

Cornwall Bass Fishery

Towards the end of 2012, a great deal of attention was directed at the bass fishery in Cornwall by recreational anglers and pole and line commercial fishermen, when a few small local vessels shot gillnets in the Runnelstone area of the coast. A significant amount of officer time was employed to ensure that the vessels did not fish inside the 'Runnelstone box' where nets with a mesh less than 250mm are not permitted to be used. After investigation by officers, several claims of 'illegal fishing' or 'illegal nets' were established to be unfounded.

As this is a complex issue, it was felt it would be useful to give a brief background to the issue.

Legislative History

On the 28th November 1980 the Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee made the Bass Fishery Byelaw which set a minimum removal size of 37.5cm for bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) in the Cornwall District which at that time extended just three miles from baselines. At the time of the byelaw's introduction the minimum landing size (MLS) for the rest of the UK and Europe was just 26cm, a massive 11.5cm (4.5 inches) under the byelaw size. The EU/UK MLS increased from 26cm to 32cm in 1986 and finally to 36cm in 1990, however over the last 22 years, national and EU regulators seemed reluctant to increase the MLS further.

Most of the impetus for this bass byelaw came from the local commercial pole and line fisherman, anglers and conservationists with the tacit support of other commercial fishermen, including the local gillnetters. In general, the size limit has been very well respected over those years but as with any restriction, there are always a few individuals from both the commercial and leisure industries who do not comply fully with the byelaw. Enforcement resources are targeted as a standard operating procedure toward these problem areas.

The 37.5cm size chosen in 1980 was a compromise as there was some support for the minimum size to be 40cm. However, the scientific evidence from CEFAS at the time was that fish in the 38cm to 40cm size moved offshore to deeper waters in the mid channel and, therefore, were not available to the local industry. Economically, the value of small fish (plate portions) was far higher than the larger fish. To recognise the importance of the species to Cornwall, whilst considering the economic and biological arguments, a pragmatic decision was taken by the Committee to restrict the size to 37.5cm. After 32 years it is still one of the highest sizes in the UK and Europe (South Wales SFC (now part of the Welsh Government) also increased its size to 37.5 cm and Southern Ireland increased the size to 40 cm).

Biological Information

Scientific data collected recently, strongly suggests that climatic change is affecting the distribution of bass and that the range of the species is extending northwards as far as southern Norway. An important bass fishery has developed in Yorkshire, a location where bass, a warm water species, were hardly ever seen just ten or fifteen years ago. Changes in migration patterns, perhaps due to climate change through warmer sea temperatures, are seemingly decreasing the incidence for mature and first year spawning bass to travel offshore during the winter months to prepare for spawning. Anecdotal information has been received that tagging experiments appear to indicate a tendency for adult bass larger than the 38cm to 40cm size to remain in inshore feeding areas into the winter.

Climatic change is also having a positive effect upon recruitment and survival rates of young bass. Scientific research and additional anecdotal evidence indicates that the trend of milder winters which the UK experienced for the past few years (since 1989), has enhanced both the survival and growth rates of juvenile bass. This translates into increased numbers of adolescent bass. In some areas of the UK bass are showing increased growth rates due to extended growth periods, brought about by higher sea temperatures.

In general, female bass do not reach sexual maturity until they reach a length of 38cm - 42cm at 6 to 7 years of age. Bass are a long lived fish of 20-30 years. Male fish tend to be smaller than females of the same age.

Economic Information

In addition to biological and stock distribution changes, the economic profile of landed bass has altered over the last decade or so. Prolific quantities of farmed bass are now readily, and cheaply available in a wide range of outlets. This availability has brought down the price of "plate portion" size fish since the mid 1980s in real terms by approximately two thirds. The present global recessionary financial climate is probably having an additional downwards impact on the price of wild caught bass, as farmed bass volumes reaching the market have increased.

Management Issues

In light of all the economic and biological changes over recent years, the view has been expressed from some quarters that if the minimum size of bass was raised (probably in phased steps) to 55cms equating to about 1.75 kg, within the UK territorial sea, huge benefits would ultimately accrue to commercial and leisure fishermen alike. However there are some provisos to that view:-

- There has to be confidence that the potential benefits of unilateral management measures inside territorial waters (12 miles) will accrue to UK stakeholders. This is not to say that all benefits must accumulate for UK interests, but that the net benefits will exceed the current values, even if a proportion of the benefits spillover into water outside of 12 miles. This confidence can only really come about through a wide-ranging assessment of the issue looking at the biological and socio-economic factors. The impacts on all the bass fisheries, commercial and recreational, and their ability to adjust and compensate for a higher minimum size, will have to be given due consideration. Different fisheries will be adversely or beneficially affected in different ways.
- There also has to be confidence that any management measure implemented inside territorial waters can be applied equally to other Member State's vessels fishing under historical rights inside of 12 miles, as well as to UK vessels. This assessment can only really come from DEFRA and/or the Commission.
- If confidence can be demonstrated regarding the above points, the necessary legislative measures will need to be introduced on a national scale, or as a minimum on a large regional basis. To do otherwise would be to potentially disadvantage fishermen in the smaller areas (ie IFCA Districts) in which it is introduced. There is an argument that if three or four IFCAs grouped together on a regional basis and introduced a common increased bass size, with or without a closed season, and if due regard was given to all the biological and socio-economic issues, plus any 6-12 mile limits or other political considerations, that the bass stocks could be harvested for the greater benefit of most, if not all, sectors. The Southern, Devon and Severn and Cornwall IFCAs have already started informal discussions about this possibility or option as a part of their byelaw reviews.

It has been assessed by interest groups that the potential value from landings could increase by 500% from the same number of fish currently being landed. Alternatively, if the calculations are correct, just 20% of the numbers of bass currently landed would generate the same first hand sale value. These benefits/values need to be scrutinised further. Scientists at the CEFAS Pakefield laboratory have said that the UK bass stocks are very robust and they are of the view that the management regime in place at present is working well, but they recommend no increase in effort.

Recent Issues Raised – CIFCA Responses

Below is a list of the questions, suggestions, issues or subjects raised via emails, letters and the comment tool on our website over the last week or two.

- Bass should be reserved only for sports fishing.

- Plans are needed for stock recovery.
- Plans needed to prevent over exploitation by gill-netters.
- Raise MLS of bass.
- Feedback wanted on what is happening re inshore gillnetting.
- Is there an agreed strategy to protect inshore bass and other at risk stocks?
- Sport fishing only areas.
- What are the Authority's thoughts on large numbers of bass caught in nets and any plans to change this?
- Gill nets alleged as taking salmonids, school bass, unlicensed vessels being used and MLS not being adhered to.

Other questions and comments were raised that fit within the main thrust of those listed above.

Some points on the list can only be decided and addressed nationally for very good reasons, but some of them can certainly be considered by the IFCA in its own District. Taking each of the points above in turn, an initial response would be as follows.

- Bass should be reserved only for sports fishing.** This is a concept that recreational sea angling (RSA) interests have suggested for several years, citing the measures already in place in Southern Ireland and the USA (for striped bass). A general decision to reserve a particular species for a particular sector, whilst excluding other sectors that will catch the species by default, will be a political decision and this would be the reserve of a Ministerial or EU decision making processes.
- Plans are needed for stock recovery.** According to national fisheries scientists, the bass stocks are healthy. This view does not necessarily compare with anecdotal data or personal comments from RSA interests and pole and line commercial fishermen. Bass constantly move along the coasts and offshore/inshore tending to move easterly from along the south coast until the autumn months, when they tend to return to the west and often offshore for breeding. As mentioned above, the range of bass have moved much further north as water temperatures have increased. "Stock management" for bass cannot possibly be managed on a single IFCA District basis, because the majority of bass within a given District is transient, not resident.
- Plans needed to prevent over exploitation by gill-netters.** This can only be answered when "over exploitation" has been defined. As previously mentioned, the scientists are of the view that bass stocks are quite healthy, although they do not recommend any increased effort. In Cornwall, gillnet effort for bass has stayed relatively static for many years, with no more vessels and nets now when compared to 10 or 15 years ago.

One sector that has increased in the last five or six years is the number (and success) of more commercial anglers and line fishermen finding concentrations of bass at discrete places around the coast. It has to be recognised that a single offshore mid-water trawler or pair-trawling team targeting bass, will catch far more fish in a single night than all the gillnetters in Cornwall will catch over many weeks. UK mid-water boats are restricted to landing 5 tonnes per week or 15 tonnes a month, but at present other Members States' vessels are unrestricted in the tonnage they can land.

The gill net vessels fishing for bass near the Runnelstone area are known to be using nets of 95mm mesh. In a study by Cefas investigating bass gillnet selectivity¹, the modal length of bass being caught in a 95mm mesh net (page 15 of the study) is calculated as 44cm, well above the Cornish MLS of 37.5cm. This is supported by anecdotal information that only one or two fish were returned to the water because they were below the MLS. Many local fishermen use larger meshes than 95mm when fishing for bass, often in excess of 100mm.

¹ http://www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/media/168267/fsp_2008_09_prog_08_bass_gill_net_selectivity_final_report.pdf

- d) **Raise MLS of bass.** As noted above, the Cornwall IFCA already has the biggest MLS in England. In conjunction with other south-western and southern IFCAs, informal discussions are now being held at a high level to look at the various options and issues. The Cornwall IFCA (and previously the SFC) has invariably supported an increased MLS for bass, but has experienced a degree of frustration that other authorities, national and local have not followed its example.
- e) **Feedback wanted on what is happening re inshore gillnetting.** Inshore gillnetting in Cornwall has reduced in recent years. Gillnetting vessels are regularly inspected under a risk based enforcement protocol (as are other fishing methods), and on the rare occasions any contraventions of regulations are encountered, full investigations are carried out and prosecutions followed where appropriate.
- f) **Is there an agreed strategy to protect inshore bass and other risk stocks?** The IFCA is bound by the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MaCAA) and section 153 lays down the obligations on the Authority for the management of inshore fisheries. As the Authority has a plethora of other obligations upon it, the Authority is undertaking this area of work through the 'Project Inshore'² which will assess all inshore stocks and their existing management compared to the effort. This will identify areas of weakness in their management, and suggest options for consideration by the Committee.
- g) **Sport fishing only areas.** Like in the point a) above, this suggestion has arisen for some while. However, unlike the answer to a), areas for specific fishing methods may be considered and developed by the IFCAs. This is an emerging area of work which may be usefully informed by the results of the previously mentioned 'Project Inshore'.
- h) **What are the Authority's thoughts on large numbers of bass caught in nets and any plans to change this?** The work being done for 'Project Inshore' will inform future plans for various exploitation levels of the different fisheries around our coast.
- i) **Gill nets alleged as taking salmonids, school bass, unlicensed vessels being used and MLS not being adhered to.** The Authority frequently receives reports that gillnets are taking salmonids. This is the responsibility of the Environment Agency (EA) and it spends a great deal of time investigating such allegations. Cornwall IFCA officers are also cross-warranted by the EA, so if salmonids are seen during inspections they will investigate and pass on the full details to the EA.

The concern of school bass (small fish under or near the MLS) being caught is usually not an issue, as the nets used to catch bass are large enough that small bass will tend to not get ensnared. Every fisherman has to satisfy the MLS (commercial and recreational) and if bass are seized by officers that are smaller than that size, then a full investigation follows and possibly a court appearance or a financial administrative penalty may be imposed.

The alleged problem with unregistered vessels is the MMO's area of competence. However, Cornwall IFCA officers always report on to the MMO when they see any vessels that may be of concern.

Edwin Derriman
Chief Officer Cornwall IFCA

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² <http://www.seafish.org/fishermen/fishing/project-inshore/about-the-project>