

Towards the recovery of European Fisheries

NOVEMBER 2016

Healthy stocks produce more fish

To get the full picture of European fisheries, Oceana has commissioned the most comprehensive scientific study¹ ever made on the status of European fish stocks and their potential productivity if sustainably managed. The findings of this independent study confirm that only a minority of European stocks can be considered as well managed, and provide the following relevant figures on the status of European fisheries:

- 85% of European fish stocks are below healthy levels.
- Only 12% of European fish stocks are fulfilling the commitments of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).
- If European fish stocks were well managed, catches could be increased by 57% / 5M t.

This information is crucial to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the status of European fisheries and to assess the performance of commitments to the CFP, in particular the objective to end overfishing. However the political stance of the EU is neither in line with these principles nor with the critical condition of European fisheries. EU fisheries ministers continue to disregard science and to overfish declining stocks on the basis of short-sighted socioeconomic arguments.

Member States must act without delay and recover all fish stocks above healthy levels to abide with legal requirements, by 2020 at the latest. But this is not just a legal matter, the positive consequences of sustainable exploiting fish resources are clear: better management can increase catches and hence deliver greater socioeconomic benefits to the fishing sector. The EU has the ability to improve the management of fisheries resources and reap the benefits that healthy stocks can provide.

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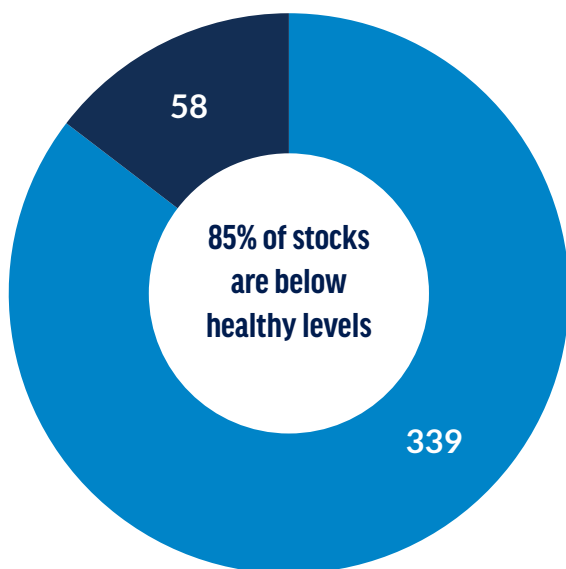
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The most comprehensive overview of the status of European fisheries

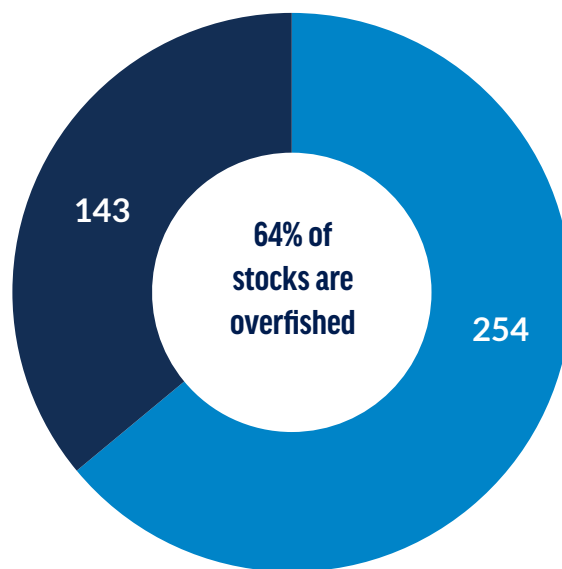
Until now, assessments of the status of EU fisheries have been incomplete, covering a limited number of stocks and / or regions², making it difficult to effectively evaluate the outcomes of fisheries management decisions. For the first time ever, the results of the current study cover the majority of exploited stocks, specifically 397 stocks of 120 species of fish and invertebrates from all European ecoregions. Regrettably, the assessment concludes that the status of EU fisheries is far from being considered in a good condition.

Stock biomass for most European stocks (85%) is well below healthy levels that can produce sustainable high catches. Of particular concern is the status of more than half of the analysed stocks, 202 stocks (51%), for which the biomass lies outside safe biological limits and which may therefore suffer from impaired reproduction. Among these, even more worrying is the status of 52 stocks (17%) that are in a severely depleted condition and threatened by collapse. The regions that show the highest percentage of stocks at healthy biomass levels are the Barents Sea and Norwegian Sea (67%), while shockingly, just 2.8% of the stocks in the European Mediterranean Sea have a healthy biomass.

Of particular concern is the status of more than half of the analysed stocks, 202 stocks (51%), for which the biomass lies outside safe biological limits.



- Below healthy levels
- Above healthy levels



- Stocks overfished
- Stocks sustainably exploited

Although fishing pressure has showed a decreased trend in some ecoregions during recent years, (mainly in certain Atlantic ecoregions) overfishing is still widespread and affects 254 European fish stocks (64%), jeopardizing the recovery of the stocks above healthy levels. The ecoregions that show the highest percentage of sustainably exploited stocks are the Barents and Norwegian Seas with 83%, while the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea have the lowest percentages of sustainably exploited stocks, with values around 15%.



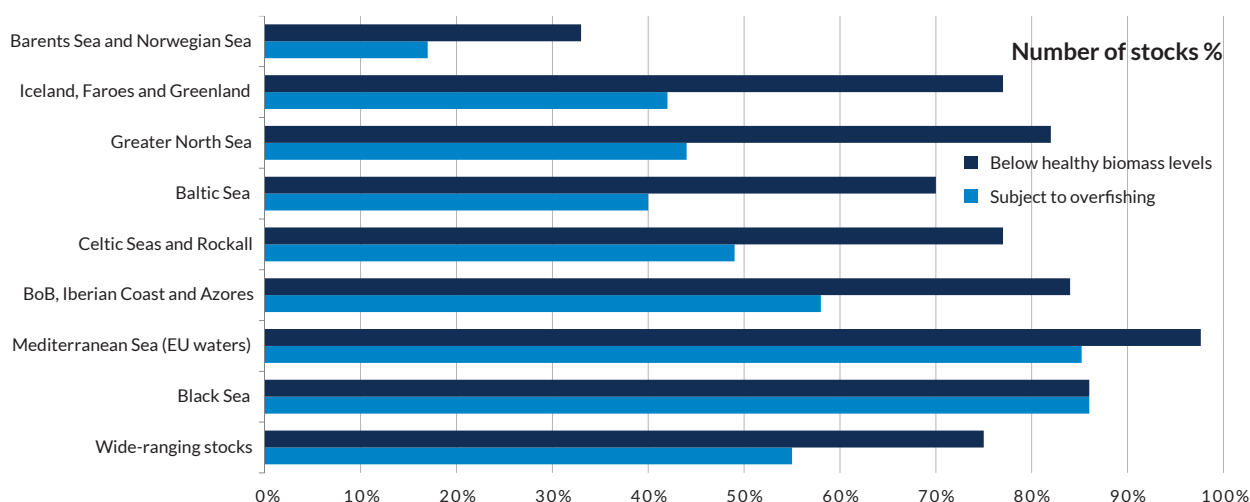
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Compliance with the Common Fisheries Policy

Only 47 European fish stocks (12%) fulfill the legal Common Fisheries Policy requirement of a biomass above healthy levels ($B > B_{msy}$) and fishing mortality not subject to overfishing ($F < F_{msy}$). The remaining 350 stocks (88%) are either in a recovery towards these conditions or persist in a state of overexploitation.

By ecoregions, the Barents Sea and Norwegian Sea have the highest percentage of stocks (50%) that comply with the goals of the CFP, while the Med Sea is the region the furthest away from CFP compliance, with less than 1% (1 stock out of 169) in this condition.

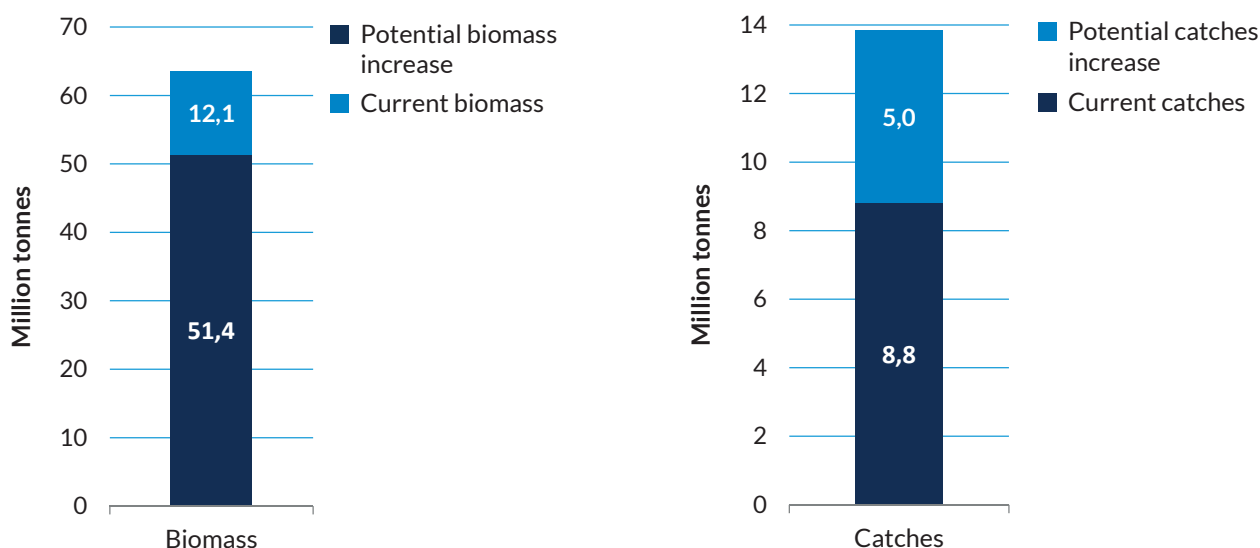
This situation means that current catches for most European stocks are taken from stocks smaller than their potential size and using unsustainable fishing pressure. There is an urgent need to reduce fishing pressure and restore stocks above healthy levels in the short term so that once recovered, the stocks can maximise their long-term catches.



Recover stocks to deliver more productive fisheries

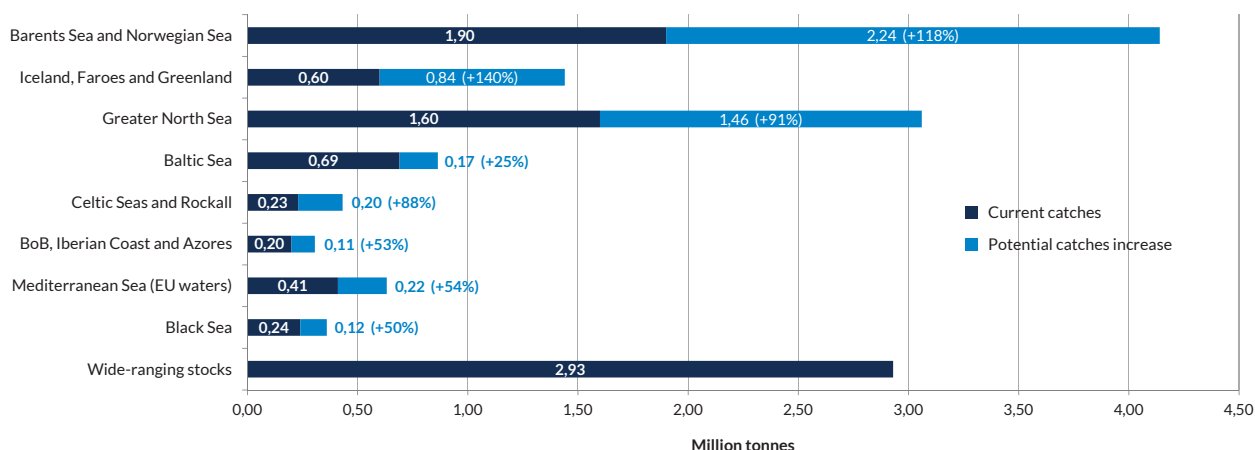
In a recovered and well-managed scenario, the status of European fish stocks and productivity of fisheries can radically change. A full recovery of EU fish stocks will mean that the total sum of the **biomass** of fish stocks at sea will increase from the current 51.4 million tonnes to 63.5 million tonnes, representing a 23.54% growth.

Rebuilding stocks above healthy levels will require a few years for most stocks. The time to recover depends on the current biomass level of the stock and how far exploitation rate is reduced below sustainable levels during the rebuilding phase. For example, exploitation at half the sustainable level should rebuild most stocks in the northern ecoregions within 1-5 years whereas in the more depleted Mediterranean, stock rebuilding may take 2-7 years.



The potential recovery of the stocks would provide more fish at sea and the possibility to increase **catches** in a sustainable way by 65% - from the current 8.80 million tonnes to 15.37 million tonnes. However, due to trophic interactions between species, this potential increase has to be precautionarily reduced to 13.83 million tonnes, representing an increase by 57.2%.

The increase in catches in a recovered and well-managed scenario would be hugely significant for all ecoregions, both in absolute terms, ranging from 0.11 million tonnes in the Bay of Biscay and Iberian waters to 2.2 million tonnes in the Barents Sea and Norwegian Sea, and in relative terms, ranging from a 25% increase in the Baltic Sea to a 140% increase in Iceland, Faroes and Greenland waters. These catch increases will in turn deliver significant positive socioeconomic consequences for the EU fishing sector.



Potential increase of catches

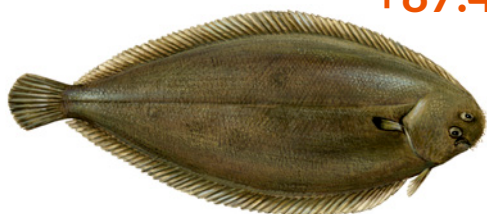
Stock examples

Current catches

Potential increase



+87.4 %



Sole (sole nsea)
Greater North Sea

14293 t

12495 t

+425.9 %



Cod (cod 347d)
Greater North Sea

52313 t

222816 t

+470.7 %



Haddock (had rock)
Celtic Sea and Rockall waters

2972 t

13989t

+364.4 %



Herring (her 6-7bc)
Celtic Sea and Rockall waters

19885 t

72458 t

+522.2 %



Sardine (sar soth)
Bay of Biscay and Iberian Sea

21000 t

109667 t

+62.5 %



Nephrops (neph VIIIab)
Bay of Biscay and Iberian Sea

7344 t

4588 t

+135.0 %



Horse mackerel (hom-west)
Wide ranging stock

129025 t

174123 t

N.B. These potential increases in catches do not account for interactions among species (e.g., food chain relationships). Therefore, actual potential catches are very unlikely to exceed 90% of the values indicated.

Illustrations:

© Scandinavian fishing year book

Oceana's proposal: How to recover EU fisheries

The EU has all the necessary elements, including the regulatory framework and scientific knowledge, for the successful development of a sustainable fisheries activity. EU decision makers should give up the current short-term approach and instead focus their efforts in recovering healthy and productive fish stocks. Oceana recommends the following principles and management measures as the requirements for the sustainable exploitation of the fish resources:

Main measures:

- Set catch limits for fish stocks consistent with scientific advice to recover fish stocks above healthy levels by 2020 the latest.
- Take emergency actions, including fisheries closures, for all stocks and/or regions heavily overfished and which are currently unable to reach healthy levels by 2020.
- For fisheries unmanaged by catch limits, fishing pressure must be reduced to the scientific limits that guarantee the sustainable exploitation of fish resources.

EU decision makers should focus their efforts in recovering healthy and productive fish stocks.



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Decisions makers have to decide between either allowing overfishing to continue or setting management measures according to sustainable criteria. This decision has a major impact on the status of fish stocks and also on the well-being of the fishing sector. The benefits of sustainable fisheries management are clear and well-recorded and although some of these measures come with a short-term cost for the fishing sector, the long-term benefits to all parties are considerable. More fish at sea will deliver increased catches with less fishing effort and less impact on the ecosystem. There is a need and obligation to put an end to overfishing in the EU, and the success to achieve this goal depends on the urgent action by the Fisheries Council.

Other complementary measures that contribute to the sustainable management of fish resources:

- Adopt multiannual management plans based on and in line with the CFP objectives.
- Reduce the impacts of fishing on by-catch species and habitats.
- Protect nursery and spawning grounds to guarantee stock recovery.
- Improve the selectivity of fishing gears in order to protect sensitive individuals like fish juveniles or endangered species.



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1. Froese, R., Garilao, C., Winker, H., Coro, G., Demirel, N., Tsikliras, A., Dimarchopoulou, D., Scarcella, G., Sampang-Reyes, A. (2016) Exploitation and status of European stocks. World Wide Web electronic publication, <http://oceanrep.geomar.de/34476/>

2. The data on overfished stocks provided by the European Commission is based on around 60 stocks in the Atlantic and 85 in the Mediterranean.

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