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The s#!t has hit the fan

Scientific report on bass stocks paints a very gloomy picture for the future

Exploitation is up

Despite recommendations to reduce fishing mortality the pressure increases

Bass stocks are in serious decline

32% drop in total bass stock over two years

Poor recruitment

Report confirms our fears that young bass survival has been 'very weak' since 2008

EU to act at last.

EU Commission to discuss emergency measures for bass as a matter of urgency

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In October of 2012 ICES* reported to the EU Commission on its assessment of a number of fish stocks, including turbot and bass. The report confirmed the fears that many have shared – Fishing mortality on bass is increasing and the stock-spawning biomass (the breeding stock) is decreasing.

In broad terms, this is bad news for our bass stocks. More fishing pressure and less breeding fish = a potential stock collapse.

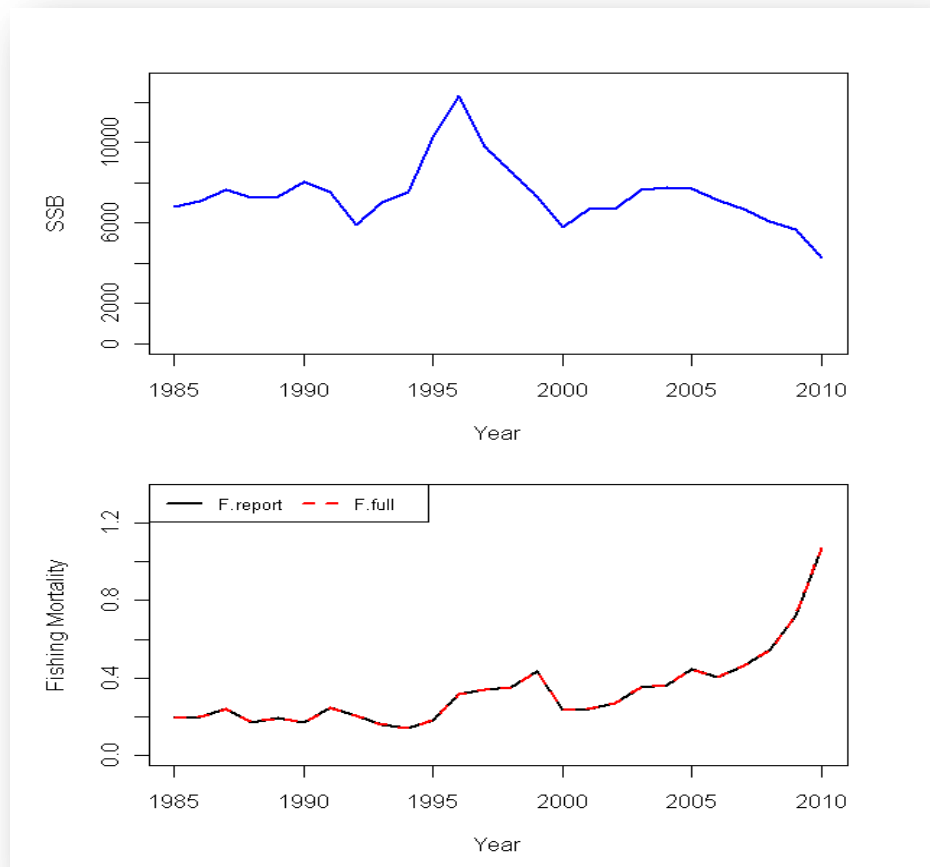


Fig 3.6.4.6. Spawning-stock biomass (SSB) and mortality rate for sea bass.

Page 103 of the ICES report which can be viewed in full on the ICES website under 'reports'

*International Council for the Exploration of the Sea

This report followed the advice from ICES, previously issued in 2012, that the fishing pressure on bass should be eased, because of concerns over overfishing, with a 20% reduction in the commercial take.

As is often the case, recommendations from its own scientific advisers were not implemented by the Commission due to pressure from member states (notably France, Spain and Portugal) and fishing pressure continued to increase.

BASS has been in dialogue with Defra and its scientific advisers Cefas, voicing our concerns about the declining adult bass stocks, for the past decade and most recently presented UK Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon with our proposals for a halt to the decline and the rebuilding of bass stocks.

Much to his credit, Mr Benyon has acted upon our concerns and his departments at Defra and Cefas have been working up a comprehensive bass management plan for UK implementation over the last few months.

However, when ICES recently presented the latest bass stock information to the EU Commission on 22nd May 2013, which portrayed a deepening crisis, it seems the EU Commission were shocked into wanting to take urgent action and Defra's plans are likely to be postponed with the EU action plan taking priority.

The ICES report contained the following statements and the writing is now well and truly on the wall

'Fishing mortality is increasing.'

'The total biomass has been declining since 2005.'

'For this stock the total biomass is estimated to have decreased by more than 20% between the periods 2008–2010'

'Total biomass in 2011–2012, was 32% lower than the total biomass in the three previous years (2008–2010).'

'Declining Spawning-Stock Biomass (SSB) and very poor recruitment since 2008 would lead to an expectation of further spawning stock decline'

'If the reduction in recruitment observed up to 2009 continues and fishing mortality remains high, a continued decline in stock biomass is expected although the rate of decline cannot be accurately projected.'

'A combination of continued high fishing mortality and continued below-average recruitment will lead to a continuing decline in spawning-stock biomass and progressive loss of older fish, and cause increasing dependence of egg production on younger and less fertile fish.'

'A reduction in fishing mortality on sea bass is needed to prevent spawning-stock declining to such an extent that the stock's ability to produce strong recruitment in more favourable environmental conditions is impaired.'

'Additionally, considering that the stock is considered overexploited, ICES advises that commercial landings should decrease by a further 20% as a precautionary buffer.'

'Improvements to fishery selectivity are needed to allow more fish to spawn at least once before capture.'

EU Commission

Following the 22nd May meeting the EU commission have asked for member states to submit their own proposals by 15th July, in readiness for a meeting to be held before the end of July to try and reach an agreement amongst member states as to what to do.

It is unlikely that complete agreement will be reached, so measures are only likely to be finalised after the summer recess, i.e. in September/October, to then become effective from Jan 2014. It is very clear that action of some sort will be taken.

These measures will be decided and put into place by the EU commission. No public consultation is needed (though stakeholders are being consulted) and no vote by MEP's is required. The EU commission can simply decide, making things quicker.

Unless all member states agree totally on a suite of **technical measures**** measures that the EU commission also agree to, a TAC (quota) will be imposed for bass. It therefore seems likely that bass will be subject to a quota (and technical measures) from Jan 2014.

Bass TAC (quota)

Quota are proposed by the EU but decided by that annual meeting of member states Fisheries Ministers in December (the horse trading meeting that goes on through the night that CFP reform is supposed to put an end to).

It is most likely that a TAC will be based on historic catches, ratcheted down because the stock is in trouble. Basing it on historic catches is bad, in our view, because we should basing any measures on a scientific forecast (which we believe ICES are working on) that would then allow for stock recovery.

TAC's will simply follow the decline in bass stocks down the proverbial plughole (a point which has been forcefully made to Defra)

****Technical Measures**

For dogmatic ideological reasons, the EU Commission does not favour increasing the Minimum Landing Size which has been suggested for several years by BASS and the Angling Trust.

The Commission prefers technical measures to control effort and improve "selectivity". These could include –

- Increasing minimum mesh sizes for static nets and inserting larger mesh panels in to trawl ends
- Banning the targeting of juvenile fish (otter trawling for them in shallow inshore waters) such as occurs off the South Wales coast.
- Closed season periods for trawling for bass where they spawn or are preparing to spawn between January and April
- Reducing vessel landings from the current limit of 5 tonnes per week down to 1.5 tonnes per month.



Catch of pre-spawning bass – We simply cannot let this continue

Is there anything we can do?

We see the increase in the MLS for bass as a key technical measure which should be introduced immediately to ensure most bass have the opportunity to spawn at least once and will be pressing the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that this time around the Commission does not shirk its responsibilities to uphold its own legal requirements of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive or to maximise economic return from bass. Doing nothing has been tried before and it clearly hasn't worked.

- We'll keep up the pressure on Richard Benyon – You should write to him too.
- Write to your local IFCA's and inform them of the seriousness of the situation.
- Tell them you want action from them, not more delays and prevarication.
- Write to your local MP and MEP or better still, arrange a meeting with them. Take this newsletter along and tell them you want their support in securing an increased MLS for UK bass to 48cms so that we can be sure they have breed at least once.
- Show this newsletter to your angling friends, the owner of your local tackle shop or email your on-line tackle supplier and tell them to look at the BASS website where a copy of this newsletter will be in a format that can be viewed and downloaded. If their businesses rely on healthy bass stocks they should be very concerned.

Whatever you do – please do something. Doing nothing is not an option.