

The Fisheries Bill:

The case for sustainable fishing limits

Fishing limits must be set in line with the best available scientific advice to ensure that stocks are restored and maintained at levels above maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and to ensure that fishing mortality is below levels that will deliver MSY.

Good Environmental Status (GES) means that ecosystems are not adversely affected by the collective pressure of human activities and can support sustainable human use into the future. To achieve GES in UK waters we must have effective fisheries management based on the best available scientific advice. This must ensure the recovery and long term sustainability of all fish stocks. Currently Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) is the best scientific sustainability assessment model we have for our fish stocks.

Sustainable fishing: setting MSY catch limits

Setting catch limits up to, or preferably below, MSY levels allows for the maximum proportion of fish to be removed from a stock, year on year, without reducing the stock's ability to maintain its population at healthy levels. Fishing at levels above MSY will result in the stock being overfished and it could become depleted, in some cases irreversibly. However, when stock levels are high and healthy and the level of fishing is set up to the MSY level, it often means catch limits can increase, for example plaice in the North Sea, which can lead to increased profits and more consistent catches. Healthy fish stocks also play a vital role in ensuring the wider marine environment is healthy, productive and biologically diverse. Many other factors can influence the health of fish stocks, including the size at which fish are captured, changes to predator and prey populations, natural environmental fluctuations, pollution, habitat loss and climate change. To help account for and provide a buffer against such factors, a precautionary approach is needed and catch levels generally need to be set below MSY. It is also important to ensure that any fishing activities do not adversely impact the wider marine environment, including: the overfishing of species which were not being targeted by the fishers; damage to seafloor habitats; and the incidental mortality of vulnerable marine wildlife including mammals and seabirds.

Plaice in the North Sea

Overfishing in the North Sea led to significant reductions in plaice. Reducing fishing mortality, to below MSY levels, has helped increase the size of the stock and has increased recent catches. Plaice caught in the North Sea was continuously fished at levels above MSY for almost 50 years. As a result, the size of the stock was constrained at relatively low levels. In 1987, catches were estimated to be around 130,000 tonnes, but this fell significantly to around 49,000 tonnes in 2007. Since then, fishing levels have been included in a management plan which also covers sole, and catches have been set in line with MSY. Following the introduction of the management plan, catches of North Sea plaice have risen year on year in line with the increasing size of the recovering stock. Fleets targeting plaice have, in response to this management, seen a significant economic improvement in their fishery.

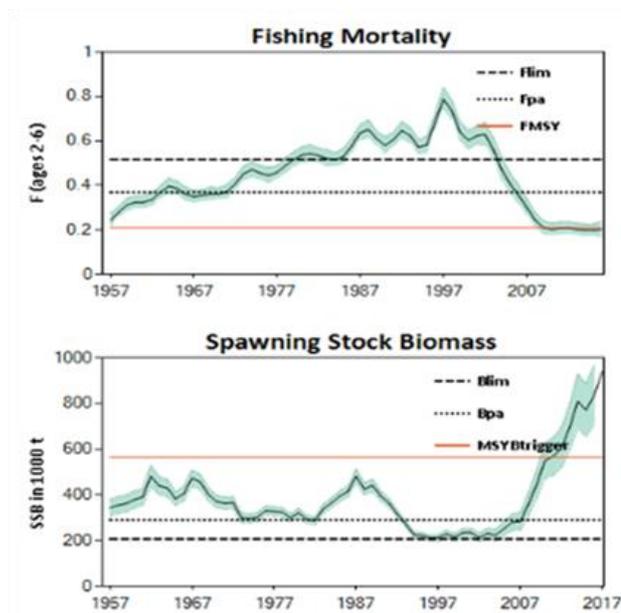


Figure 1. Graphs show fishing mortality and spawning stock biomass (the amount of mature fish) over time for North Sea plaice (ICES, 2017)

Risk

If the UK sets fishing opportunities above MSY levels, or decides to set fishing levels according to an alternative system from neighbouring coastal states it will **fail to implement its international legal obligation to meet Article 61(2) and 61(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 to end overfishing by 2020**. Not only will the UK miss these targets but it will **fail to realise the significant social, economic and environmental benefits of restoring stocks above biomass levels capable of producing MSY**. It will also **fail to increase the resilience of fish stocks in response to environmental changes, such as changing sea temperatures**. Therefore, we are less likely to improve the stability of catches or reduce the risks associated with overfishing or natural ecosystem fluctuations in the complex mixed fisheries that are prevalent in UK waters.

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