UK Fisheries Audit Summary Briefing

Introduction

The UK's decision to leave the EU has considerable implications for the management of North East Atlantic fisheries. The fisheries governance system for these stocks, most of which are shared with third parties, and the balance of power in the decision-making process have been altered.

Oceana therefore commissioned a UK Fisheries Audit to provide a baseline for evaluating the UK's progress and/or setbacks in the sustainable management of fish stocks under this new management scenario. The audit provides an evidence-based snapshot of the status of UK fish stocks, and the recent exploitation by the UK fishing sector of those stocks, at the time the UK fully leaves the EU including the Common Fisheries Policy.

UK fishing activity

The audit analysed those stocks of most economic importance to UK fisheries species (both quota and non-quota) . Pelagic quota species, such as mackerel and herring caught mainly by over 10 m vessels, dominate UK landings by volume (54%). Non-quota shellfish, such as scallops and crab, are also key contributors (21%), with the remaining 25% comprised of demersal species. Smaller inshore vessels (10 m and under) which make up the majority of the UK fleet by number (74%) but have only very limited access to UK quota (<2%), rely on non-quota species, hence shellfish comprise >80% of landings by volume and value.

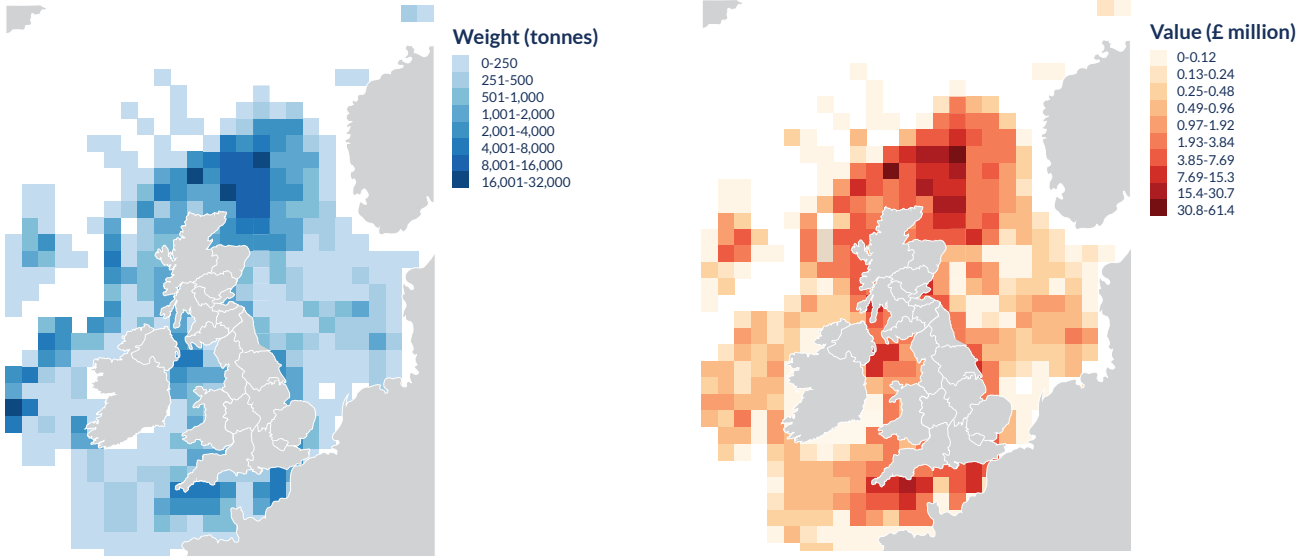


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of total UK vessel landings by weight (left) and value (right) in 2019

Most UK fish landings from the North East Atlantic, around 618,000 t in 2019, came from UK waters (81% by live weight and 87% by value). EU waters, mainly the Irish Exclusive Economic Zone, accounted for an additional 15% of landings and 8% of value, with the remainder from Atlantic third country waters and the high seas. The turnover of UK fisheries in 2019 was approximately £1 billion with the majority derived from over 24 m vessels operating off Scotland.

Status of UK fish stocks

In terms of stock size, of the 104 UK stocks audited, 35.6% were healthy relative to the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY[a]) whereas 20.2% were in a critical condition. Data limitations mean the status of the remaining 44.2% cannot be determined. As regards exploitation status, analysis revealed that only 37.5% of the audited stocks were sustainably exploited prior to the UK leaving the EU. However, 28.8% were being overfished (F>FMSY), whilst another 33.6% were data limited and so cannot be adequately assessed, leaving them at greater risk of unsuitable management decisions.

Focus stocks

More detailed benchmarks for a selection of stocks are provided in the UK Fisheries Audit for management and policy considerations following Brexit. These stocks were selected according to their economic status (the 'top 10') or their performance: the 5 most sustainably and 5 most unsustainably fished in terms of stock size and fishing mortality rate.

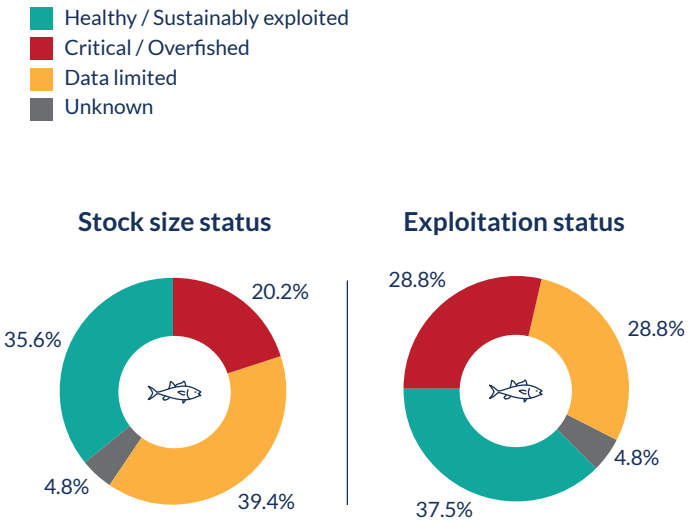


Figure 2. Stock size (left) and exploitation status (right) of the 104 audited fish stocks

Focusing on the 'top 10' stocks, (8 of which are shared with third parties - mainly the EU), 6 are overfished or their stock biomass is at a critical level: North Sea herring, North East Atlantic blue whiting, North Sea whiting, Eastern English Channel scallops, North Sea cod, and Southern North Sea crab. Further, there is insufficient data to define reference points for North Sea anglerfish. Therefore, only 3 of the top 10 stocks upon which the UK fishing industry relies are healthy and sustainably exploited: North East Atlantic mackerel, North Sea haddock and West of Scotland Nephrops.

The audit highlights the lack of full implementation of fisheries management policy and the persistent setting of catch limits above scientifically advised catch levels. For the 'top 10' and worst performing stocks, the majority of TACs were set above levels advised by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) in past years. Conversely, the TACs for the top performing stocks were mainly set at, or commonly below, scientifically advised levels.

[a] MSY is the largest catch that can be taken from a stock in the long term under prevailing ecological and environmental conditions.

Health and exploitation status of the 'top 10' fish stocks (Figure 3)

- Healthy / Sustainably exploited
- Critical / Overfished
- Data limited

North East Atlantic mackerel
(Scomber scombrus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North Sea herring
(Clupea harengus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North East Atlantic blue whiting
(Micromesistius poutassou)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North Sea haddock
(Melanogrammus aeglefinus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

West of Scotland Nephrops
(Nephrops norvegicus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North Sea cod
(Gadus morhua)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North Sea whiting
(Merlangius merlangus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

North Sea anglerfish
(Lophiidae)
Exploitation status
Stock status

Southern North Sea crab
(Cancer pagurus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

Eastern English Channel scallops
(Pecten maximus)
Exploitation status
Stock status

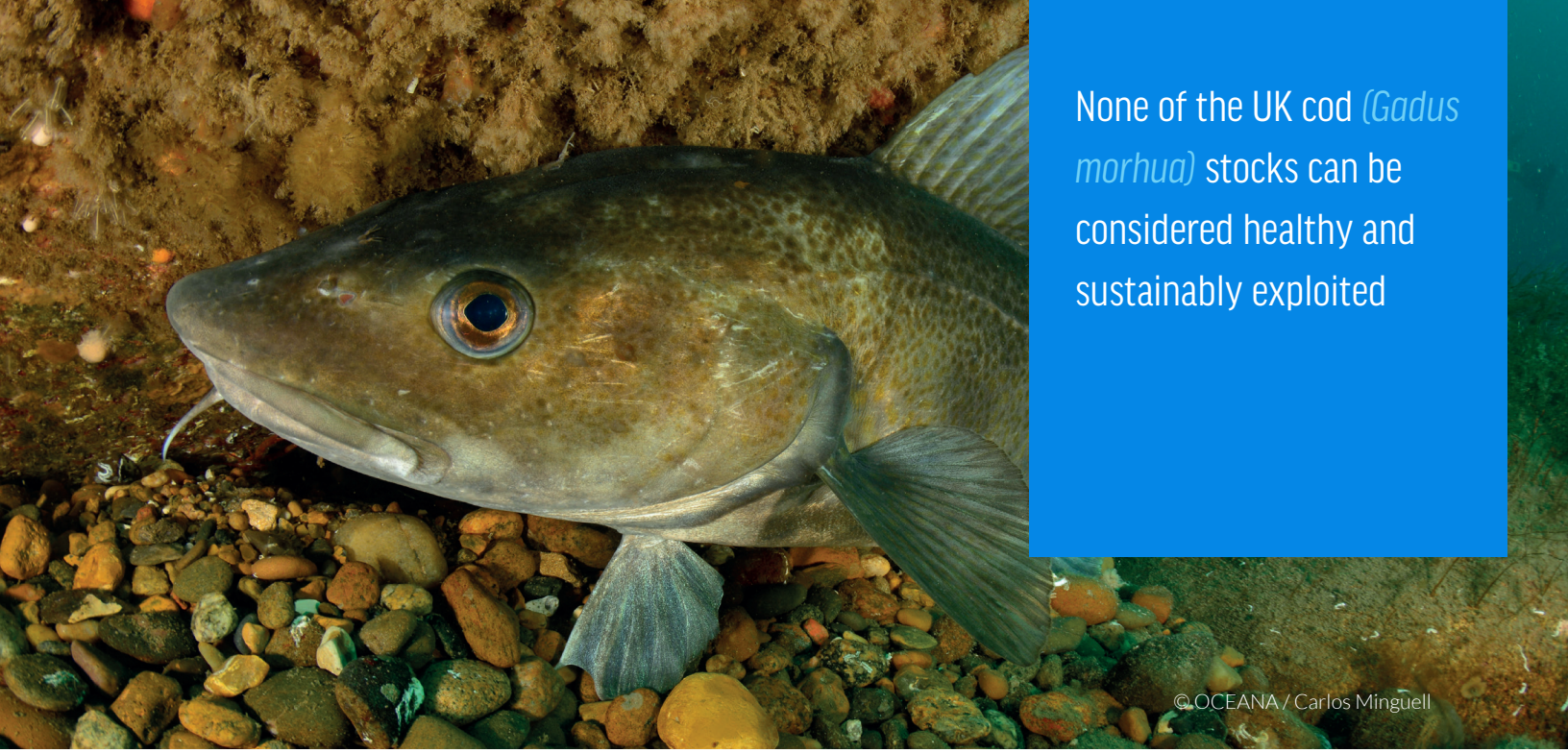
Illustrations from © Scandinavian Fishing Year Book

Concerned about cod?

The challenges of rebuilding depleted stocks are highlighted by a focus on the recent exploitation and management history of the UK cod stocks, given ongoing concerns over the status of this iconic fish species. None of the UK cod stocks can be considered as healthy and sustainably exploited. With climate change also likely to be affecting cod's resilience to fishing mortality, effective recovery plans are needed more urgently than ever. However, because most of the cod stocks are primarily caught as bycatch in valuable mixed fisheries, such measures will require a shift in fisheries management priorities.

Environmental impact case studies

The UK Fisheries Audit investigates, through a selection of five case studies, several other specific issues associated with UK fisheries management which have negative implications for the environment and sustainable fishing. Potential opportunities for improvements to integrate an ecosystem-based approach are highlighted. For example, the UK could demonstrate better management practice by accommodating the ecological importance of forage fish species, as highlighted by the implications of overfishing of sandeels for North Sea fish, cetacean and seabird populations.



None of the UK cod *(Gadus morhua)* stocks can be considered healthy and sustainably exploited

Policy recommendations

In response to the findings of the UK Fisheries Audit and the new management scenario arising from Brexit, Oceana sets out policy recommendations for domestic and international fisheries to the UK government. Overarching in these is ensuring sustainable fisheries is the primary goal of the UK's fisheries policies and plans, to fulfil the objectives of the UK Fisheries Act and also go further and achieve the UK government's aspiration to set 'a gold standard for sustainable fishing around the world', as well as meet UK international biodiversity and sustainability commitments.

There is an opportunity and a responsibility for the UK, to lead the way in sustainable fisheries. In doing so the UK could demonstrate the importance and value of implementing the best management standards of collaboration across national and international borders, and of long-term holistic environmental management. Oceana hopes that this opportunity materialises in a shift to fully sustainable fisheries.

The **UK Fisheries Audit** is a report produced by Macalister Elliott and Partners Ltd. for Oceana. Available at https://europe.oceana.org/sites/default/files/oceana_uk_fisheries_audit.pdf

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