



Isle of Man
Government

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Proposed changes to Isle of Man legislation regarding sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*)

Public Consultation

Issued by:

Fisheries Directorate

Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture,

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1. Aim of the Consultation

The purpose of this consultation is to seek responses to proposals by the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture to make a number of amendments to Fisheries legislation, which aim to maximise the value of sea bass to the Isle of Man economy, and benefit conservation of the species as a whole.

In accordance with the requirements of the Fisheries Management Agreement 2012, the following UK administrations have been consulted on the proposals and have responded that they have no comments to make:

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland (DARD)

Marine Scotland, Scottish Government

Welsh Government

Responses to the proposals are now being sought directly from the following organisations deemed to have an interest in the issues addressed:

Isle of Man Government Departments

Tynwald Members

Attorney General

Manx Fish Producers Organisation

Manx Anglers Forum

Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society

Manx Wildlife Trust

Isle of Man Angling Federation

Douglas & District Angling Club

Peel Angling Club

Mannin Angling Club

Ramsey Angling Club

Manx Game Fishing Club

Isle of Man Fly Fishers

However, members of the public and representatives of organisations not included in the list above are also invited to submit comments by 23rd November 2015.

2. Background

Sea bass are long-lived fish that take several years to reach sexual maturity. Reproductive success is also partly dependent on sea temperatures and can thereby display large inter-annual variations. A cold winter can severely reduce recruitment, the impacts of which, due to the species' delayed maturity, can be felt for a number of years. The species is therefore recognised by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) as being very susceptible to over-exploitation.

While concern regarding exploitation rates has historically focused on the commercial fishing industry, recent surveys in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, along with highlighting the economic importance of recreational fishing, have also indicated the potential for recreational catch of marine fishes to have a meaningful impact on stocks of certain species, including bass. For instance, it is estimated that, in England during 2012, recreational anglers caught and kept between 230 and 440 tonnes of bass compared to a total commercial landing of bass into the UK (mostly England) of 897 tonnes in the same year.

Such is the level of concern regarding the status and sustainability of sea bass populations in European waters, that the European Union has recently introduced a raft of management measures intended to reverse the decline, including a three fish per day recreational bag limit, a ban on commercial fishing by all EU vessels for bass within Irish waters, monthly commercial catch limits, and an increase in the minimum conservation reference size (MCRS) to 42cm.

2.1 Current legislation governing sea bass in the Manx Territorial Sea (12nm)

At present, within the Manx Territorial Sea, under the Sea-Fisheries (Bass) Bye-Laws 2004, the Minimum Landing Size (MLS) for bass is 43cm and there is a ban on pair trawling for the species. In addition, under the Sea-Fisheries (Protection of Migratory Fish Species) Bye-laws 2005, recreational netting for any species is prohibited within a designated coastal zone extending from the Stack at the northern end of Peel Bay clockwise round the Island to the north of Ramsey Bay with the exception of specific areas designated for licensed sand eel fishing. Whilst, to the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture's (DEFA) knowledge, there is currently no commercial targeting of bass taking place within the territorial sea, this remains an option for licensed vessels other than by pair trawling, and there is no recreational bag limit in existence.

2.2 Economic value of sea bass to the Isle of Man

Sea angling is, unsurprisingly, very popular in the Isle of Man, both among residents and visitors, and a survey conducted last year for the Department of Economic Development's (DED) Tourism Section concluded that angling (sea and freshwater) was one of the three activities most appropriate for active targeting of the tourist market, the absolute market potential of angling based on adult populations of Britain and Ireland being estimated at 0.9 million and 0.1 million respectively.

While the current value of recreational sea angling to the Isle of Man economy has not been quantified, extrapolation from the DEFRA report *Sea Angling 2012 – a survey of recreational sea angling activity and economic value in England* indicates that it is likely to be significant;

The DEFRA report estimated that around 2% of all adults in England are sea anglers, spending an annual average of £1394 on the sport per individual. The last full Isle of Man population census, conducted in 2011, reported a resident population of 84,497, of which 69,461 were 16 years or over. Assuming that 2% of these adults participated in sea angling gives an estimated 1,389 adult sea anglers resident in the Island in 2011. Multiplying this figure by the average annual spend on sea angling per individual estimated in the DEFRA survey (£1,394) provides an estimate of total spending on the sport by adult resident sea anglers in the Isle of Man during 2011 of £1,936,266. In reality, given the Island's geography, the percentage of resident adults engaging in sea angling is likely to be higher, as was the case within resident populations of English coastal areas surveyed for DEFRA.

Such extrapolation can obviously only provide very approximate estimates of the value of sea angling to the Manx economy. However, considering the population increase since the last census and that these estimates do not include spending by visiting anglers, indications are that sea angling makes an important contribution to the Island's economy as well as having the potential to make a greater contribution via improved promotion to the tourist market of the opportunities the Island offers.

Bass are known already to be a popular target for resident recreational anglers, and anecdotal information from anglers and charter boat operators indicates that bass are targeted by a significant number of visiting anglers. The aforementioned 2014 survey for DED found 'fish species' to have the highest ranked priority for anglers when choosing a destination, sea bass being mentioned as a particularly exciting attraction.

In contrast to the recreational sector, bass in Manx waters currently have negligible value in commercial fishing terms. The species is not targeted by the local fleet and no commercial targeting of bass by non-Manx vessels is known to be taking place. While DEFA is keen to encourage and facilitate diversification within the Manx fleet as one means of improving the resilience of the local fishing industry, it does not consider commercial targeting of bass to be a sustainable diversification option due to the species' biology, inter-annual variation in breeding success, and the paucity of information on stocks within Manx waters. Diversification into bass fishing would likely only appeal to the under-10m boats of the Manx fleet, which would probably mean that commercial fishing, were it to commence, would take place near-shore, providing direct competition with foreshore and charter boat anglers. The lack of sufficient data on stocks to allow for the institution of sustainable catch limits means that there would be strong potential for commencement of commercial bass fishing to have a direct detrimental impact on the quality of recreational bass fishing and an indirect detrimental impact via reducing support for and compliance with recreational restrictions.

3. Proposals

The Department is proposing amendments to fisheries legislation, which would effectively confer sports fish status upon sea bass, similar to the status accorded to salmon and sea trout within the Isle of Man's territory.

There is a precedent for a similar approach to be found in the Republic of Ireland. Following a collapse of local stocks, the Irish Government, in 1990, introduced legislation banning the Irish fleet from fishing for bass in its territorial waters, as well as imposing limitations on recreational catch, including the imposition of a two-fish per day bag limit and a minimum landing size (MLS) of 40cm. Since introduction of these measures, the value of recreational bass fishing has grown to be worth several million Euros to the Irish economy.

Despite some pressure from the commercial sector, Inland Fisheries Ireland's review of bass policy, published in August 2014, concluded that continuing to manage bass as a purely recreational species is vital for the conservation of stocks as well as providing the greatest benefits to the Irish economy. With a view to ensuring the sustainability of recreational exploitation, as well as improving the quality and therefore attractiveness of Irish bass angling, the review recommended a number of measures including a reduction in the daily bag limit to one fish per day, and an increase in the current MLS to 50cm, in order to increase the overall abundance of bass and the abundance of the large specimens particularly sought by sports anglers.

The proposed amendments to Isle of Man Government fisheries legislation are as follows:

Proposal 1

Total ban on commercial fishing for sea bass within the Manx Territorial Sea (12nm)

Proposal 2

Recreational bag limit of one sea bass per day with catch and release allowed post-take

Proposal 3

Minimum Landing Size for sea bass of 50cm

Proposal 4

Maximum Landing Size for sea bass of 60cm

Proposal 5

Compulsory requirement for retained sea bass to be removed whole from the foreshore (in order to facilitate enforcement of the landing size restrictions)

Discussions with members of the Manx Anglers Forum along with observations by DEFA Fishery Officers indicate that, as elsewhere in Europe, the attractiveness of bass for most resident and visiting bass anglers in the Isle of Man is primarily in terms of sport rather than as a food source, and catch and release is widely practised. It is therefore considered highly likely that imposing such strict limitations on recreational catches would not adversely affect the value of the recreational fishery. Catch and release of rod caught bass typically has low impact on mortality, and this, combined with their tendency to return each year to the same feeding grounds, means that increasing protection of bass within Manx waters has the potential not only to aid conservation of the species as a whole but also to raise the profile of the Island as a venue for recreational bass fishing through increasing the abundance and quality of fish available to the angler. The proposed increase in the minimum landing size would ensure that any retained fish had had the opportunity to spawn at least once, thereby aiding recruitment as well as encouraging an increase in the numbers of large fish returning to Manx waters.

The proposed introduction of a maximum landing size aims to increase the resilience of the population in the face of uncontrollable impacts, such as reduced recruitment resulting from cold winters, by exploiting the fact that egg production of female bass increases with size. Protecting the largest individuals has the added benefit of increasing the abundance of large trophy fish for sports anglers. Whilst this is an unusual whitefish conservation technique within Europe, it is a management option, which has been employed elsewhere to safeguard populations of species with similar life-history. In Australia for instance, the pink snapper *Pagrus auratus*, like sea bass, is a long-lived, slow-growing and late-maturing fish popular with recreational fishers. The imposition of maximum as well as minimum landing sizes is regarded by the Government of Western Australia's Department of Fisheries as one of the measures responsible for its success in returning pink snapper populations in Shark Bay, a World Heritage Area, to sustainable levels from the badly depleted state they had reached by the 1990s.

Should the above proposals for recreational fishing be adopted, DEFA will seek to work closely with the angling community and Non-Government Organisations to promote awareness and appreciation of the benefits of the tighter restrictions, and to provide resource for a tagging programme to assess the impact on abundance and longevity of bass in Manx waters. Support and assistance is more likely to be forthcoming if the potential for beneficial impact to be negated by commercial exploitation is removed.

4. Conclusion

DEFA's Fisheries Directorate aims to maximise the contribution of economically valuable species to the Manx economy in a manner that is sustainable and ideally benefits the conservation of the species as a whole. In the case of bass, the information available indicates that this is best achieved via limiting exploitation to a regulated recreational fishery.

5. Submission of responses

Copies of this document may be downloaded from either the Department website at <https://www.gov.im/daff/consultations.gov?menuid=16916&type=current> or from the consultations webpage of the Isle of Man Government website at www.gov.im/consultations.gov

Comments regarding the proposals outlined in the document are welcome and should be submitted by **23rd November 2015** to:

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Should you require a paper copy of the consultation document, please contact Karen Galtress at the postal or email address above.

Following the consultation period, the responses will be reviewed and the conclusions, together with a summary of the comments received, will be published.

Please note the following:

Unless specifically requested otherwise, responses received may be published either in part or in their entirety, together with the name of the person or body submitting the response. If you are responding on behalf of a group it would be helpful to make your position clear. To ensure that the process is open and honest responses can only be accepted if you provide your full name with your response.

The purpose of consultation is not to be a referendum. It is an information, views and evidence gathering exercise from which to take an informed decision on the content of the proposed legislation. As with any consultation exercise, the responses received do not guarantee changes will be made to what has been proposed.



The information in this booklet can be provided in large print or audio format upon request.