

MCS POSITION STATEMENT ON: Seabass management

October 2016

Geographical extent: Central and South North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea

This document constitutes the formal expression of a Marine Conservation Society position on an issue of concern to us, at a particular point in time. It is not to be edited altered or misconstrued. Please get in touch if you wish to discuss it, or need any clarifications. We are always open to constructive discussion and our views may change over time, in light of new evidence or changes in policy context.

THE MCS VIEW

The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is extremely concerned about the future of the sea bass stock around the UK. In June 2016 the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advised that there should be zero catch (Commercial and recreational) due to its status having rapidly declined to dangerously low levels. MCS supports the scientific recommendation of ICES as vital to ensuring the future of this stock and its role in the marine ecosystem and as an important commercial and recreational species.

Catch limits were introduced and emergency measures to protect spawning fish were put in place by the European Commission in 2015 in addition to bag limits for recreational anglers and periods where fishing for bass was almost completely banned to try and improve the stock's condition. However, following on from the most recent assessment from ICES released in June 2016, MCS believes that these measures have not been successful in reducing the overall mortality of seabass to a level consistent with stock recovery.

There needs to be significant further action to reduce the fishing mortality in the short-term, and longer term management measures need to be developed to safeguard this important species.

THE MCS ASKS

UK Government

- Reduce UK commercial catches, and likewise, influence neighbouring countries to reduce their catches to the lowest possible levels to allow the stock to recover as quickly as possible:
 - A total catch of 882t is expected to allow for a 9.7% recovery of the stock in 2018. MCS estimates achieving this would require at least a halving of 2016 catches.
 - A total catch of 453t in 2017 is expected to allow for a 15.67% recovery of the stock in 2018.
- Implement the previously proposed six month moratorium from January to June for all fishing for seabass and maintain the bycatch limit at 1% until all avoidance measures have been demonstrably implemented.
- Close known spawning grounds to all fishing that can catch seabass at spawning times to allow maximum recruitment.
- Move-on measures to be considered in key areas to facilitate a reduction in bycatch and discarding.
- For the long-term benefit of the stock and to maximise the potential yield from the fishery, the UK needs to propose that catch limits for seabass are distributed in a way which preferentially allocates catch to fisheries using gears that have the least impact on the juvenile population and wider environment, as opposed to historical landings.
- Any mortality that can be avoided should be encouraged to allow for stock recovery.
- Catch data for seabass across commercial and recreational sectors must be improved and increased monitoring is needed to aid data validation.
- English IFCA's must gain powers to enforce EU fishing regulations.
- Post capture survival studies need to be undertaken in preparation of seabass being included in the landing obligation for demersal fisheries, as it already is in pelagic fisheries.
- Development of a multiannual management plan for seabass which recovers and maintains the stock above levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield in the long-term.

Recreational anglers

- Increase catch and release and adhere to the existing one bass bag limit per day (July –Dec).
- Report any suspicious or potentially illegal sales of wild bass to **Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111. A cash award may be available.**

Businesses trading seabass & consumers

- The fishery is red rated at [Good Fish Guide](#) and therefore we strongly advise businesses and consumers to avoid buying wild caught seabass until the fishery is in better shape.
 - There are many better rated alternatives available including certified farmed seabass (eg. Global GAP) and several other species like MSC certified mackerel, hake, haddock. Check [Good Fish Guide](#) for many other great options.
- MCS encourages the public to support campaigns directed at improving the status of wild seabass.
- IF buying wild bass, take extra care to ensure it has come from **legal commercial fisheries**.
- Report any suspicious or potentially illegal sales of wild bass to **Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111. A cash award may be available.**

WHAT MCS IS DOING

- We will be calling on all stakeholders to play their part in the recovery of seabass.
- We will be calling on the government to improve the management, data collection and protection for seabass.
- MCS will be encouraging businesses and consumers to avoid wild caught seabass until there is evidence of improvements in the stocks status.
- We will promote more responsible alternatives to wild caught seabass such as Global GAP certified farmed seabass and seabass farmed in land based production systems.
- We will be working with policy makers to ensure that the management for seabass is focussed on the recovery of the stock in the short-term and that it is safeguarded in the long-term.

SUPPORTING MATERIAL

Background to the issue (including evidence lacking)

Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) peaked in 2010 and has been declining since. SSB is now at the lowest point since recording began and has fallen below the minimum biomass limit (Blim); below this point there is a high risk that the stock will suffer from reduced productivity. There has been an increase in fishing mortality (F) but this appears to have declined slightly in recent years. Recruitment has been very poor since 2008; however, the 2013 estimate shows above-average recruitment.¹

¹ <http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2016/2016/bss-47.pdf>

There are uncertainties in the assessment because of inaccuracies in the catch data, particularly recreational catches. Stock identity remains poorly understood and tagging studies are ongoing. Survival rates of seabass discarded from commercial vessels or released by anglers are poorly known.

ICES has advised that when the precautionary approach is applied, there should be zero catch (commercial and recreational) in 2017¹.

Management measures introduced

While the decline in seabass has been documented for a number of years negotiations on the introduction of technical measures to preserve bass fish stocks only began in earnest in the European Commission in 2012. No agreement on technical conservation measures was reached at the December 2014 meeting of Ministers, and as a result, the UK Government made a formal request to the Commission to take emergency measures to protect sea bass stocks.²

The Commission subsequently announced a package of technical conservation measures for 2015:

- A pelagic trawling ban for sea bass (26 Jan 2015) during its spawning season—effective until 30 April 2015;
- A limit on recreational anglers of three fish per day per angler (26 March 2015);
- A maximum catch per month by gear type limiting the targeting of the vulnerable stock, agreed on 24 June 2015;
- An increased minimum landing size (MLS) for sea bass (from 36 cm to 42cm).

Despite these emergency measures, ICES warned that bass stocks were still declining. In November 2015, the European Commission proposed (among other things) a six month moratorium across the entire distribution area of the population in order to protect spawning aggregations of seabass. MCS was supportive of this proposal, yet the resulting measures were significantly diluted after negotiations with EU Member States. In December, an agreement was reached which included a ban on commercial (pelagic) trawlers fishing for bass from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016 in the English Channel and North Sea and a closure to the fishery for all gears between February and March (With a 1% bycatch allowance for demersal trawls). The tables below from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) outlines all catch restrictions for all gear types in all areas currently in force³:

²House of Commons library <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00745/SN00745.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bass-fishing-catch-limits-closures-and-minimum-size/bass-fishing-catch-limits-closures-and-minimum-size>

Commercial measures 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016 (inclusive)

Sea Area	ICES Division	Demersal trawls and seines	Fixed Nets, Hooks and lines	All other gear types (including drift nets)
North Sea	IVb, IVc	Up to 1% bass by-catch	1,300kg bass per vessel per month except February and March	All bass catches prohibited
Channel	VIIId, VIIe	Up to 1% bass by-catch	1,300kg bass per vessel per month except February and March	All bass catches prohibited
Celtic Sea	VIIIf, VIIg*	Up to 1% bass by-catch	1,300kg bass per vessel per month except February and March	All bass catches prohibited
Irish Sea	VIIa*	Up to 1% bass by-catch	1,300kg bass per vessel per month except February and March	All bass catches prohibited
South West Approaches	VIIh	Up to 1% bass by-catch	1,300kg bass per vessel per month except February and March	All bass catches prohibited
* Inside 12nm limit only				

Commercial measures 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2016 (inclusive)

Sea Area	ICES Division	Demersal trawls and seines	Fixed Nets, Hooks and lines	All other gear types (including drift nets)
North Sea	IVb, IVc	1,000kg bass per vessel per month	1,300kg bass per vessel per month	1,000kg bass per vessel per month
Channel	VIIId, VIIE	1,000kg bass per vessel per month	1,300kg bass per vessel per month	1,000kg bass per vessel per month
Celtic Sea	VIIIf, VIIg*	1,000kg bass per vessel per month	1,300kg bass per vessel per month	1,000kg bass per vessel per month
Irish Sea	VIIa*	1,000kg bass per vessel per month	1,300kg bass per vessel per month	1,000kg bass per vessel per month
South West Approaches	VIIh	1,000kg bass per vessel per month	1,300kg bass per vessel per month	1,000kg bass per vessel per month
* Inside 12nm limit only				

Measures for recreational angling

Sea Area	ICES Division	1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016	1 July 2016 to 31 December
North Sea	IVb, IVc	Catch and release only	1 bass per fisherman per day
East Channel	VIIId, VIIE	Catch and release only	1 bass per fisherman per day
Celtic Sea	VIIIf, VIIg	Catch and release only	1 bass per fisherman per day
Irish Sea	VIIa	Catch and release only	1 bass per fisherman per day
South West Approaches	VIIh	Catch and release only	1 bass per fisherman per day
West of Ireland	VIIj, VIIk	1 bass per fisherman per day	1 bass per fisherman per day

The current management measures are significant, and it is difficult to know the full impact of some of these measures for several years e.g. increase to the minimum landing size and measures to reduce mortality on spawning fish. However, the latest scientific advice indicates that even with the likely effects of current measures, and a zero catch next year, the biomass would still be at a very low level in 2018. If current measures only are maintained, MCS estimates that the biomass will continue to decline (e.g. According to ICES, a total catch next year of 1672t is expected to reduce the biomass by a further 1.1% in 2018. It is therefore clear that in order to recover the population, significant cuts to the total catch in 2017 need to be achieved. The faster that this population is recovered, the faster that seabass can once again be enjoyed by all user groups and fulfil its natural role in the marine ecosystem.

References

ICES advice 2016:

<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2016/2016/bss-47.pdf>

European Commission emergency measures 2015:

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/mare/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=20186

MMO New measures for 2016:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-commercial-and-recreational-fishing-restrictions-for-bass-in-2016>; and

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bass-fishing-catch-limits-closures-and-minimum-size/bass-fishing-catch-limits-closures-and-minimum-size>