

ANGLERS' VIEWS ON CONSERVATION OF SEA BASS

GIANLUCA GRILLI, JOHN CURTIS, STEPHEN HYNES, PAUL O'REILLY



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Gianluca Grilli (ESRI, TCD), *John Curtis (ESRI, TCD), Stephen Hynes (NUIG), Paul O'Reilly (IFI)

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OVERVIEW

Internationally there is a movement in fishery management to incorporate stakeholders in decision making processes and an important element of this is understanding anglers' attitudes and perceptions. To that end, this study considers anglers' views on conservation measures relating to the sea bass fishery in Irish waters.

This research shows that anglers are generally in favour of stronger protective measures for sea bass compared to the situation in 2015 when anglers were facing more stringent regulations for the 2016 season. Designating the sea bass fishery as 'catch and release' only for the period of January-June 2016 was broadly supported by surveyed anglers. Most anglers considered the 'catch and release' measure for January-June 2016 as too lenient and expressed a preference in favour of mandatory 'catch and release' for the entire season. For the 2018 season the sea bass fishery was designated mandatory 'catch & release'.

When bag limits were permitted prior to 2018 the retention of one fish per day had the largest support among anglers and similar to international experience the size of the bag limit was not a source of conflict between anglers and Inland Fisheries Ireland, the fishery manager. Indeed, many anglers suggested other enhanced regulatory measures, such as size limits, to support fish stock recruitment.

Despite a general consensus towards greater stock conservation there are divergent opinions on the conservation status of sea bass. For example, equal proportions of anglers at 12% believe that the status of sea bass stocks is either very good or very poor. This might generate conflict when stricter measures are established because many anglers might not understand the reason.

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Grilli, G., Curtis, J., Hynes, S., O'Reilly, P. "Anglers' views on stock conservation: Sea bass angling in Ireland", *Marine Policy*, <https://authors.elsevier.com/c/1Xxo~714MVE~X> [before 13 December 2018 for free download] <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.10.016>

BACKGROUND

The research is based on a survey of sea bass anglers to elicit anglers' feedback on current and proposed regulations pertaining to the Irish recreational bass fishery. The survey was undertaken in early summer 2016 and domestic and international visiting anglers who fished for sea bass in Ireland during 2015 were interviewed.

A moratorium on commercial fishing for sea bass in Irish waters has been in place since 1990, plus the recreational fishery has been closely regulated. Up to 2015 regulations limited harvest to two sea bass per day in addition to a minimum size limit of 40cm. The fishery was also closed from 15th of May to 15th June every year to protect spawning fish. Regulations for 2016 included 'Catch and Release' only from January 1st to June 30th (with the exception of parts of counties Cork and Kerry). Additional regulations included a reduction in the retained fish per day from two to one, and an increase in the minimum size from 40cm to 42cm. In 2018 the fishery became 'catch & release' only.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research revealed that the greater majority of anglers expressed a willingness to participate in conservation measures, which indicates that the sea bass angling community is positively disposed to conservation measures. This was particularly the case for anglers that primarily target sea bass, who have a greater awareness of the conservation status of sea bass stocks and the long history of protective measures for sea bass. This positive finding possibly reflects historical efforts to communicate with anglers on the status of sea bass stocks. However, challenges remain on communicating the threatened status of sea bass stocks to some anglers. One-in-eight surveyed anglers believe the conservation status of sea bass in Irish waters is very good, with one-in-three believing it is good or better.

Non-specialist sea bass anglers are one group likely to fall into these categories, and more extensive outreach to sea anglers may be necessary to improve awareness and improve compliance with current fishery regulations. Sea bass anglers in Cork and Kerry, counties where the probability of catching sea bass is highest, are also likely to be among the minority of anglers unaware of the threatened status of sea bass stocks. Such anglers may not understand why stricter angling regulations have been implemented and more active communication may be necessary to convey the reasons behind such measures.

Whitaker Square,
Sir John Rogerson's Quay,
Dublin 2
Telephone **+353 1 863 2000**
Email **admin@esri.ie**
Web **www.esri.ie**
Twitter **@ESRIDublin**