

FISHING QUOTAS BASED ON SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION AS OPPOSED TO NATIONAL OR INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS

The continuous deterioration of the fisheries in the North-East Atlantic demonstrates the European's Union's resounding failure to manage these fisheries over decades. While the assessment that ICES made in 2003 of the majority of commercial species caught by European fleets was already pessimistic, the panorama represented by the latest report in 2004 is even worse, apart from very specific cases (the acceptable state of some stocks of Norwegian lobster in northern areas and the slight recovery of certain haddock populations).

The European Union's commitment to achieving responsible and sustainable fisheries, as reflected in the New Common Fisheries Policy, must, at long last, provide an impetus to fisheries management.

Given that numerous scientific studies recommend the closure of fisheries, or at least drastic reductions in catches, these measures would have significant consequences for a large number of fishermen and companies that depend on these resources. But this cannot be a reason to even further delay the putting into action of measures that allow the recovery of stocks and the protection of the marine environment, as otherwise we may reach the point of the collapse of many fisheries with far more serious social, economic and environmental repercussions.

Oceana wishes to demonstrate its support for the proposals and recommendations made by the scientists and the European Commission to achieve significant reductions in the fishing effort, and recommends a strong policy geared towards imposing the majority of these measures on the most aggressive, destructive and wasteful fishing practices used by EU fleets, with a particular emphasis on bottom-trawling in the case of demersal species and pelagic trawling in the case of pelagic species.

Oceana's opinion of the TACs proposed by the European Commission for the North-East Atlantic in 2005

- ***Anchovy (*Engraulis encrasicolus*)***

Data on the evolution of the anchovy over the last decade shows a serious decline in populations and despite continuous scientific recommendations to reduce catches, the EU has repeatedly failed to respect scientific expertise and has permitted catches that are far higher than acceptable. By way of example,

in 2003 ICES recommended that no more than 11,000 tonnes should be caught in the Bay of Biscay, but politicians decided to allow a TAC of 33,000 tonnes, three times higher than recommendations. As a result of this disastrous decision, the recommendation for this year is to reduce the acceptable catch to 5,000 tonnes.

The European Commission, paying heed to the best scientific information available, has decided to propose the quota advised by scientists. This is not the case with anchovies in the Bay of Cadiz and neighbouring areas, where the Commission has proposed 36% more catches than recommended, despite the fact that since 1999 ICES has been advising that 5,000 tonnes should not be exceeded (something that has never been respected by politicians).

Oceana recommends bringing the proposal in line with scientific reports, in which case catches should not exceed the recommended 4,700 tonnes, rather than 6,400.

- ***Monkfish (lophius spp.)***

Almost all the Commission proposals on monkfish quotas (including the two species *Lophius piscatorius* and *L. budegassa*) comply perfectly with scientific recommendations for the catches of this species. The recommendations for the stocks in the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea comply to the letter (8,800 tonnes), the recommendations relating to the deep-sea areas between Greenland and the north of the Bay of Biscay and Ireland, where information appears to demonstrate a certain recovery, have been increased (34,382 tonnes as opposed to 26,700 the previous year; an increase of almost 30%), but catches of 1,840 tonnes of monkfish off the Iberian coasts are being permitted, where scientific recommendations point to zero quotas.

Oceana is proposing the closure of the latter fishery until such time as an effective and scientifically approved plan for the recovery of the species is in place. Since 1999, when ICES recommended small reductions to avoid reaching the current situation, politicians have been ignoring these recommendations and allowing quotas that have reached up to four times higher than those recommended.

- ***Blue whiting (Micromesistius poutassou)***

This is a species that, once upon a time, was ubiquitous and very important to the marine ecosystem. The scarcity of catches of other species of greater commercial interest (e.g. hake) has led to a large proportion of the fishing effort being diverted to this species. This not only puts its stock at risk, but also endangers the recovery possibilities of other species, such as hake, which depend to a large extent on blue whiting for food. The current fishing effort is very much higher than what this species can withstand, which has led to the situation whereby the majority of catches are now made up of juvenile fish (59% of the total weight).

Since ICES started recommending quotas for this species in 1994, the EU has ignored their advice every year, sometimes allowing quotas between two and four times higher than recommendations. For several years, agreements could not even be reached to restrict catches to sustainable levels, and the fisheries in Russia and the Faroe Islands are not limited by any kind of TAC.

The latest report from ICES recommends a combined catch for all stocks of blue whiting of around one million tonnes (a reduction of more than 50% with regard to 2003).

Although the catch proposals presented by the Commission are within the limits set by ICES, maximum quotas or TACs have not been set for many areas, and the catches of other fleets have not been taken into account (such as Russia and the Faroe Islands) which leaves the door open for the continued and uncontrolled overexploitation of this species.

Oceana is asking for strict TACs to be established instead of allowing them to remain open under the inexplicable designation of “not important”.

- ***Cod (Gadus morhua)***

Only the stock in the area between Norway and Iceland, and to a much lesser extent between the western English Channel and the South of Ireland, still maintains “exploitable” populations.

It is with this species that the EC is proposing quotas that run contrary to scientific advice. Despite the fact that ICES has recommended zero quotas for areas such as Kattegat, Skagerrak, the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the eastern English Channel, as well as the lowest possible catches in the waters of the Faroe Islands, the Commission is proposing quotas of several thousand tonnes in all these areas.

Regrettably, the EU has ignored scientific advice to close fisheries for five consecutive years, and for many more years has ignored requests to reduce the fishing effort, without putting any kind of effective measures into place to prevent the drastic decline in the biomass and catches of this species.

In order to avoid the closure of these fisheries and the consequent social and economic impact, the EU has put forward a five-year recovery plan for some of the cod populations in the worst state. ICES has evaluated this plan and has concluded that with the meagre reductions in catches proposed it is unlikely that this objective can be achieved, for which reason it is reiterating its advice to close these fisheries. Likewise, Oceana supports the proposals of ICES or, failing these, the approval of a realistic and effective plan that meets with scientific approbation.

- ***Haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*)***

This is one of the few species in which a certain recovery of various stocks has begun to be noted, which has allowed slight increases in catches in certain zones to be recommended. This is the case of haddock between the North Sea and the Baltic (where an increase of 8%-9% is proposed) and Iceland (with quotas some 25%-27% higher) and the west of Scotland (an increase of some 17%-18%), although in this last case catches continue to be low and there is an extremely high proportion of discards which can reach 50% of catches.

However, this recovery is not generalised and for many stocks there are still recommendations for reductions that have been ignored for years. In the Irish Sea, there should be a reduction of 10%, in the Arctic of 18% and in the Faroe Islands of 10%.

The Commission proposals are fairly close to scientific recommendations, although frequently higher, particularly with regard to haddock between the west of Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula, regarding which ICES declared it was against any kind of increase in catches, which has been disregarded, the proposal being to increase quotas by almost 2,000 tonnes, representing an increase of 20%, despite the fact that in preceding years they were not even able to cover the quotas granted.

- ***Hake (*Merluccius merluccius*)***

There are two clearly distinct hake stocks. One is in the southern zone, comprising the entire area of the Iberian coasts and part of the Bay of Biscay, and the other is the northern zone between the North Sea and the waters of the British Isles.

The southern stock is in a much worse state and ICES recommendations for the last three years have been the total closure of this fishery. Despite this, almost 13,000 tonnes of a species that should be totally protected have been caught. In spite of this, the Commission is continuing to propose catches of almost 6,000 tonnes of this stock, which is on the verge of collapse.

The closure of the southern hake fisheries was proposed in the event that there was no effective recovery plan in place for this species. In Oceana's view, the ineffectiveness of the countries involved, which have been incapable of putting forward a coherent proposal for the last three years, necessitates the immediate establishment of a zero quota for this stock.

With regard to the northern stock, ICES recommends catches of no more than 33,000 tonnes which, in Oceana's opinion, is excessive, as in 2003 it recommended a cutback of 70%. Even so, the Commission is proposing a much higher quota (more than 40,000 tonnes).

The huge amount of discards, the low biomass, the high volume of accidental catches, the lack of a proper recovery plan for this species, the

incomprehensibility of the minimum established size and the lack of an ecosystem assessment makes it necessary for the principle of precaution to be applied, with very much more restrictive quotas. The economic and social importance of this species cannot be allowed to cloud scientific reasoning and allow the indefinite overexploitation of this species. Oceana disagrees with the permissiveness of the Commission and is calling for the closure of fisheries in the southern region and a reduction of at least 20,000 tonnes in the northern zone.

- ***Herring (Clupea harengus)***

This could well be the species in the most acceptable situation and allows the most sustainable catches. However, it should not be forgotten that these are stocks that can experience huge fluctuations and changes from one year to the next.

The EC has maintained criteria very close to scientific recommendations, although it is not known if in order to alleviate cutbacks in other species it has always tended towards allowing slightly higher quotas than those recommended.

Oceana advises against allowing these increases so blithely and instead abiding by the recommendations of ICES. For instance, in the Skagerrak-Kattegat, stock quotas of almost 5% more than those recommended are being allowed, and 10% more in the North Sea.

Although this species is in a better situation than many others in the North-East Atlantic, scientific recommendations should not be disregarded.

- ***Horse Mackerel (Trachurus spp.)***

The quotas proposed by the Commission for 2005 are very much higher than those recommended by scientific research. Once again we are playing Russian roulette with a species that experiences great fluctuations. For example, in the case of the stock in the Iberian area, catches of 80% higher than those recommended by the ICES are being permitted, possibly to compensate for the heavy reduction proposed for anchovy catches.

Oceana believes that these kinds of “compensations” should not be implemented, as not only can they be very dangerous but can also end up by driving both species into a situation of chronic overexploitation.

We believe that the Commission should re-orientate its proposal for this species and base it on scientific and not “compensatory” criteria.

There is a similar situation with the stock in the North Sea, for which excessively high quotas are being proposed that easily double those recommended by ICES (from 18,000 to more than 40,000).

- ***Atlantic mackerel (Scomber scombrus)***

The European Commission proposals for Atlantic mackerel are in line with the topmost part of the range recommended by ICES. Although, from Oceana's point of view, the principle of precaution recommends always keeping to the lowest part of the range (between the 320-420,000 suggested by the ICES), we would be able to understand and support the proposal if this criteria were to be subject to amendment in accordance with scientific research resulting from a study of the stock during the coming year.

- ***Megrim (Lepidorhombus spp.)***

In the case of this flatfish, which in actual fact encompasses two species (*Lepidorhombus boscii* and *L. whiffiagonis*), the Commission has been very respectful of scientific criteria, presenting a very sound and well-founded proposal, although, as in many previous cases, with a tendency towards the upper limit. Oceana applauds this decision, although our advice is not to maintain this upward trend simply as a matter of course but only if dictated by the right circumstances.

It must be said that in the case of megrim, with the exception of the Iberian zone the fisheries have been fairly conscientious with regard to following scientific recommendations and TAC proposals.

While in the majority of areas catches have been maintained at a fairly sustainable level, in the Iberian zone they have decreased by 90%, going from 13-14,000 tonnes in the Eighties to the current figure of 1-2,000 tonnes.

- ***Norwegian lobster (Nephrops norvegicus)***

The majority of stocks of this species are in a relatively good state, except those in the Iberian area. The ICES advice is not to increase catches to take advantage of this good situation, and to close the fisheries off many of the Iberian coasts, particularly the Galician-Cantabrian quadrant, where the population could well be close to collapse.

For the fourth consecutive year, scientists have asked for the closure of this fishery in Management Area O (Cantabria-Galicia) and, also for the fourth consecutive year, their advice has been disregarded, permitting the capture of 162 tonnes. This represents the authorisation to catch almost 1,000 tonnes in four years of a stock that should be totally protected.

There is a similar situation in the Galicia-Portugal area, where the recommendation is not to exceed 50 tonnes, but for which catch quotas of more than 10 times this figure are being put forward (540 tonnes). Scientific recommendations have never been respected in this area, with catches always very much higher than recommended.

For another endangered population, in the Bay of Biscay, the Commission's proposal does correspond to scientific advice not to catch more than 3,100 tonnes, but they should also take into consideration the discards that, for years, have not been accounted for.

- ***European plaice (*Pleuronectes plateas*)***

This is one of the Commission proposals that encompasses the recommendations most closely in agreement with scientific advice along with the most disparate. For the Skagerrak-Kattegat area, it recommends respecting the 9,500 tonnes proposed by ICES, but for the northern area it massively exceeds any real possibility for the sustainable exploitation of this stock (proposing 70% more than recommendations, going from 35,000 to 59,000 tonnes).

In many areas, the biomass of this species is so low that it barely allows for just a few dozen or hundred tonnes to be caught. This is the case in the Grand Sole area, where the scant 373 tonnes proposed by the European Commission exceeds ICES recommendations by almost 40%. And again, in the western area of Ireland the 128 tonnes proposed by the European Commission almost doubles ICES recommendations (around 77 tonnes).

Oceana recommends much lower quotas for this species, which has suffered such substantial declines in populations; quotas that, at the very least, correspond to ICES advice and the best scientific information available.

- ***Saithe (*Pollachius virens*)***

This species has frequently been discarded as an accidental catch in many other fisheries, which has not enabled us to take a general overview of the actual volume of catches made.

Although it used to be a species that was regarded as being in a good state, the scarcity of other catches of greater commercial value (cod, haddock, etc.) have made it a target species of some fisheries that previously undervalued it, increasing the pressure on its stocks.

Oceana believes that the Commission should not view this species as an escape route for the crisis in other fisheries, as this gadiform species is just as vulnerable as others that have already been massively overexploited. We therefore recommend caution when it comes to granting catch quotas. Indeed, ICES has already recommended reducing the fishing effort on some stocks, due to the fact that clear signs of decline have already been noted in certain populations.

It is possible that pollock is in a good state or even increasing in just a few Arctic areas, such as Iceland and Norway, while in areas of generally greater exploitation of gadiforms, such as the North Sea, the Baltic, Scotland and the Faroe Islands, they are declining.

- ***Sole (Solea solea)***

The case of sole is similar to that of other flatfish. Many of their populations can now only withstand very low catches, usually below 50% of those of the Eighties.

The Commission's proposals are fairly close to ICES recommendations, with quotas either exactly the same or fluctuating between 5% or 10% either above or below them.

In this case, apart from generally sharing the criterion of the Commission, Oceana would like to point out that very strict quotas need to be maintained in order to allow the recovery of the species, given that all its stocks are regarded as overexploited or subject to a fishing effort higher than what would be advisable.

- ***Whiting (Merlangius merlangus)***

Whiting also needs a period during which catches are reduced in order to allow its recovery. The Commission's proposal pretty much follows scientific advice in some areas (such as the 1,600 tonnes established for the Faroe Islands and the north of the British Isles) but allows excessively large catches for the area between the west of Ireland and the English Channel and Grand Sole (where the 10,600 tonnes recommended are exceeded almost twofold: 21,600).

Oceana recommends reviewing this proposal in order to bring it in line with ICES recommendations.

Conclusions

In view of scientific evidence and the urgent need for recovery of numerous stocks in the North-East Atlantic, Oceana is calling upon the Commission to serve as the channel for transmitting ICES recommendations, based on the best scientific information available, and upon Member States to respect these proposals.

For years now, following the annual debate at which the fishing quotas are decided, politicians from the different nations have tended to return to their respective countries as the "great victors" each time they achieve quotas over and above scientifically recommended catches. This political and short term attitude should be done away with. Keeping the fishing industries happy by allowing biologically impossible catches or putting the future of fisheries in grave danger is not a responsible attitude, apart from being contrary to the general interests of the European people, to the pledges made to European citizens and to international agreements.

There are various fisheries that should be closed or at least included in a strict stock recovery plan:

- The monkfish fisheries off the Iberian coasts
- The cod fisheries of Kattegat, Skagerrak, the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the eastern English Channel.
- The hake fishery off the Iberian coasts and the Bay of Biscay
- The Norwegian lobster fishery in the Cantabrian/Galician area

Likewise, others should be monitored very carefully due to their likelihood of getting into similar circumstances:

- The anchovy fisheries in the Bay of Biscay and the Bay of Cadiz
- All cod populations, except in the Arctic
- The northern hake stock
- Megrin off the Iberian peninsula
- All sole stocks

And not forgetting, in third place:

- Monkfish stocks between the North Sea, the Baltic and the west of Scotland
- All the populations of blue whiting, given their tremendous importance to the Atlantic ecosystem.
- Mackerel stocks which, if such high catches continue, may follow the same fate as other small pelagic species
- All flatfish populations
- No increase in fishing pressure on haddock, pollock and whiting.

Bibliography

In drawing up these comments, Oceana has used the following documents as reference:

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