



Bass briefing following 2016 EU Fishing Opportunities outcomes

January 2016

Background

Bass stocks in Britain and Europe are in trouble and urgent action is needed to conserve and rebuild the remaining spawning populations. The decline is the result of intensive commercial overfishing, increasing fishing effort, targeting of spawning aggregations and juvenile fish, loss of nursery habitat in estuaries and successive years of poor recruitment due to cold spells in the winter. Sea bass are an iconic sporting species and a top target for recreational anglers. Thirty years ago bass were considered primarily a recreational species and were subject to very little commercial harvesting.

Organisations like the National Federation of Sea Anglers, now part of the Angling Trust, and the Bass Anglers Sportfishing Society (BASS) have been campaigning for the introduction of bass conservation measures for best part of 20 years. Things looked hopeful in 2004 when the Net Benefits report by the Cabinet Office recommended that fishery managers look at making bass a recreational-only species. Sadly, the report stayed on the shelf, bass stocks continued to be overfished and the unsustainable minimum size limit of 36cms remained in place until last year's long overdue rise to 42 cms – the absolute smallest size at which bass reach maturity and are able to reproduce.

Scientific advice issued by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) in June 2014 recommended an 80% cut in bass mortality across the EU area for 2015. This followed the 2013 advice for a 36% cut which politicians had foolishly failed to implement and the commercial sector ignored. In fact, the 2014 bass landings by UK vessels rose by 30% (from 772 tonnes to 1,004 tonnes) despite the clear need to conserve threatened stocks.

Some progress

Following the failure to reach agreement at the European Fisheries Council meeting in December 2014 the EU took the unusual step of introducing a series of welcome emergency measures which were confirmed at the Fisheries and Aquaculture Committee meeting on Friday January 23rd 2015. These included a new minimum landing size of 42cms and a ban on the trawling of spawning aggregations in order to help save declining bass stocks in the English Channel, Southern North Sea and Irish and Celtic Seas.

The UK secured some success in leading on the introduction of the 2015 package of emergency measures to protect bass stocks. However, what was achieved has not been enough and unfortunately the situation has continued to deteriorate. ICES advice for 2016 recommended catches of no more than 541 tonnes. This was effectively a 90% reduction on 2014. Even if all targeted fisheries were closed, the by-catch of bass would exceed 541 tonnes. The package of measures in 2015 is estimated to have reduced catches by only 36 per cent and the European Commission has admitted that what was agreed, while considerable, simply didn't go far enough.

Disappointment

In the face of scientific advice for further reductions in bass landings, recreational anglers were prepared to play their part in what we expected to be a fair, effective and proportionate package of measures that would help rebuild bass stocks.

The new proposals from the Commission included:

- A complete fishing ban for commercial vessels and recreational anglers (including catch and release) in the first half of 2016
- In the second half of 2016 a monthly one tonne catch limit for vessels targeting sea bass and a one fish per day bag limit for recreational anglers.

Anglers were disappointed and alarmed by these proposals and the Angling Trust lobbied strongly against the disproportionate restrictions proposed for bass anglers and for sustainable catch and release to be allowed during the proposed moratorium period.

"Whilst we welcome the proposals to further restrict the commercial harvesting of bass it is monstrously unfair to lump all forms of bass fishing together. There is absolutely no equivalence between a trawler dragging a huge net across the ocean and a group of anglers going out at the weekend with a rod and line and fishing sustainably within agreed size and bag limits. The Angling Trust intends to tell the Commission that they are picking on the wrong target."

Anger

Disappointment turned to anger when the organisations representing Britain's 800,000 sea anglers heard the news that EU Fisheries Ministers had caved in to pressure from commercial fishing interests and granted exemptions to commercial hook and line and the highly damaging bass gill net fishery with the exception of drift netting, which he referred to as "low impact".

Far from being low impact, this sector is actually responsible for harvesting more than half the bass stocks in the UK. It will now only be closed for two months of the year rather than six as was planned in the proposed European moratorium on commercial bass fishing during the spawning period.

For the UK alone, this represented an increase in gill net landings of 131 tonnes compared with the scientists' recommendation of a maximum of 541 tonnes of landings in 2016 for the entire Northern bass stock. Furthermore the gill net monthly catch limit per vessel has been raised from 1.0 to 1.3 tonnes, making a nonsense of claims to be conserving bass stocks in line with the evidence and best scientific advice.

At the same time, the £200 million recreational bass sector will see a zero bag limit in the first six months and in the second half of the year the bag limit for anglers will be reduced from three fish a day to just one.

Whilst anglers were pleased to have retained Catch and Release fishing for bass during the first half of the year, they claim that the overall package has unfairly targeted the one activity that is most sustainable and creates the greatest economic benefit, in favour of allowing what is virtually 'business as usual' for the netters.

What it means

The decision to grant derogations from the six month moratorium has created an absurd situation which is both unfair and economically damaging. It risks criminalising thousands of law abiding people, and will be very difficult to enforce without the support of angling clubs, anglers and the Angling Trust.

- Charter boat bookings are already down which will impact on tourist revenues and potentially put some operators out of business
- Anglers fishing from April to June will have to return all their bass yet a commercial boat can come alongside and catch and kill the same fish
- Ministers have boasted that these supposed conservation measures will have little effect on commercial inshore bass fishing whilst claiming that they have secured a good deal for bass stocks
- Ministers have claimed that drift netting accounts for 90% of all netted bass when figures from the MMO for 2014 show that it is nearer 30%

Economics

Figures from Defra and the MMO (including the Sea Angling 2012 report) show:

- There are 884,000 sea anglers in England who directly pump £1.23 billion p.a. into the economy (£2.1 billion including induced and indirect impacts);
- 10,400 full time jobs are dependent on sea angling (23,600 jobs including induced and indirect impacts)
- That the recreational bass fishery is worth £200 million to the UK economy
- Over 90% of bass consumed in the UK are farmed fish
- Around half of bass caught commercially in UK waters are exported
- The 5,000 commercial fishermen remaining in England and Wales land £160 million worth of fish [all species] 80% of that value comprise shellfish and other species of no interest to anglers.

- The remaining 20% by value (£32 million) is made up of those same fishery resources upon which the £1.23 billion sea angling industry is dependent and include £7 million worth of commercially landed sea bass.

Blue Marine Foundation Report

A report published on December 2014 by the Blue Marine Foundation, defining the environmental and economic benefits of sea bass, compared the economic values and biological impact of recreational and commercial bass fishing on a like-for-like basis. It found that the value to the economy of a European bass caught by sea anglers using rod and line is far more than that of a fish caught and landed commercially. It also found that recreational bass angling creates three times the number of jobs as commercial fishing, with a lower environmental impact than any commercial fishing method other than hook and line.

The research, conducted by respected fisheries consultancy MRAG, showed that sea anglers fishing in Sussex spent £31.3 million on tackle, charter boats and hotels to catch around 15 tonnes of bass in 2012 and created 353 full time jobs. In comparison, commercial sea bass landings of 248 tonnes in Sussex generated only £9.25 million and 111 full time jobs.

Drift Netting and the Petition

A 14,000 strong petition, supported by TV presenters Matt Hayes and Henry Gilbey, has now received a formal response from the government which has angered anglers still further. Officials at Defra are claiming that they have not 'watered down' the Commission's proposed 6 month moratorium by allowing fixed gill netting to continue. The Minister repeated his claim that drift netting is responsible for 90% of all bass caught with nets and that this will cease during this period. Data published by his own department shows this to be untrue. It is also likely that there will be an increase in fixed drift netting as a result of the drift net ban.

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has published landings data for 2014 showing that netting constitutes some 62% of all commercial bass catches with drift netting being responsible for just 1/3 of all netting – not the 90% claimed by the minister. [See note 1]

Further studies show how nonsensical the government's claims really are. A report commissioned by SEA FISH, in which both the MMO and Defra fully participated, was published in June 2014 stating that the entire UK drift net catch of all species was worth less than £1 million at first sale landing. Annual bass landings from netting averaged 361 tonnes between 2010 – 2013 and 90% equates to 325 tonnes, so if the 90% figure were correct, bass landings alone from drift nets would be worth over £2 million!

Going back further, the CEFAS analysis of the 2010 bass fishery showed that only 11 tonnes of the 719 tonnes total bass landings were listed under drift nets: just 1.5%.

What Now ?

If bass stocks are to be rebuilt and credibility restored then the UK government should stop trying to face in different directions and come down firmly in favour of fishery management policies that operate in favour of the most sustainable forms of bass fishing and the conservation of stocks. This has already happened in Ireland and is about to be introduced in the Isle of Man. Last month, the Fisheries Directorate on the Isle of Man launched a public consultation on its proposal to change the legislation covering sea bass to include:

- * A ban on all commercial bass fishing within 12 miles of the island's coast;
- * A new minimum landing size of 50cms (compared to 42cms in the EU);
- * A maximum landing size of 60cms (to allow big breeders to survive);
- * A catch limit of one fish per angler per day.

Measures Needed

These are the measures that we wish to see implemented:

- A package of measures that will cut 2016 landings to 541 tonnes.
- Commercial and recreational fishing for bass to be restricted to rod & line and hand lines only.
- A complete ban on commercial targeting of pre-spawning and spawning aggregations of bass.
- A fully documented bass fishery, with all bass landings recorded.
- A discard ban for bass from 2016.
- A Long Term Management Plan that sets out clear management objectives, including an abundant stock and fishing opportunities allocated on socio-economic criteria.
- An increase in the Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MLS) to 48cm.
- Improvements to existing Bass Nursery Areas, including a ban of all netting in these areas, even targeting other species.
- All measures to be extended to the Bay of Biscay.

Domestic measures

We are awaiting progress with the high-level review of domestic (UK) bass management measures following a call for evidence earlier this year on the existing bass nursery areas in England and Wales. It is important that this review progresses without delay and includes:

- Identification of new, and expansion of existing, bass nursery areas to reflect the expansion of the range of bass and year-round presence around much of the coast.
- A review of the effectiveness of the existing measures including compliance and enforcement.

- A review of existing landings data and exemptions/ loopholes with the objective of improving landings data and identifying sources of illegal, unregulated and unreported landings of bass — a request that the EU Commission has already made to Member States.

A Complete Moratorium ?

The next ICES advice on the condition of bass stocks is due in June 2016 and if EU ministers continue to fail to take meaningful measures then there is every possibility that we will see a complete moratorium on all forms of bass fishing for several years. The political unwillingness to be seen to be restricting commercial fishing opportunities in line with scientific advice is threatening to result in the collapse of yet another publicly owned EU fish stock.

Notes and References

1.MMO Landing Data 2014

Landings for code "GND" (Gill Nets Drift) are 20% of total commercial landings (indicating 1/3rd of all netting). The rest of gill netting is a further 42% of total commercial landings.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/uk-sea-fisheries-annual-statistics-report-2014>

2.Report to the Sea Fish Industry Authority – June 2014

http://www.seafish.org/media/1198094/drift%20net%20fishing%20in%20the%20uk%20sea%20fish%20june%202014_final.pdf

3.Angling Trust statement following EU Fishing opportunities Meeting in December

<http://www.anglingtrust.net/news.asp?section=29§ionTitle=Angling+Trust+News&page=2&itemid=2843>

4.Petition and Response

The decision to water down the recent European decision on the bass stocks

"Gill netting should also be prohibited during the closed season.

The current restrictions on recreational anglers should also be in place on commercial activities The European Union have done their best to reverse the damage done to the bass fish stocks, yet the UK government decided to ignore the basic facts ,and allow gill netting to continue. A single gill nett can wipe out hundreds of fish in one swoop so how can this be acceptable , it makes a mockery of the restrictions placed on recreational anglers"

Government Response

See here: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/116747>

Extract:

The petition title misrepresents the EU process. UK Government successfully ensured anglers could fish for sport and the derogation for gillnets excluded driftnets that take most UK netting catches.

*The UK Government **has not sought to water down** the EU decision to protect bass stocks agreed in the EU fisheries Council on 15 December 2015, as suggested in the petition title. The terms of the petition are either a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the EU process and the UK Government's approach.....*

*....While accepting the principle of the proposed 6 month moratorium and a subsequent catch limit of 1 tonne per vessel per month for most commercial fisheries, **we aimed to avoid disproportionate impacts on the lower impact, small-scale inshore hook and line and inshore fixed gillnet fisheries during the first 6 months. But as the UK Government position was for a more modest derogation than that offered on the day, we sought to reduce the impact of this on bass stocks.***

*Our negotiating position was based on different fisheries' relative impacts and reflected several factors. Hook and line has the highest degree of selectivity for the right size of bass taken – though gillnets also perform well compared with other fishing methods. We also needed to consider the proportion of the bass catch taken by UK vessels using these methods: although the nets gear group has previously accounted for half of the annual UK bass total landings (46% average from 2011-2013), **drift-netting is estimated to account for up to 90% of this, as the Commission are aware, and drift-netting was not agreed for inclusion in the derogation...***

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Our emphasis].

5. Extract from George Eustice article in Fishing News Jan 14.

*However we wanted to avoid a disproportionate effect on lower impact, small scale inshore hook-and-line and inshore fixed gillnet fisheries. Fixed gillnets are second to hook and line on selectivity for the right sized fish, **and only account for an estimated 10% of the UK netting total, which is mainly drift-netting.***

6. ICES Advice

<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2015/2015/Bss-47.pdf>

7. BBC Countryfile

The bass issue was the subject of an investigation by this week's BBC TV Countryfile programme which can be seen here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk...ile-north-devon>

8. Blue Marine Foundation

The Blue Marine Foundation report can be found here:

<http://www.bluemarinefoundation.com/a-new-report-commissioned-by-blue-suggests-fish-should-only-be-caught-with-hooks/>