

Bass – The need and scope for local management measures

(Leon Roskilly 26 Aug 2014)

Overview

The district contains important recreational and commercial bass fisheries.

The availability of bass for the future is being dangerously compromised by increasing effort and a succession of recruitment failures in recent years.

The site-fidelity of bass makes them vulnerable to local depletion, but provides opportunities for local stewardship measures.

Unless action is taken soon we will lose the greater part of our bass fisheries, with economic consequences for the district and the wider viability of our fisheries.

There are measures that can be taken locally to both monitor and preserve our bass stocks.

Current Situation

Alarmed at the increasing effort on bass and a succession of recruitment failures in 2013 ICES recommended a reduction of 20% in landings to protect the valuable recreational and commercial bass fisheries. (<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2013/2013/bss-47.pdf>)

At EU level, emergency measures were called for but although the need was agreed, France (with the largest track record on bass) pushed for bass to become a TAC species (where they would be given most of the quota). Other EU countries felt that other technical measures were needed (such as seasonal closures to protect pre-spawning aggregations an increased minimum size etc.,)

With no measures in place and further increased effort, in 2014 ICES are now suggesting an 80% reduction. (<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2014/2014/bss-47.pdf>)

Meanwhile DEFRA who had independently been considering measures to conserve the UK fishery, put on hold any action awaiting the outcome of EU deliberations.

Meanwhile evidence suggests that effort on bass is still increasing given the market demand that arose when bass stocks were higher, and there is anecdotal evidence that with far fewer 'plate-sized' bass available, fishermen are turning to fishing for the larger fish (which are the remnants of the breeding stock) to satisfy demand and fill the gap when quota for other species is exhausted.

The EU Scientific, Technical and Economic Fisheries Committee (STECF) were asked to provide advice at the STECF summer plenary in July, (<https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/plen1402> - There is much information on bass amongst the background documents).

There will be further EU meetings on the subject of bass during this year, but the timescales and outcomes are unknown.

CEFAS are undertaking a 4 year study to better understand the dynamics of the UK bass stocks (<https://marinescience.blog.gov.uk/2014/06/16/conservation-seabass/> - although DEFRA appreciate the need for action in the meantime).

Bass biology

Bass are a slow-growing, late-maturing species with erratic recruitment (possibly temperature related) which (near the northern limits of their range in the UK) increases their vulnerability to over exploitation.

Bass can live around 25 years, grow to over 20lbs, spawning around 15 times. They shoal for life, the shoal reducing in size due to attrition over time. Females are larger than males.

Females produce viable spawn for the first at around 42-45cm.

Bass spawn offshore in winter/early-spring in water of at least 9C (increasingly this is happening locally with less need for long 'out of area' spawning migrations).

The bass plankton drifts towards the coast and bass fry take up residence in shallow waters, especially estuaries and near power-station outfalls.

They will stay resident in these coastal biological nursery areas for 4 years before leaving as nomadic young adults.

When fully mature, there is strong evidence that they become resident in an area, returning to the same area each summer after spawning migrations.

As with a number of other species older larger specimens contain greater quantities of spawn which is more viable than that produced by younger, smaller fish (immature fish can also produce spawn and milt but this is generally unviable).

Scope for local management.

One of the problems recognised by ICES is that the 'site-fidelity' of mature bass, and the need for younger fish to be resident in nursery areas during their early years, can lead to local depletion of stocks.

By definition this also indicates that specific measures can be taken locally to conserve local stocks and to mitigate local depletion by introducing protected areas and closed seasons for spawning aggregations in line with our stewardship obligations upon which the valuable local recreational and commercial fisheries depend.

Recommendations

Some measures on bass need to be dealt with on a European and national level.

e.g. Increased minimum sizes, catch-limits, restrictive licensing of bass etc

Other measures are best dealt with regionally, perhaps in association with other IFCA's that share

management of stocks that span IFCA districts.

It is recommended that Kent & Essex IFCA work with the Association of IFCAs and specifically with neighbouring IFCAs (Easter, Sussex and Southern) to identify measures that can be taken in concert with others.

K&EIFCA should adopt bass (and sole) as priority action species.

Locally Kent & Essex IFCA should identify significant biological nursery areas within the district, and inshore spawning grounds off our coast and develop measures to protect these aggregations.

Regular reporting of local catches, perhaps based on MMO produced figures (although these are known to significantly under-report the amount of bass landed within the small-scale fishery sector as well as unlicensed landings)

Annual surveys to be undertaken of '0' group year-classes to monitor recruitment and effectiveness of measures taken to restore stocks locally. (This could be accomplished by using volunteers and in partnership with others such as CEFAS, universities and other organisations).

K&EIFCA should also write to DEFRA and EU Fisheries, complaining at the lack of action on bass and the effect that this delay will have on local stocks and fisheries, with grave economic consequences.

Further Information

Ireland has recently produced a policy document for the management of bass in their waters (<http://www.fisheriesireland.ie/policies/453-inland-fisheries-ireland-bass-policy/file>)