

SSACN Position Statement - Bass.



Previously, other than elasmobranchs in trouble, SSACN has not advocated singling out individual species for protection as our policy is to try and improve all near shore species and their habitats available to sea anglers.

However, ICES recently presented the latest bass stock information to the EU Commission on 22nd May 2013, which portrayed a deepening crisis, the advice states, “The combination of slow growth, late maturity, spawning aggregation, and strong site fidelity increases the vulnerability of sea bass to overexploitation and localized depletion”.

The same 2013 advice also recognised:

- *Total biomass in 2011–2012, was 32% lower than the total biomass in the three previous years (2008–2010).*
- *‘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.’*
- *Improvements to fishery selectivity are needed to allow more fish to spawn at least once before capture.*

ICES recognised that Bass are a special species in their 2012 Advice, stating “*Management of sea bass fisheries needs to take into account the distinctive characteristics and economic value of the different fisheries. Sea bass is of high social and economic value to sea angling and other recreational fishing that contribute substantially to local economies.*”

With all the above in mind we believe that, rather than allowing a TAC based commercial fishery to develop, a series of Technical Measures should be introduced to protect bass and deliver Best Value from the resource and thus create substantial economic and social reward by increasing income and jobs to those rural areas most in need.



Conclusion

Clearly something has to change or bass will be added to the list of species in recovery.

We believe Scotland should consider case studies from Southern Ireland (zero commercial take) and the USA before any long term decisions are made. The sustainable management of fish species such as bass, primarily for recreational benefit, can generate superior economic gains for local and national economies. In addition, it can ensure that recreationally exploited species continue to expand as a result of very low angling mortality rates and relatively inefficient capture techniques (hook and line).

In the short term, we believe Scotland should increase the MLS to 45 cm at the first opportunity before the fish move inshore for the summer and another opportunity to protect the bass stocks and develop a recreation fishery is squandered.

SSACN Recommendations:

1. Allow all bass to spawn at least once before capture in any fishery (commercial and recreational) by increasing the Minimum Landings Size (MLS) from the present 36cm to 45cm
2. Increase any commercial net mesh size to fit the new MLS.
3. Identify and protect Nursery and Spawning areas
4. In view of the damage to bass stocks occurring through near-shore and beach-based netting, we recommend that all forms of netting be excluded from known bass regions.
5. The introduction of Technical Measures for commercial licensing and the use of carcass tags, to reduce the current high level of illegal netting and sale of 'illegal' bass.
6. Bag limits for anglers
7. Improve the quality and quantity of scientific knowledge and data on all bass fisheries.
8. Recreational catches to be sampled (as required by the data collection regulation) and the socio-economic value to be estimated
9. Member States should be allowed to set a higher MLS and bigger mesh than prescribed by EU regulations within their 12nm territorial waters for their own as well as other nations' vessels.
10. Avoid going down the TAC route at all costs. It's time for a different look at how to manage fish stocks. We believe a TAC would continue to allow over fishing in EU waters and the situation would likely get worse under a TAC. See RSA combined Bass TAC Position Paper
11. Similar measures should be identified for all fish stocks in the near-shore <3 miles environment.





Bass in Scotland

As far as SSACN is aware, there is no scientific data available to show stock dynamics or migrations of Bass in Scottish waters and very little reliable data is available to quantify the contribution to the national economy made by recreational Bass angling, however according to the 2009 Government's Study - Economic Impact of Recreational Sea Angling in Scotland by Radford, 25% (30,000) of all anglers in Scotland target bass.

Of these 30,000 anglers, a surprisingly small percentage could actually admit to catching a bass, and particularly a bass over 4 pounds. Bass are considered a trophy fish and the Bass angler has to endure many blank days

It now appears Bass can be caught all the way up the west coast and round the north coast during the summer months. The Solway and Luce Bay hold the biggest head of Bass. The immature bass known as schoolies can be found in big numbers at times from the Mull to the Borders. The larger mature fish seem to move into the area during the late summer although the odd one can be caught in all months of the year. There is a large amount of netting going on in this area to supply the local restaurants and hotels.

When mature bass move out of the nursery areas, they will stay in the same shoal for life. After a short nomadic period, they will remain in the same area, apart from spawning migrations. Due their slow growth rate, once a localised shoal has been depleted it will take years to replace.

In line with Defra's proposals for sea bass management measures for consideration in the expert technical group; SSACN believe there is a need for:

- A reduction of fishing mortality on adult bass
- A reduction in overall mortality on all ages of bass
- A need to extend the protection of juveniles

SSACN has long promoted their GFAC <http://www.ssacn.org/gfac> measures which are a voluntary code to ensure fish have a chance to breed a least once. This is of particular importance for the sustainability of Bass because they are so slow-growing and therefore late to reach sexual maturity; A fish from Scottish waters weighing 10 pounds would probably be 20 years old, and about 71 cm in length. They reach sexual maturity at 42 cm which is achieved in six to seven years.

