

Overexploitation of Fish Stocks in the UK

**Is the EU quota system at present able to maintain sustainable fish stocks and the British fishing industry?**

The overexploitation of fish in UK waters is a major problem with many species harvested to the point of depletion or extinction according to the Marine Conservation Society.

Biologically, overexploitation usually refers to over harvesting of a resource population to a level below the maximum needed for a sustainable yield. While the population of Britain increases, the marine environment is being exploited to a level which they say simply cannot be sustained. The rate at which we consume fish is exceeding the ecological limits of the seas around us and some species have already been fished to commercial extinction. Last year's Cod scare is only the start of the commercial fishing "drama" and it is clear policies need to change by introducing new quotas or lowering presently existing ones. Greenpeace are campaigning against the government in order to achieve more sustainable fishing and make sure the ecology of the sea around Britain is protected. On the other hand, many British fishermen do not want more quotas that restrict them further, putting their livelihoods at stake. At the moment EU quotas are calculated by allocating Total Allowable Catches (TACs) subject to different areas around the EU and it is argued by some conservationists and local fishermen that these are unfair and target the wrong areas and groups within the fishing community.

The case for maintaining the current system is proposed by the UK Government itself who advocate keeping current quota allowances thus preserving jobs in the fishing industry.

Fishing provides the UK with a valuable food source (seen in *Figure 1*) as well as jobs and livelihoods to those in the industry. They want to protect the marine environment and to

Seafood sales 2006 - 2013

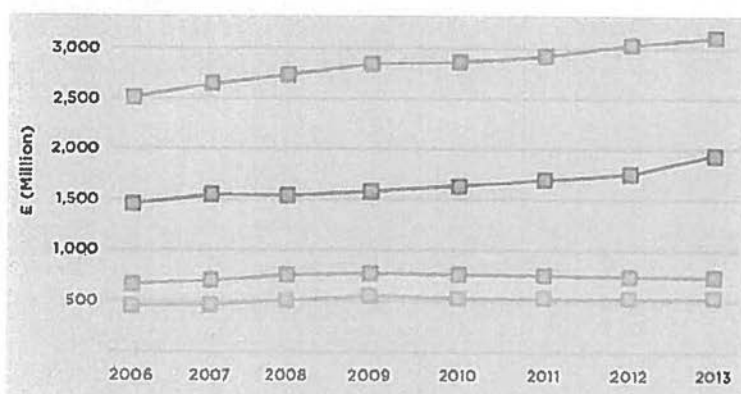


Figure 1 Graph Fish sales trends in the UK (www.seafish.org)

create a healthy marine ecosystem and maintain fish stocks. This was publicised in the *2010-2015 Government Policy Marine Fisheries Report* under the Coalition Government. In the UK the managing of fisheries

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needs to be improved by publishing a register of fixed quota allocations for fishing fleets. This is presented in the “Common Fisheries Policy” in which aims to minimize the impact on the marine ecosystems around Britain and create an economically viable fishing industry. The Government agrees with the European Commission’s board of scientific advisors (STEFC) on Total Allowable Catches (TACs) which is a limit to the amount of fish commercial fishermen can land in ports – this is advised by fisheries scientists. While the Government’s solution is to keep the status quo there are, it is argued drawbacks; these quotas are partly responsible for the problem of high levels of discard back into the sea. The government say that “These ‘over-quota’ discards are estimated to account for around 26% of discards (England and Wales 2008 to 2010).” Due to the fact fishermen run out of quota to land one species but continue fishing for other species and discard the rest.

The Marine Conservation Society present a viewpoint against the current quota system, they want quota policy changed so fewer fish can be taken from around the UK. Their mission is to achieve improvements in marine biodiversity and fish stocks. They aim to do this by influencing government policy, industrial practice and individual behaviours. They lobby the government on issues affecting UK seas and also the policies needed to protect the marine environment. In previous campaigns they have helped introduced vital laws which protect the marine environment. Their 2015 Annual Report outlines the fact that they believe too many fish are being taken from the sea and too much waste is being thrown back into the sea. In order to protect the fish stocks around the UK they want to create 33 nature conservation areas around Scotland and overall, want 61% of the entire UK marine area to be a “Marine Conservation Zone”. They state: “In 2014, the European Commission reported that 41% of assessed fish stocks in the North East Atlantic (NEA), and 91% in the Mediterranean were overfished.” This is their main priority for campaigning. As the decline in fish stocks continues (as seen in Figure 2 with North Sea cod example), the MCS believe there is a need to increase public awareness about sustainably supplied fish so people buy better sourced ingredients. In addition, to amplify the effect of tightening the quota system they want to decrease the impacts of commercial fisheries and create a more positive economic impact on fishing communities.

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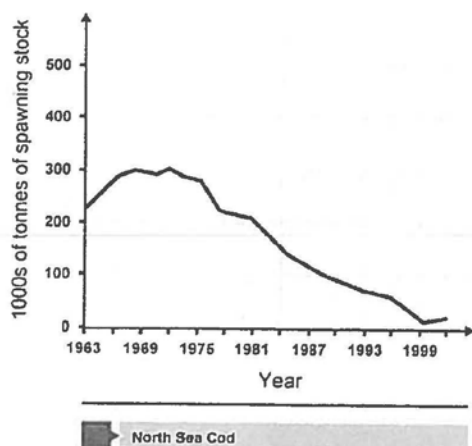


Figure 2 Graph North Sea cod stocks since the 1960's (www.bbc.co.uk)

Greenpeace, an environmental organisation that campaigns on worldwide issues, including highlighting examples of overfishing, argue for an overhaul of the quota system as it is evident that these quotas are not strict enough. They also believe quotas are not well allocated as British fishermen are restricted in the numbers of fish they land while some Dutch fleets, for example, “bypass” these quotas by landing their fish abroad. In 2013 there was a historic EU vote on quota allocation which was to restore fish stocks and create new jobs in the fishing communities – the UK government was supposed to give detailed information on how they’d distribute fishing quota to the fishing fleet. However, these new laws have not been strictly enforced according to Greenpeace, and they have recently taken the Government to court (in 2015). Inshore local fishermen bring considerable environmental, social and economic benefits to Britain and are the sector that most need looked after but are not helped by the current quota system as foreign vessels take up a lot of the UK quota. They state: “local fishers account for 79% of the UK’s fishing fleet, however, they have access to just 4% of the UK quota.” According to Greenpeace, if fish stocks were restored evidence suggests that the UK would gain £370 million in revenue and 3,000 fishing jobs. If local fishing is supported there will be a much lower impact on the marine environment and also this will inject cash into local economies benefitting the job market. However, at the same time the mean price of fish for consumers would have to rise. They are about to publish their *Coastal Champions Action Plan* to gain political support and this is where their solution lies – they want to completely overhaul the fishing system to give more control to local fishermen. This has obvious drawbacks, namely it is contrary to current EU policy and therefore the government is unlikely to be able to make this change. They also highlight the problem of

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quota-hopping where foreign vessels obtain the right to part of a country's national quota for fish in European waters by buying licences from its fishermen. The "Independent" states that, 150 large fishing vessels are Spanish and Dutch owned and these "vessels carry British flags and British fishing licences" so their catches are counted against the British quota.

The UK fishermen (represented by Dave Cuthbert, Co-chairman of the campaign group *New Under Ten Fishermen's Association*) are arguing EU quotas are too severe. This is because they will lose much of their income if the current system stays; over 20,000 jobs are at stake in the industry. Cuthbert says "The sad thing is that the fish are there but we are allowed to take less and less. It is not us that have done the damage to stocks, yet we are the victims." He believes that the Common Fisheries Policy is at fault. It was created so that it protected fish stocks and assigned fishing grounds but it was allocated based on historic claims of catch sizes. These quotas have meant that many local fishermen don't have access to their local waters for fishing or are subject to severe catch limits. The politicians in Brussels, he says, are generalising their policies by applying broad restrictions without listening to the voices of local fishermen who know about their own local waters. The *Common Fisheries Policy* enforced by the European Union has also meant that there has been much higher waste. If the fish are too small or the wrong species according to an FAO study estimate, "discards in the North Atlantic amount to 1.3 tonnes a year- 13 percent of the catch, with even higher rates off

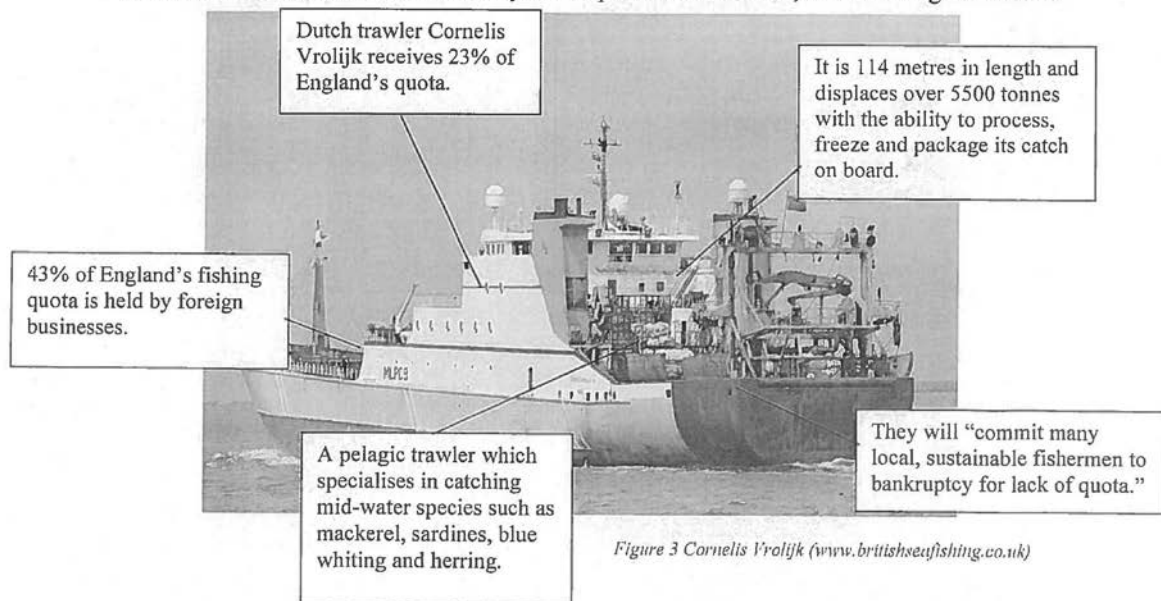


Figure 3 Cornelis Vrolijk (www.britishseafishing.co.uk)

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the coasts of Scotland". According to the *Daily Mail*, DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) has wrongly allocated the quotas. Local, low impact fishermen don't receive as much as the industrial fishing businesses, for example, the Cornelis Vrolijk (fig.3). Local fishermen claim the quantity of fish in the sea is plentiful in certain areas where they fish but this is refuted by EU scientific advisers. However, they believe the stocks around the UK are being harvested unsustainably by the commercial fishermen at the expense of the inshore fishers; Greenpeace would agree.

In order to protect Britain's fish stocks most agree that having some level of quota in place is necessary, however, it is argued by many parties that these are wrongly allocated. The annual report of the Marine Conservation Society is a reliable source of information because has strong scientific evidence and valid, up to date statistics. Their ecological argument is to further control and limit the decline in fish stocks, however they do not comment on exactly how they would manage this and causing as little hardship for fishing communities. Greenpeace as a non-profit organisation is presenting one point of view and may present bias, obvious from the use of emotive language in their reports, as it is trying to achieve popular support. Their use of direct action has, however, led to controversy and legal action in the past.

The UK Government is able to gather a broad range of accurate statistics on how the EU administer quotas and TACs in order to keep fishing fleets under control as well as having the best interests of British Fishermen's livelihoods at heart. But, as conservation charities revealed and the *Daily Mail* reported, abuse of the quota system is going on which questions the Government's position and credibility in this matter. The paper gave the viewpoints of local fishermen and quoted from the *New Under Ten Fishermen's Association*. Some of the more extreme opinions are quoted by this source but the background information comes from the *WWF More Fish* campaign which is widely recognised and scientifically researched. Dave Cuthbert, from the Fishermen's Association, should know how local fishermen could achieve maximum benefits, however perhaps he could be considered as presumptuous in saying that quotas are too severe as stocks are declining but by stressing the manipulation of the current system by large business concerns he does engender popular support across the board.

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Each source's best interest is in increasing the protection of fish stocks, but as both the MCS, Greenpeace and the UK local fishermen agree this is best achieved by manipulating the system to allow more development of local fishing industries. They do a good job in highlighting the absurdities of the current system and put forward a viable case for increased local influence in policy making, including quotas. How this is going to work within the current EU policy is difficult to see; either way, a situation which doesn't result in increased fish prices, particularly a "fish supper" is always going to be an emotive issue.

1849 words

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