Save our stocks!

BASS member **Shaun Sorenson** explains how stocks can be increased if anglers support conservation

After 40 years of campaigning, consultation and effort by BASS and other angling organisations, what has been achieved in the fight to save bass from heading towards endangered species status?

Unpalatable to some and of little concern to others, the simple answer is very little. The time and effort given by a very small number of people has been nothing short of heroic, but in terms of achievement, dismal.

This is not a reflection of their abilities but the result of decades of disinterest by sea anglers, ineffective lobbying, a constant stream of MAFF and Defra studies, and a general lack of clarity over objectives and priorities.

All 'players' such as government ministers, commercial fishermen, the tackle trade, those earning money from bass angling, and anglers like you and me need to look in the mirror and feel ashamed of our general lack of involvement towards protecting a living creature of such importance.

As an example, take one element – the Minimum Landing Size. The BASS Restoration Team spearheaded a proposal to increase the MLS to 48cm based on scientific evidence, to ensure that each bass can breed at least once. Nigel Horseman, of the BASS Restoration Team, stated that: "Government has clearly listened to the concerns of anglers and reviewed the science for themselves. That evidence, together with the evidence that will be published with the results of Sea Angling 2012 at the end of November, adds up to an utterly compelling case for a whole new approach to bass management in UK waters"

By careful dialogue with IFCAs and Defra, and working jointly with the Angling Trust, the situation is now that the Fisheries Minister has launched a Defra enquiry. However, the Fisheries Minister was changed in the autumn reshuffle, but thank goodness the new one supports the enquiry.

The fact is we have fewer bass to catch today than we had in yesteryear, and for those anglers fishing 20, 30 or 40 years ago, today's catch rates are dismal. Would I take up sea fishing as a youngster today? No, and I think that verdict explains the low number of young members of angling clubs or societies.

How do we start to change the way we manage bass as a resource for the future, or is it already too late? I don't know the answer, but I know the same path will not stop the demise of the bass. The consultations, meetings and campaigns are important, but are we really being listened to? Ministers come and go, and new Ministers often want to debate/review the findings of their predecessors, re-starting the whole process of consultation and the need for change all over again.

Meanwhile CEFAS, the agency for fisheries research, continues to carry out studies on bass and the results are even more alarming. Just look at the latest bass population study on the Solent: *www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/media/617317/bass_solent_survey_report.pdf* (pic above).

To summarise, the juvenile bass are at an all-time low, which will affect fishing as the adult fish are fished out and won't be replaced.

What can anglers do to try and improve this desperate situation? We can become one voice with unified support from all interested parties, whose number one objective is to protect the declining bass stocks. It would need a powerful voice, backed-up with a membership of all interested parties big enough and committed enough. It would also need adequate financial support and full-time paid officials, including lobbyists.

In my view the Angling Trust gives us that opportunity. We may be a million miles away from where we want to be, but it is the only way I see a fundamental change in approach being made, to allow all relevant parties to take part and reap the rewards of bass as an economic and social resource for future years.

We can start by looking at ourselves and ask what we are doing. Whatever the answer, it's not enough – critical, I know, but we have to be critical of ourselves before we can criticise others. Secondly we can take one tiny step and join like-minded anglers who have an interest in the future of our sport, by becoming, and staying, a member of BASS and of the Angling Trust, and doing our bit to support their campaigns.

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