



European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

REPORT

Recreational Fishing and the Long Term Management of Sea Bass

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European Parliament

MEP Norica Nicolai welcomed all the participants to the conference in her capacity as the President of the RecFishing Forum. The European Commission is thinking about a complete ban for fishing bass for all 28 Member States, to be decided in December 2016. It is an essential topic for the Forum and the meeting aims at finding other solutions that the Commission's proposal.

MEP Richard Corbett introduced the topic and its importance: to make sure that the wider socioeconomic impact of recreational fishing is properly taken into account, even when shorter management decisions are taken, not just for sea bass but for all species. Stocks are below the level at which recovery can be guaranteed; ICES advises a moratorium. The MEP pledged for a fair and equal burden sharing and negotiated solutions. Yet, the sea bass recreational fishing sector is worth €2bn a year. There are discrepancies within Europe on the mere definition of recreational fishing, as well as political positions. Then all stakeholders should be listened to.

Ian Noble, Chairman, Professional Boatman's Association, stated that there is 3 million anglers in the UK, among them 884,000 sea anglers who accounted for 1.1 million angling-days spent on private or chartered boats in 2015. £1.23bn and 10,000 full-time jobs are the most striking figures of the annual recreational fishing market in the UK. Many different sectors of the economy are boosted by recreational angling, including transportation,



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accommodation, food & beverages, specialty retail outlets and the information sector. He then exposed the differences between commercial fishing and angling practices. For instance, the commercial sector, fishing 365 days a year with gill nets that are far less selective, is the main explanation of the stocks falling. The EU suggests recreational anglers take around 25% of the bass, against 10% according to CEFAS and the Eastern IFCA study he supports. Mr. Noble expressed his surprise when, in 2016, gill netters saw their TAC increase by 30%, to 1,300kilos of sea bass per month, whereas recreational sea anglers were subject to a one bass bag limit. There is a real disproportion due to an efficient lobbying of the commercial fishing industry, he said. Moreover, this limit had direct economic impacts, with 1,301 fishing trips not rebooked or cancelled for the only second half of 2016. He concluded saying that EU law foresees that access to a fishery should be based on transparent and objective criteria including those of an environmental, social and economic nature. Mr Noble is supportive of proper fish stock management, which will bring more fish. Once this will happen, quotas can be allowed to rise, allowing rod and line angling and commercial fishing to produce more revenue and employment.

(VIDEO BREAK) See the video "Seabass – Crisis, Value, Solution" here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDmONwE1ETQ>

Jean Kiffer, President, FNPPSF, member of the EEA, first recalled that sea angling is the first motivation when buying a boat for 80% of people. Recreational fishing represents 5 to 10 times more human activity than commercial fishing. It does display a social role, bringing together men and women from kids to their grand-grandparents, from all social background. Furthermore, Jean Kiffer touched upon the good practices of sea angling for human health. Current European measures are incoherent. As an example, they are only implemented in France above the 48° parallel, which creates a non-existing boarder. Mr. Kiffer believes those measures to be also unfair and dangerous. A daily limit makes no sense when sea anglers are, on average, 5-10 days a year offshore. He reminded the audience about the unilateral decision taken by the anglers to select only >42cm sea bass, above the 36cm EU limit, a symbol of sea anglers' *bona fide*. About the daily limit, Jean Kiffer advocated for a monthly or yearly limit because of the volatile nature of recreational angling. Besides, he proposed a compulsory declaration of all catches, so that the weight of sea angling will be exactly measured. This way of management already exists for other species, like bluefin tuna or other sectors, like hunting, and feedback is positive in terms of stocks management. Logbooks or computer management programmes are options, as long as the selected one is simple for all sea anglers. He finally stated that the European anglers are ready to commit.



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Willie Roche, Senior Research Officer, Inland Fisheries Ireland, presented a brief overview of the management of sea bass fisheries in Ireland, which has operated for some 25 years now, and some information on the features of the angling sector. In Ireland, commercial fishery was closed in 1990 for it to become an angling-only fishery. On the same year, a bag limit of two fish per day was introduced, as well as a minimum size of 40 cm and a closed season from the 15th of May to the 15th of June. One of the other measures introduced was the ban of selling bass other than imported bass. The idea was to limit opportunities for retail outlets to sell illegally fished bass. Maintaining a very restrictive angling fishery has been Ireland's policy since then. In 2016, the revised angling regulations (a catch-and-release fishery for the first six months of the year, and for the second half of the year, one fish bag limit), created some trouble but no major contestations. Willie Roche then moved on to presenting four major policy areas: management of the status quo, *i.e.* an angling only fishery, the restoration of old levels of abundance, the socio-economic value of the fishery and the maintaining of the existing bass revenue stream. Generally, he felt that the economic benefits of a sustainable bass fishery needed to be explained to a wider audience so that they would understand that the biggest added value to the economy is produced by the recreational bass fishery. Mr. Roche gave also significant figures to the audience. In 2016, the average retention by anglers were 3.28 fish per year, and the catch-and-release level was at 86%. Sea bass angling in Ireland accounts for 9% of the total national angling industry.

Willie Roche put forward some ecological investigations he is carrying on, dealing with stocks, genetics, satellite and conventional tagging, etc. He believes that a more scientific approach will help to further reduce the fishing mortality in the angling sector. Finally, Mr. Roche concluded that operating a very restrictive angling fishery made of catch-and-release appeared to be a valuable solution in Ireland.

David Mitchell, Chairman, EAA Sea Sub-Group, Angling Trust, said that the EU law has to be applied as a precondition for any management objectives and strategies, yet Member States are responsible for its implementation and sometimes lack willingness or capabilities to deliver. Second, Mr. Mitchell considered that to minimise environmental impacts on sea bass means taking out the most damageable practices. Some commercial fishing techniques are the most damaging, whereas recreational angling is the most benign. Third, maximising the social and economic benefits should be a major objective for the whole society. Sea bass angling can generate a very high economic and social input, so he believes commercial and recreational fisheries can coexist and complement each other in a multi-faceted fishery. The key lies in finding the balance between the lowest economic impact and the highest economic and social benefits, while guaranteeing the highest abundance. Increasing abundance will



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allow the angling sector to grow, he believes. Abundance must also be looked for by maintaining the natural age structure, meaning that if the expectations of catching “the fish of a lifetime” vanishes, recreational sea bass angling will disappear. Lastly, he pledged for a fully documented fishery that would assess all catches, both commercial -thanks to a landing obligation- and recreational, and for an access for all EU citizens to fish as a public resource.

Maja Kirchner, DG MARE, presented the relevant developments for the past two years in the European legislation. Until December 2014, there was almost no measures in place for sea bass except the minimum landing size of 36cm. Today, a management scheme is in place that has made first results on the sea bass stock. It stretches from a closed season to monthly catch limits for all fishermen, including the one-bag limit for recreational anglers. In 2015, there was a 38% decrease in landings and another 44% reduction is expected in 2016. The European Commission took the June 2016 ICES advice very seriously and is engaging with all stakeholders before coming with a proposal. After internal discussion at DG MARE, Commissioner Vella will make a proposal for sea bass management for 2017. She concluded by stressing on the urgent need of establishing a long-term multi-annual management plan for western waters, that would for sure include sea bass.

DEBATE

MEP Raymond Finch, UKIP, took the floor first, and complained about Commissioner Vella not replying after a year about his questions regarding bass stocks and expressed his pessimism about receiving any.

Anthony Brown, Group Advisor, UKIP, took the opportunity to remind the audience about the meaning of the term “recreational”. It is something one chooses to do for pleasure, on his or her own way. Wrapping it in red tape because of heavy regulations to comply with will lead to many recreational anglers stopping their very much appreciated leisure. Leisure is by essence incompatible with extended regulations.

Jan Kappel, EAA Secretary-General, asked Maja Kirchner about the extra 44% decrease expected in 2016. According to him, a lot of illegal catches took place in January because the legislation was not fully in place, which biases all statistics for 2016.

Maja Kirchner, DG MARE, understand Mr. Brown’s concerns, but prioritises wildlife conservation over unregulated leisure. She welcomed the positive commitment of European anglers since 2014 and their open-mindedness to measures for commercial fishermen and recreational anglers. Answering Mr. Kappel’s question, she declared that all fishermen should



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have been made aware of the new legislation back in January, but it is up to the States to implement such a closure. Measures will stay in force also for January 2017, so all are aware of the current moratorium.

Brian O’Riordan, Low Impact Fishers for Europe Live Platform, defends hook and lines fishers mainly from South England and the Netherlands and reached out to the audience by proposing to collaborate. He is supportive of a fully documented fishery, too. He took as a technological example the English company SuccorFish who has produced an app that allows recreational anglers a quick and easy notice of their catches to national authorities. He also agreed on the closure but suggested November-April and north of the 48° parallel as boundaries.

Pierre Feuilly, IFSUA, represents the spare fishing community. He supports equality between sea bass anglers and all recreational fishermen.

MEP Richard Corbett asked Mrs. Kirchner about the supposed 25% share of recreational anglers on sea bass catches. Due to restrictions imposed to commercial fishermen, he wondered whether this share would not be a sustainable amount.

Maja Kirchner replied that the measures in place are in light of the current scientific advice and that the Commission is still looking at the scientific advice and making calculations of what a daily or monthly bag limit could bring over the whole year.

CONCLUSION

MEP Alain Cadec thanked all participants and both organizers, EAA and EFTTA. He recalled that he warned the European Commission back in 2011 on the sea bass issue. The preservation of the resource is essential to guarantee a future to all recreational anglers. No fish means no fishermen. Sea bass is a political and economic issue for French fishermen, since they account for 70% of the commercial sea bass fishery in Europe. As a recreational angler himself, he does not believe the moratorium to be an efficient solution. Opposing commercial fisheries and recreational anglers will not lead anywhere. Distinctions have to be made within fishing practices, between hook and line fisheries and others having a bigger impact on the environment, such as trawlers. The emergency faced today with the sea bass will soon be the case for the sea bream and the pollock. He is personally in favour of the logbook and a monthly bag limit, also for scientific purposes. He then welcomed the field trip of DG MARE to French fisheries. Overall, the sea bass issue is a symbolic one for the European Union. All countries must compromise, so must the Commission and the Parliament, and all voices must be listened to, to avoid further resentment. Mr. Cadec lastly highlighted upcoming events that will contribute to this vivid democratic debate.