



Angling Trust Parliamentary Briefing – Update on Bass Stocks

November 2014

Parliamentary support needed for bass stocks

Bass stocks are in deep trouble. This update briefing seeks to provide arguments and information for Parliamentarians prepared to raise the issue at Westminster, and with ministers, to make the case for meaningful conservation measures to avoid a stock collapse.

The Situation

Sea bass in Europe are at risk of total collapse in coming years unless urgent action is taken to conserve and rebuild the remaining spawning stock. The latest scientific advice issued by ICES in June 2014 recommends a staggering 80 per cent cut in catches of bass across the EU for 2015. This follows advice for a 36 per cent cut in 2013 which was not acted upon. The decline is the result of intensive overfishing, increasing fishing effort and successive years of recruitment failure. Unless action is taken to protect the remaining stock we fear a moratorium on bass fishing in Europe will be the only recommendation available to protect and restore this important fishery.

Successive Fisheries Ministers have been well aware of the current parlous state of sea bass numbers around the inshore waters of England and Wales and the long overdue need for the government to introduce measures to prevent a catastrophic stock collapse. Sadly, it now seems that this collapse could be about to happen. The results from last month's Solent bass survey confirm five poor year classes in a row (2008 – 2012) which offers a bleak prospect for the future.

Economic No Brainer

A collapse in bass stocks or a total moratorium on all forms of bass fishing would be disastrous for recreational sea angling which, according to Defra's own Sea Angling 2012 report shows there are **884,000 sea anglers in England who directly pump £1.23 billion p.a. into the economy** and upon which 10,400 full time jobs are dependent. If induced and indirect impacts are taken into account these figures soar to £2.1 billion and 23,600 jobs. **The VAT alone which is collected from sea anglers dwarfs the entire value of all commercial fish landings in England.** In purely economic terms, we would be better off if bass were retained as a line caught species only with the bulk of the market demand met by farmed fish. This would immediately revive the UK fishery for both the inshore under ten metre

commercial fleet, who would be in position to provide a premium product caught in a sustainable way, and the recreational sector - the majority of whom practice catch and release.

The 6000 commercial fishermen remaining in England land £160 million worth of fish [all species] 80% of which are of no interest to anglers. Of the remaining 20%, £32 million is made up of those same fishery resources upon which the £1.23 billion sea angling industry is dependent and include £5 million worth of commercially landed sea bass.

The EU Commission has said it would prefer technical measures and is currently considering the options for managing bass and implementing the 80 per cent cut in catches. The Science, Technical & Economic Committee for Fisheries met last month and the report from the meeting outlines possible technical conservation measures for the management of sea bass. The Commission is currently considering these and recommendations from the Advisory Councils will be put forward following a further round of **consultations from which it is already clear that the commercial sector will resist any meaningful conservation measures.**

Will Europe Deliver?

Despite some encouraging signs that the European Commission has finally woken up to the unfolding disaster that is happening across the North Atlantic fishery we remain concerned that their sensible raft of proposals will inevitably get watered down once the commercial sectors get to work on their individual parliamentarians. A number of welcome measures are on the table at the moment and relate to the main bass stock in the Celtic sea, Channel, Irish Sea and North Sea. The interested Member States (i.e. France, UK, Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Spain and Portugal) agreed on the following key factors:

- Acceptance of the assessment of the state of the stock;
- A total allowable catch (TAC) not being the best option;
- The need for immediate action to reduce fishing mortality significantly, with specific limits on targeted fisheries, both commercial and recreational;
- The need to protect spawning aggregation areas;
- The need to take into account socio-economic factors; and,
- Beyond immediate action, the need in the medium term for a management plan.

Whilst we accept the need for bass to be subject to management measures through a common EU policy, we fear the outcome of the ongoing EU negotiations will deliver far too little, and far too late. We also believe, given the gravity of the situation outlined in the latest ICES advice, that national measures are also urgently needed to manage bass stocks within our inshore waters irrespective of the outcome of the EU process.

UK Position

The UK has been consistently unwilling to take unilateral action to protect bass in UK waters due to a desire not to exceed, or fall short of, the requirements set by the EU and due to the requirements of the Government's Better Regulation Framework. In addition, it had been claimed that we cannot prove that UK bass stocks are discreet from those of other member states (despite previous Cefas science stating the opposite) and the government insists that, as a shared stock, bass needs to be managed only at an EU level. This is in marked contrast to the successful precautionary approach adopted in Ireland.

However, more recent correspondence now appears to accept the case for taking action in respect of UK territorial waters. This was re-iterated by Fisheries Minister George Eustice at the Angling Summit last month with a pledge to look again at the minimum landing size.

Bass Minimum Landing Size

One of the technical conservation measures we believe would achieve most at a UK level – one that the Dutch government has already implemented despite the outcome of the EU process being unknown – is raising the minimum legal size to above the size of sexual maturity. It is self evident that allowing the harvesting of a species before it has had an opportunity to breed is completely unsustainable and will lead to serious stock depletion. Why have a bass mls at all that fails to do the job of protecting immature bass?

In 2012 the previous Fisheries Minister, Richard Benyon, instigated a review into the evidence supporting this measure. However, the outcomes of this review have yet to be made public and we hope that the results can be released in the near future. Raising the minimum legal size for bass from 36cms to 45cms in the UK would achieve the following outcomes:

- Contribute towards the necessary 80 per cent reduction in catches recommended by ICES which is highly unlikely to be achieved by EU measures alone.
- Improve the recruitment of bass and protect the year classes upon which a stock recovery will have to be built.
- Contribute to the UK's obligation under the reformed Common Fisheries Policy to achieve maximum sustainable yield for all stocks.
- Reduce the fishing mortality from both recreational and commercial fishing in a fair and even-handed way.
- Sow the seed for the development and long term increased profitability of the £5m commercial and £200m recreational bass fisheries in the UK.
- Demonstrate good practice fisheries management by not targeting immature stocks.
- Deliver a positive conservation message from the Government to the estimated 886,000 sea anglers in England and the proportion of the 23,600 people employed in England who are reliant in full, or in part, on an abundant UK recreational bass fishery
- Reduce discards by phasing out damaging inshore targeted juvenile bass otter trawl fisheries in the Bristol Channel and elsewhere.

Raising the minimum legal size for bass is, in itself, not the single answer to protecting and restoring the UK's bass fishery; a fully inclusive package of measures is also needed on top of the EU proposals including:

- Strengthening and enforcing the UK's network of bass nursery areas.
- Taking steps to incentivise the line-caught fishery to improve selectivity and reduce unwanted fishing mortality.
- Re-profile the current exploitation pattern away from fishing methods that have the biggest negative impacts on stocks towards methods that are most environmentally friendly, selective, and generate the best return from the fishery.
- Decreasing the catch limit per commercial boat per week to ensure we achieve the 80% necessary and to get closer to all commercial fishermen making a contribution to solving this issue, thus ensuring fairness between commercial and recreational sectors, without risking increasing discards.
- Introducing bag limits for recreational anglers and a consideration of slot size limits to protect bigger, more fertile, trophy fish from unnecessary harvesting.

Site Fidelity of Bass

It has been disappointing to hear ministers repeating the claim that UK measures are likely to be ineffective on a migratory fish in the light of the studies showing that bass display considerable site fidelity. Particularly when Defra officials have referred to bass site fidelity in recent correspondence as a reason **for** introducing UK measures so it would be good to have some clarity from the government on this point.

The Angling Trust would welcome any measures that reduce the commercial targeting of spawning aggregations in the Western Approaches by European vessels, particularly as this would dramatically reduce the ability of French and Spanish boats to intercept English bass, possibly with a higher mls, heading out beyond the 12 mile limit. However, the 2007 (Pawson et al) studies show that local technical measures can make a difference irrespective of other factors.

These results, taken with those of an earlier study on the recruitment patterns of bass from UK nursery areas (Pickett et al., 2004), suggest that the main benefits (in terms of yield) of management aimed at protecting juvenile sea bass in coastal waters of England and Wales accrue chiefly to fisheries operating within the UK 6-mile zone.

Lessons from other countries

Other EU countries have acted to protect their bass stocks and the jobs that depend upon them. Ireland banned the commercial fishing for and landing of bass in 1990 after stocks collapsed due to commercial overfishing. Bass has been managed by the Irish Government as a recreational angling only species ever since at considerable benefit to the Irish economy - generating between 15 and 20 million Euro per annum – equivalent to at least three times the value of all commercial bass landings in England and Wales. In addition the Irish are actively considering raising their bass mls to 50cms, introducing catch and release only zones and tightening the recreational bag limits.

The Dutch government is introducing a series of national measures to protect bass including; banning pair trawling in certain areas from September-December, capping monthly landings of bass at 5,000kg per vessel, increasing the minimum landing size from 36cm to 42cm for all fishers, a bag limit of 20kg for recreational fishers and a cap on the small-scale commercial rod and line fleet. These measures are being taken because action is needed now and because the outcome of the EU process remains unknown. The Dutch fully recognize that their measures may need to be amended as a result of an EU intervention but are no longer prepared to stand by as bass stocks collapse.

The Welsh Assembly Government is about to go out to consultation on a package of measures *“aimed to enhance both the enforcement of regulations and the protection of both adult and juvenile seabass stocks”*.

The Great American Striped Bass Recovery

“The most successful restoration of a fin fish stock in the history of North America”, announced the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) when reporting on the state of striped bass stocks in 2003.

The Atlantic coast migratory striped bass has supported important recreational and commercial fisheries from Maine to North Carolina for centuries. Steady declines in the abundance of striped bass in the 1970s (supported by commercial landing data) raised serious concerns about changes to the population of this species. In order to stem the decline, both individual state management actions and coast wide management measures were implemented through the Atlantic State Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Interstate Fisheries Management Plan for Striped Bass. The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act 1984 allowed the ASMFC to recommend federal imposition of a moratorium on striped bass harvest in states that failed to implement such management plans.

These measures saw populations of striped bass and number of angling trips increase by over 500% from 1982. Recreational expenditure on striped bass fishing has increased from \$85 million in 1981 to \$560 million in 1996. In the State of New Jersey the number of marine angling trips increased from 1 million in 1981 to 7.48 million in 2001. The American Striped Bass recreational fishery now attracts anglers from all over the world and makes a current estimated economic contribution in excess of \$2.5 billion.

Conclusion

Bass is the favourite fish targeted by recreational sea anglers, who are extremely frustrated by the failure of successive governments over the last 15 years to follow their own scientific advice and introduce a sustainable bass management plan with sensible minimum size limits to allow the species to spawn at least once before harvesting.

In particular we need an immediate increase in the current minimum landing size from 36cms to 45 - 48cms in order to allow bass to successfully reach at least their first spawning size of 42cms and to have time to complete their life cycle. Furthermore we would like to see an end to commercial harvesting during the spring spawning period, restrictions on pairs trawling and trammel netting, which have done so much damage already, reductions in catch limits per boat and for a significant expansion in estuarine bass nursery areas where juvenile fish can be afforded greater protection.

Some helpful Defra PQs:

- 1) In light of the urgent need to conserve sea bass stocks why is the Minister still yet to publish the findings of the review into the evidence, commissioned in 2012, supporting an increase in the UK's bass minimum landing size?*
- 2) What action will the Minister take to prevent the collapse of sea bass stocks of which are of huge economic importance to both the UK recreational and commercial fishing sectors?*
- 3) What conclusions has the Minister drawn from the results of the recent Solent bass survey, which showed five successive poor recruitment years, and the prospects now indicated for sea bass stocks in the future?*
- 4) What steps will the Minister support to ensure that the 80% reduction in sea bass mortality is complied with in 2015?*
- 5) Given the evidence of bass site fidelity and studies showing that the inshore fishery is the prime benefiter from technical bass conservation measure, will the Minister state what steps he intends to take to introduce domestic bass conservation policies?*

Useful links

- The latest ICES advice on bass can be found [HERE](#)
- The Science, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries (STECF) were recently asked to consider management measures for bass. The final report from the meeting can be found [HERE](#)
- The Angling Trust and BASS recently jointly wrote to George Eustice with this letter which you can read [HERE](#).
- Martin Salter's recent blog post on bass can be found [HERE](#)
- Details of the Angling Trust's *Let Our Bass Breed* campaign can be found [HERE](#)

Facts about bass

Biology

- Female bass do not become sexually mature in UK waters until at least 42cm in length (source: Sea Bass: Biology, exploitation and conservation, by Pickett and Pawson. This is the definitive text on the subject produced by the leading Cefas bass experts).
- At that size and age (6 to 7 years), bass grow at about 6 cm per year.
- The current minimum landing size of 36cm was set in 1989, despite the maximum yield to the UK bass fishery occurring at an MLS of 50cm (MAFF lab leaflet 59, Pickett and Pawson).
- It takes 2 to 3 years for the bass to grow from 36cm to 48cm.

Breeding

Very young bass live in inshore bass "nursery areas", where they are protected and can be studied. Latest sampling (by Cefas) indicates very poor breeding success over recent years, consistent with the poor weather (cold winters) we have experienced. The result is a paucity of young bass to join the adult bass population and fishery over the next few years.

More information from:

David Mitchell - Marine Campaigns Manager 07946 263131 or david.mitchell@anglingtrust.net

Martin Salter - National Campaigns Coordinator 07976 946033 or martin.salter@anglingtrust.net