



Angling Trust General Election Briefing – Save our Bass Stocks

March 2015

Political support urgently needed for bass stocks

British and European bass stocks are in deep trouble and anglers and coastal communities are looking for political support from those who seek to represent us in Parliament.

This briefing has been prepared for MPs and parliamentary candidates to provide them with the information to make the case for meaningful conservation measures to avoid a catastrophic stock collapse.

An 80% cut in landings is required to save the bass stock for the long term benefit of all stakeholders. These cuts must reward sustainable fishing practices and maximise socio-economic benefits.

Summary

The Angling Trust would publicly welcome statements of support from parliamentary candidates that recognises: the serious problems caused by the commercial over-fishing of bass; that bass should receive a far greater management priority for the economically significant recreational fishing sector; the need for the EU temporary ban on the trawling of winter spawning aggregations to be made permanent; the reduction of bass mortality through catch limits in our inshore waters in line with the best available evidence from ICES and others; the case for the expansion and reform of bass nursery areas and for an overhaul of the outdated regulations covering inshore netting.

The Current Situation

The bass stock in Europe is on the brink of a total collapse unless urgent action is taken to conserve and rebuild the remaining spawning populations. The latest scientific advice issued by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) in June 2014 recommends a staggering 80 percent cut in landings of bass across the EU area 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, targeting of spawning aggregations and successive years with only small numbers of juvenile fish - insufficient to replenish the adult population. The results from last October's Solent bass survey confirm five poor years of juvenile bass in a row (2008 – 2012) which offers a bleak prospect for the future.

A Political Failure

EU Member States have historically chosen to protect their own national fishing rights for bass, without regard to the rapidly diminishing numbers of bass. As a result, they have allowed their commercial fishing fleets to plunder and destroy the bass fishery.

UK Fisheries Ministers have been well aware of the current parlous state of bass numbers and the long overdue need for the Government to introduce measures to prevent a catastrophic stock collapse.

EU Commission Action

Following the failure to reach agreement at the European Fisheries Council meeting in December 2014 the EU Commission took the unusual step of introducing emergency measures following a request by the UK government. The measures resulted in a ban on pelagic (mid water) trawling of aggregating and spawning bass stocks in the English Channel, Southern North Sea and Irish and Celtic Seas. However, these measures are only temporary and will expire on April 30th 2015. It is essential if bass stocks are to be restored that this temporary measure is maintained in 2016 and preferably made permanent so that this unsustainable fishery cannot be allowed to reopen under political pressure.

In addition to the closure of the pelagic fishery, measures were proposed to reduce the impact on bass stocks from recreational fishing and from other commercial bass fisheries. As a result an EU-wide bag limit of three fish per day for recreational catches comes into force by April 1st. Member states have taken longer to agree on measures to reduce the impact on bass stocks from other commercial fisheries but we now hope that monthly catch limits, seasonal closures and a new minimum legal size of 42cm for all fisheries, including technical changes to fishing gears, will be agreed and see the rest of the commercial catching sector play a fair role in contributing to reducing fishing mortality further in 2015.

Although welcome, these measures will still fall very short of reaching the scientifically advised reduction in mortality of 80 per cent and unless more serious efforts are made to reduce the main sources of bass fishing mortality the status of the species will continue to decline with negative impacts on coastal communities and economies across the UK. ICES will issue its 2016 advice on bass later this year and we fear this may be for a total closure of bass fishing in northern Europe.

In the longer term the European Parliament recently adopted a resolution for the development of a long term management plan for bass which, while welcome, will take a number of years to be agreed. Until this happens further short term measures will need to be agreed for 2016 and beyond. It is therefore critical that the UK follows the scientific advice and takes measures, both in partnership with other EU members and at a domestic level, to protect the remaining bass stock on which any future recovery will be built.

Will the UK Government now act?

It seems highly likely that the EU proposals will not deliver the 80% cuts required in 2015 and we are therefore looking to the UK Government to supplement the EU measures with UK unilateral measures.

The UK Government has previously resisted introducing UK measures to protect the bass stock, arguing that there would be little benefit to the UK, due to the unsustainable offshore mid-water trawling of spawning aggregations carried out by other EU Member States.

That argument is severely flawed, since bass spend most of their time in inshore waters such as estuaries, nursery areas, coastal reefs and surf beaches. However, now that the offshore mid-water trawling of spawning aggregations has been banned, the road is clear for the UK Government to introduce UK measures unilaterally, secure in the knowledge that the benefits will accrue to UK stakeholders.

Our own Fisheries Minister George Eustice has indicated a willingness to review UK conservation measures, including increasing the wholly inadequate minimum size at which bass can be harvested and reducing the unsustainable levels of commercial exploitation. However, progress is painfully slow and to date no specific proposals have been tabled.

The government has shown a laudable commitment to marine species conservation in British Overseas Territories and have recently declared one the world's largest marine protected areas where commercial exploitation will be banned - in Pitcairn Islands. A similar commitment to problems closer to home is now needed.

See here... <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-31943633>

Economic Impact

The imminent collapse in bass stocks or a total moratorium on all forms of bass fishing would be disastrous for the economy of recreational sea angling and coastal communities.

Defra's Sea Angling 2012 report shows:

- 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);**

Supporting Sustainable Fishing – A No-Brainer

The Government's current "Long Term Vision" document "Fisheries 2027" includes the requirement to utilise public marine fishery resources for their best economic return to society:

"In most cases fish stocks and access to use them, either commercially or recreationally, are managed to maximise the long-term economic return to society."

Commercial fishing for bass is destroying the bass fishery, but in the UK is worth only a paltry £5 million first landed value.

Cutting landings by 80% will deliver valuable long term economic benefits. It represents a golden opportunity to re-profile the current exploitation pattern away from unsustainable commercial fishing

methods towards methods that are the most environmentally friendly, selective, and generate the best return from the fishery.

In purely economic terms, it is clear that we would be far better off if wild bass were retained as a line caught species only. This would immediately revive the UK fishery for the inshore under ten metre commercial fleet, who would be in position to provide a premium product caught in a sustainable way, and would allow the recreational sector to grow to its full potential.

Blue Marine Foundation Report

On December 1st, the Blue Marine Foundation published a report “Defining the Economic and Environmental Values of Sea Bass”, focusing on Sussex.

This report compared the economic values and biological impact of recreational and commercial bass fishing on a like for like basis. It found that:

“The final economic output per tonne of bass retained in Sussex is almost 40–75 times higher for recreational bass fisheries than for commercial bass fisheries. The employment generated per tonne of bass retained is 39–75 times higher for the recreational bass fisheries than for the commercial fisheries.”

It also found that sea angling has 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 bass in 2012 and created 353 full time jobs, whilst retaining only 15 tonnes of bass. In comparison, commercial sea bass landings in Sussex generated only £9.25 million and 111 full time jobs, whilst landing 247 tonnes of bass.

NOTE: The Blue Marine Foundation report can be found here:

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

Impact on Commercial Fishermen

Few, if any, commercial fishermen are solely dependent upon bass for a living. However, an 80% cut in landings will unquestionably have a short term negative economic impact on the commercial fishing industry.

However, there is no other choice - without the bass stock, there will be no commercial bass fishery.

In the longer term, allowing the stock to regenerate and moving to premium, higher value, sustainable fishing methods will dramatically increase the economic returns to the commercial bass fishery.

Bass Minimum Landing Size (“MLS”)

One of the technical conservation measures we believe would achieve most at a UK level is raising the MLS from 36cm to 45cm, i.e. 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?

The EU and Member States are currently discussing an increase in the MLS to only 40cm or 42cm and it remains to be seen whether this will be implemented.

Raising the UK MLS for bass to 45cms in the UK would achieve the following outcomes:

- Contribute towards the necessary 80% reduction in mortality recommended by ICES, which is highly unlikely to be achieved by EU measures alone.
- Protect juvenile bass 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.
- 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 884,000 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 trawl fisheries in the Bristol Channel and Sussex.

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

Commercial Catch Limits and Spatial / Seasonal Closures

Decreasing the monthly catch limit per commercial boat is necessary to ensure we achieve the 80% reduction in bass mortality. Current proposals for 2015 are in the area of 20%, which simply do not reflect the urgency of the situation.

Spatial and seasonal closures of areas by gear type allow a targeted reduction in exploitation and can be used to protect inshore spawning stocks.

Bass Nursery Areas

The Angling Trust and our colleagues at the Bass Anglers Sportfishing Society are calling for the rapid improvement and extension of the UK's Bass Nursery Areas ("BNA"), to provide protection to valuable estuarine environments for juvenile bass.

- Only highly restricted and controlled licensed netting (such as for salmon, sand-eels, eels and scientific research) should be allowed in BNA.
- The EU's proposed 3 bass bag limit for recreational sea anglers should also apply to commercial fishing in BNA.
- BNA should be extended to all estuaries and should extend sea-ward at estuary mouths.

- A deeming measure to assist enforcement (preventing claims that bass found on a person fishing in a BNA were not caught in the BNA).
- Adequate funding for proper signage and enforcement of BNA regulations.

However, the Angling Trust is encouraged by the news that, as a result in increased awareness of the parlous state of the current bass stock, some IFCAs are currently looking at the possibility of introducing control measures within some estuaries that are not currently designated as Bass Nursery Areas. In addition, climate change seems to be extending the range of our bass stock and so we would hope that areas further north would be considered for designation as BNAs.

Netting Reforms

The current regulations regarding inshore netting are nothing short of farcical. Unpowered vessels can set nets and sell their catches without a commercial licence. 'Recreational netting' is allowed but the catches should not be sold. Netting can take place in designated bass nursery areas for other species such as mullet, bream and flounder even though bass will be 'accidentally' caught as a by catch. The public are unable to report illegal fishing when it is unclear as to what species are being targeted by the netters.

Many anglers believe that the time has come for a complete overhaul of the outdated rules covering netting with measures which should include:

- No netting for mullet, bream or other marine species in bass nursery areas (BNAs)
- An expansion in the number, size and scope of the BNAs
- A 'deeming' measure to apply to any caught bass brought into a BNA
- An end to all forms of unlicensed netting
- All forms of commercial exploitation to require a licence
- Proper signage and enforcement of BNA regulations
- Further protection for estuaries and other important inshore nursery habitats

Lessons From Other Countries

Other EU countries have acted to protect their bass stocks and the jobs that depend upon them while in America bass stocks have been rebuilt following the implementation of strict recovery plans.

Ireland

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 currently proposing to raise their bass MLS to 50cms, introduce catch and release only zones and tighten recreational bag limits.

Netherlands

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, a bag limit of 20kg for recreational fishers and a cap on the small-scale commercial rod and line fleet.

America

The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act 1984 saw the federal imposition of a moratorium on striped bass harvest in states that failed to implement effective 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 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**.

Conclusions

Bass is the favourite fish targeted by UK 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.

As a result, recreational sea anglers are now becoming more politically aware and active and are demanding the introduction of a broad package of EU and UK measures to achieve an urgent 80% cut in mortality and to reprofile the bass fishery in favour of sustainable fishing methods that will maximise the social and economic returns to the UK.

The UK urgently needs:

- A 45cm MLS to allow the species to spawn at least once before harvesting.
- Large reductions in catch limits per boat
- Spatial and temporal closures
- An end to commercial harvesting during the spawning period (December to the end of April)
- Phasing out of unsustainable fishing methods such as pair trawling and bottom trawling
- A significant improvement and expansion of Bass Nursery Areas
- An overhaul of the outdated netting regulations and greater estuarine protection

There will be the predictable objections from those who either deny the science or who seek to put short term profit before the long term interests of species and the economy. To concede once again to these pressures will ensure the final collapse of any viable bass fishery for either the commercial or recreational sector.

ENDS

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](#)
- Details of the Angling *Trust's Let Our Bass Breed* campaign can be found [HERE](#)
- Angling Trust response to EU bass proposal [HERE](#)
- Inland Fisheries Ireland – Bass Policy paper Aug 2014 [HERE](#)
- Management of seabass in NW Europe - Pawson and Pickett 2004 [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 5 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.

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 welcomes 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 other countries' boats to intercept English bass whilst they are in offshore spawning areas. 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.