

THE STANDARD OF BASS ANGLING IN CORNWALL



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Introduction

As consideration is given to the development of a Fisheries Management Plan for bass, this report attempts, on behalf of the Cornish Federation of Sea Anglers (CFSA), to give the Recreational Sea Angler's perspective on the standard of bass angling in Cornwall, and how this has changed over the years.

The general consensus among anglers is that things were better in the past, particularly with regard to larger fish. But perceptions can be misleading in that we tend to look back with rose-tinted glasses, while at the same time adjusting our expectations to changing levels of return (shifting baselines). What is needed is an objective view based on evidence of catches, but there is a dearth of information here, and an apparent reluctance among some anglers to share their personal experiences. To try to fill this gap I have analysed my own catches over a 24-year period, undertaken research and canvassed the opinion of local bass anglers. I should note that this report relates to shore angling only.

The factors which influence catches

One of the difficulties about trying to draw conclusions about the standard of fishing is the number of factors which can affect this.

The most important factor which influences catches is the number and size of fish which are available to be caught i.e. bass stocks and the age/size profile of these. Data from ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea) on the Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) since 1985 is shown in the discussion section, along with recruitment indices and catches, both of which affect this. The SSB data does not give any indication of the age/size profile of the stocks – information which is of particular relevance to anglers. Nor does it give any indication of stocks within local areas which, due to bass' habit of returning to and remaining within local areas (site fidelity), can be severely depleted if fishing effort is not adequately controlled.

Modern advances in angling technology don't just enhance the angling experience - they make the process more efficient (think of casting a centre pin reel with 'cuttyhunk' line), and also allow us to fish different types of ground. The use of floating plugs and weedless soft plastic lures enables us to easily fish shallow rocky ground, opening up long stretches of coastline that anglers in the past would have avoided for fear of excessive tackle losses. And because of its greater convenience many anglers (including those new to the sport) are targeting bass in this way, which should result in higher catches.

Variations in experience, competence and degree of application/focus/specialisation between anglers, and within the same angler over time, will affect catches. Anglers are increasingly turning to social media for their interactions, and experiences, tips and knowledge are more readily shared via posts and videos. This helps to improve the general level of competence and fish-catching ability, and give even new entrants the tools to begin catching quickly. Conversely, with new techniques/tackle/lures/marks etc. to try, a degree of non-productive experimentation time can be expected, although this can be reduced by information sharing.

Methods and baits used may also affect catches. Bait fishing is thought to produce bigger bass than lures, although many big (some very big) bass are caught on lures. Whether perceptions will change as a result of increasing lure fishing in the dark remains to be seen. Some baits, such as worm and prawn, are thought to attract smaller fish as a whole, whereas large, smelly baits like mackerel and squid seem to produce bigger bass. Lure fishing is a more efficient form of fishing, with less time spent baiting up and a greater stretch of shoreline more easily covered within a session.

Access to improved weather forecasting and surf reports allow anglers to better focus their efforts on the venues and days when fishing is likely to be more effective.

The availability of bass to shore anglers is influenced by the movements of their prey, and when baitfish remain offshore, so will the bass. Conversely, when bait fish or other prey is present in vast amounts, the fish may be satiated for several days after and not look at the angler's bait or lure. It may also be that potential predators of bass (tuna?) either force them to move offshore, or force the baitfish on which they feed further out.

With climate change bass are extending their range northwards, and this may mean that stocks are spread out over a larger area, or conversely that stocks around the southwest are being boosted by more, and potentially larger, fish from Biscay. Does this also affect when the bass arrive inshore? In recent years, I have found that the fishing has been inconsistent in my area until August, when previously good fishing might be expected in June. Stormy weather may limit the occasions when even the shore angler can get out, either for safety reasons or because the conditions are unfishable; with climate change such occurrences seem to be becoming more frequent.

Catch and release is an increasing trend among bass anglers, and so we should expect to see fish numbers increasing if commercial catches remain static or decrease.

There may be sessions where one person catches and the other doesn't, illustrating that the fish were there but this would not have been apparent if the unlucky angler was fishing alone.

Competition with commercial fishermen, either due to the placing of nets which physically prevent anglers casting out, or due to the removal of fish, will affect anglers' catches.

The seasons fished can also affect catches, with mid-summer to mid-winter generally producing the bulk of catches in Cornwall.

The time of day fished can also affect catches. Daytime shore fishing was regarded as more productive in the past when stocks were higher. These days many anglers feel their chances of catching are much higher at night or first and last light.

The coast fished can influence catches, with the North Coast generally regarded as producing larger fish, possibly due to less commercial fishing because of fewer

harbours there and the likelihood of big swells. Likewise, estuary fishing can affect results and are being increasingly targeted by bass anglers as their potential for producing larger bass is recognised.

Recording catches

I have fished for bass in Cornwall from the shore since I came to the County in 1983. In the early days, bass was just one of a number of species I tried to catch. From about the late eighties however, I began to target them more and more.

In those early days, I would record only the briefest of details on 5 x 3" record cards. From 1998 onwards, I recorded every trip in a diary, including those where fish were caught and blank trips. I have analysed these diaries and summarised my results under the parameters described below.

I should point out that the sizes of fish have all been converted to length to make the data consistent throughout, more current and easier to analyse. Until recently I have not been in the habit of measuring all fish, and have rarely weighed fish under 8lb. The weights of most fish below 5lb are estimated from appearance with a reasonable degree of accuracy; once you get your eye in, it's surprising how well you can judge this. These weights have been converted to lengths using the BASS tape unless the length was actually measured. For fish of 5lb or over, the length is actually measured, or in a few cases converted from an actual weight. Where I have recorded e.g. 5 fish to 3lb, I have estimated a range of lengths up to the max (51cm in this case). I have used a length of 40cm where I have recorded 'schoolie' in my diaries (unless I recorded 'small schoolie' when 35cm was used). Although this means that the average size given is an approximation only, it does give a rough idea of the quality of fish caught, and the trend should be valid since the same rules were followed throughout. The figures for fish of 60cm and above should be accurate.

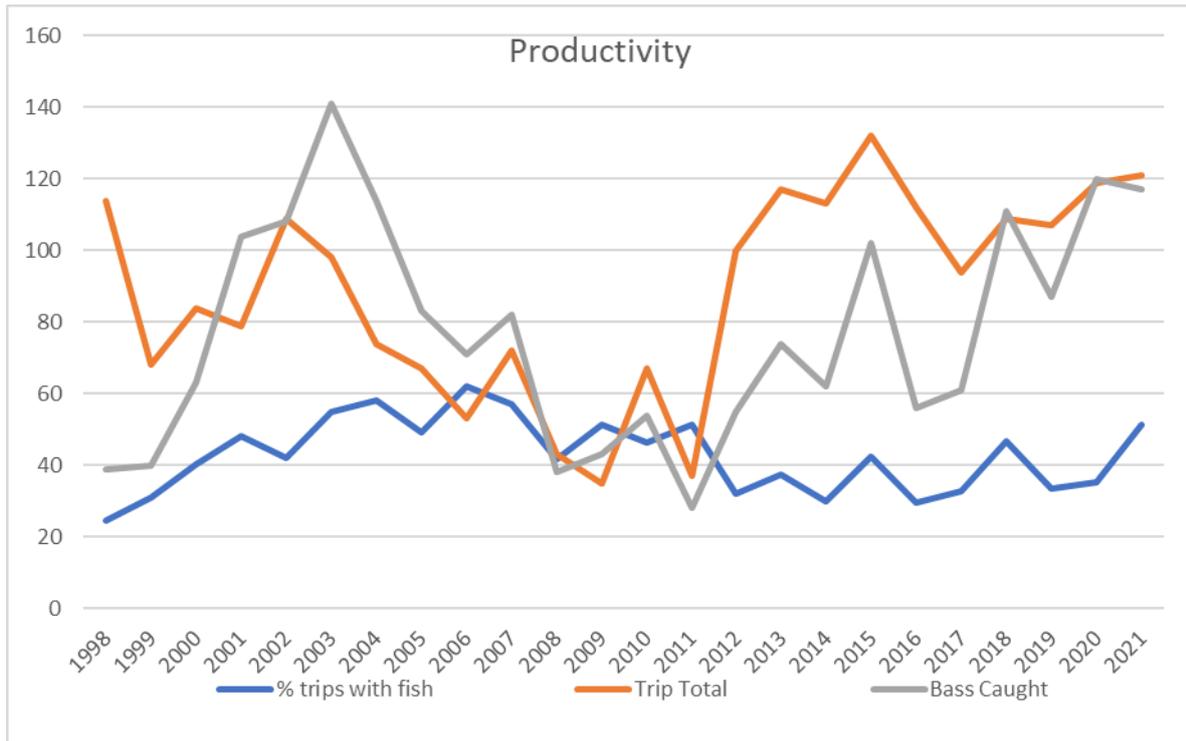
The parameters I have selected are essentially to gauge fishing productivity (number of trips, number of fish, % of trips where fish were caught, and number of fish per trip), and fishing quality (average length of fish, number of fish of 60cm and over, % of fish of 60cm and over, and maximum length).

Results

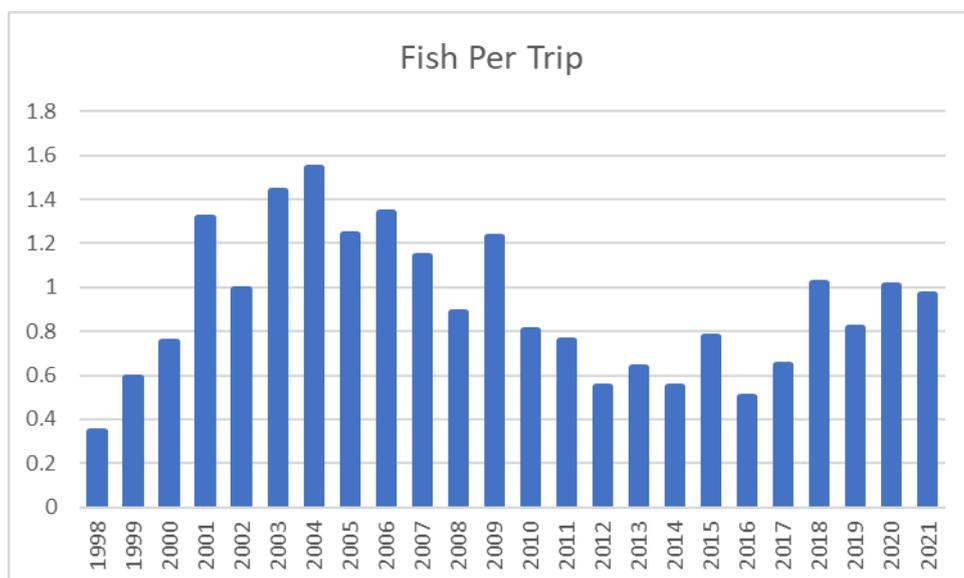
My results are summarised below, and should give a reasonable indication of what the fishery is capable of producing for bass anglers in Cornwall since:

- It covers a long period (24 years) and includes 2,124 trips
- I consider myself a reasonably competent bass angler who fishes regularly and exclusively for bass from late spring to mid-winter (since 2014)
- I use both lure and bait (including legering and float fishing) methods

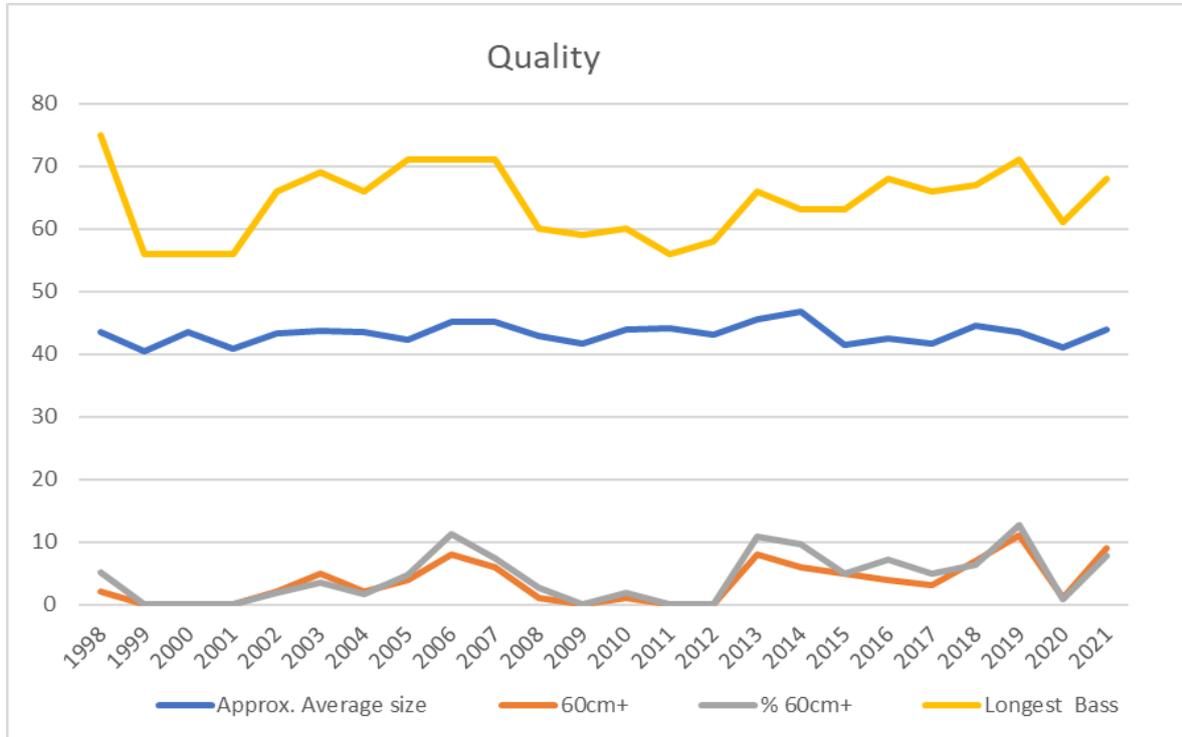
Since more of my fishing has been carried out on the South Coast than the North and Estuaries (until recently), the results may be more relevant to that coast. I have excluded any trips and catches from outside Cornwall.



- Number of bass caught: from a low of 39 in 1998, the number of fish caught rose to a peak of 141 in 2003, falling thereafter to a low of 28 in 2011 and only starting to recover in a sustained way 2018. The above chart shows well how my catches have related to effort over the years. Productivity in terms of fish per trip is shown later.
- Number of trips: this will be influenced by many factors, not least being variable and ongoing work pressures. From 2013, retirement allowed more trips to be made. From the winter of 2013, I started making more regular trips in December and January. Most trips are 2-3 hours long.
- Percentage of trips where fish caught: from a low of 24.6% in 1998, this rose to a peak of 62.3% in 2006, thereafter falling to a low of 29.5% in 2016. In 2021, the value was 51.2%.



- Fish per trip: from a low of 0.3 in 1998, this rose to a high of 1.5 in 2004, thereafter falling to a period of low values around 0.6 between 2012 and 2017. There are signs of a recovery after this, but at around 1 this is below the 2004 peak.



- Longest fish (cm): the average for this is 64.3cm, but in some years, this can be as low as 56cm. Five of the years produced 70cm+ fish, interestingly 3 of these (71cm) came in successive years (2005-7). My Personal Best, a fish of 75cm (estimated from its weight of 9lb 6oz) was caught way back in 1998.
- Approximate Average size (cm): the values are approximations only, as discussed above, but they should give a general indication of the size of fish caught and the trends in this. The range of sizes is fairly limited around the average of 43.2cm, but there are outliers at the lower (40.4, 40.8 in 1999 & 2001) and higher (45.1, 45.1, 45.6, 46.8 in 2006, 7, 13 & 14 respectively), possibly reflecting good preceding year classes and/or growth.
- Number of 60cm and over fish: this is quite variable, with some years producing none or just one (1999 – 2001 & 2008-2012), while other years produced eight or more (2006, 2013, 2019 (11) and 2021). The percentage of fish caught which were 60cm and above will obviously follow the same pattern, but with the addition of 2014 where although only 6 fish were caught, this represents 9.7% of all fish caught. Conversely, the 9 fish caught in 2021 only represents 7.7% of the total. The maximum % obtained was 12.6 in 2019. Although undoubtedly affected by them, these figures do not seem to correlate well with SSB levels, particularly for the higher values. It may be that other factors are more important here (e.g. larger fish moving up from Biscay, or conversely, remaining offshore due to baitfish/predator movements). Because the results vary both up and down over time, I think it unlikely that this has anything to do with any increases in fishing expertise.

A rare record of the size composition of bass catches in the past can be seen in 'The Art of Angling' 1957 Vol 1 Part 4, Chapter 5 p281-303: [Bass and bass fishing](#), written by Donovan Kelley. The weights of 400 bass "taken over a long enough period (and wide enough range)" were distributed as follows:

1.5 - 3lb: 56%
3 - 5lb: 32%
5 - 7lb: 8%
7lb+: 4%

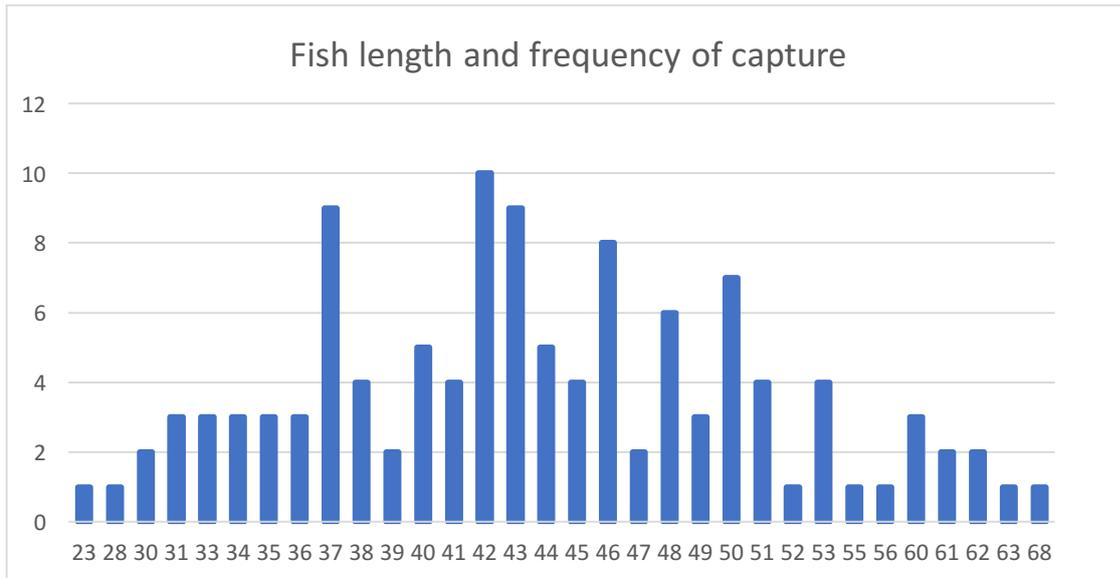
The 83 bass (all measured) I caught in 2021 which were 40cm or over were distributed as follows:

40cm - 50cm (corresponds to 1.5lb to just under 3lb): 75.9%
51 - 60cm (corresponds to 3lb to 5lb): 16.9%
61 - 67cm (corresponds to just over 5lb to 7lb): 6.0%
> 67cm (corresponds to over 7lb): 1.2%

I have not taken account of the 29% of fish I caught which were below 40cm as I was uncertain whether DK had included fish of this size in his figures.

This would suggest that I caught a significantly higher percentage of smaller fish, while the percentage of medium to large fish I caught was lower than in 1957, particularly those in the 3-5lb range. Admittedly this is a small sample, but I suspect this is representative of Cornwall anglers' catches generally. Perhaps this is the inevitable consequence of a fishery aimed at maximising the number of fish around the MCRS as opposed to one where a more natural age profile is the aim.

The chart below shows the number of bass I caught at each length (all measured) in 2021 (total 117). The average length was 43.9cm, with 36.75% of these below the current MCRS of 42cm. It's disappointing to note that relatively few bass over 50cm were caught.



2014 was considered a good year class from our Cornwall juvenile bass surveys, and the influence of this class can be seen in the chart by the number of fish at around 42cm. We also found that 2016 was quite good, and the spike at 37cm is probably due to this class. It should be noted that in the Cefas Solent survey these classes only appear to be average for the whole time-series going back to 1985 (see below), and nothing like the outstanding 1989 class, or even the more recent 1997 and 1999 classes.

2021 was the first year that I regularly fished estuaries, making up 43% of total trips. The average size of fish was the same for estuary and coast at 43cm. Of the 9 fish I caught of 60cm or more, 3 came from the coast (2 on bait, 1 on lures), while 6 came from estuaries (all on lures), including my biggest fish of the year at 68cm. It will be interesting to see if these results are repeatable in the coming years. At any rate, my 2021 results seem to confirm the benefit of the increased protection of fish arising from the prohibition of nets in Cornwall's rivers and estuaries afforded by the 2018 CIFCA byelaw.

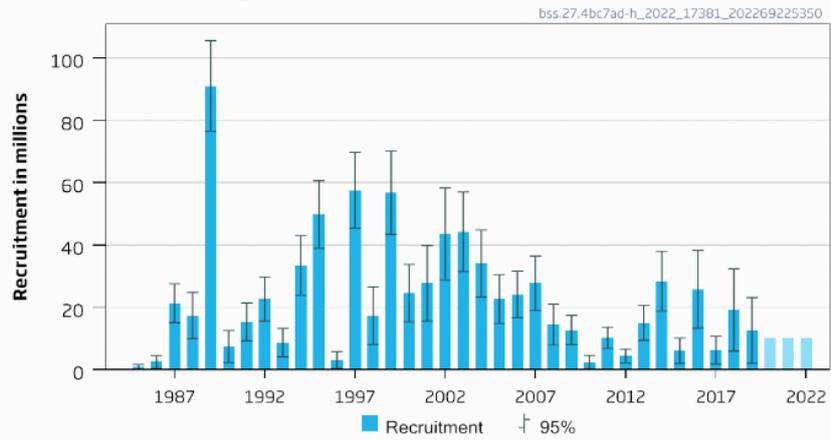
Discussion

My fish per trip ratios generally reflect the trend in year classes, with stronger classes 5 years earlier, or the classes immediately around this, giving higher ratios reflecting an influx of fish from 30cm. Likewise, my fish per trip ratios follow the trend for the SSB quite well, particularly the period between 2012 – 2017 when stocks were at their lowest.

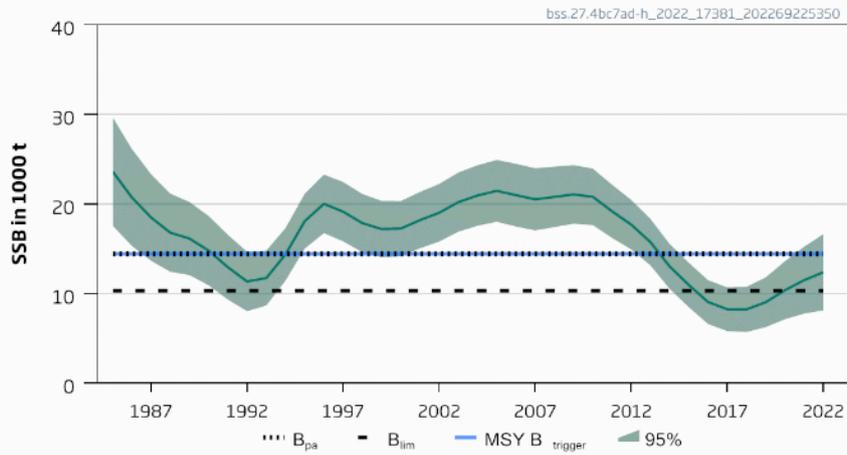
My fish per trip, and percentage of trips with fish ratios in recent years are on the up, but would hardly indicate that a sudden upturn in fishing productivity had occurred or was imminent.

That my catches agree with the science, and reflect stock levels, infers that if stocks were higher, so would catches be. From the ICES graphs below, it can be seen that the SSB in 1985 was approximately twice what it is in 2022, so we might expect catches to have been significantly higher then.

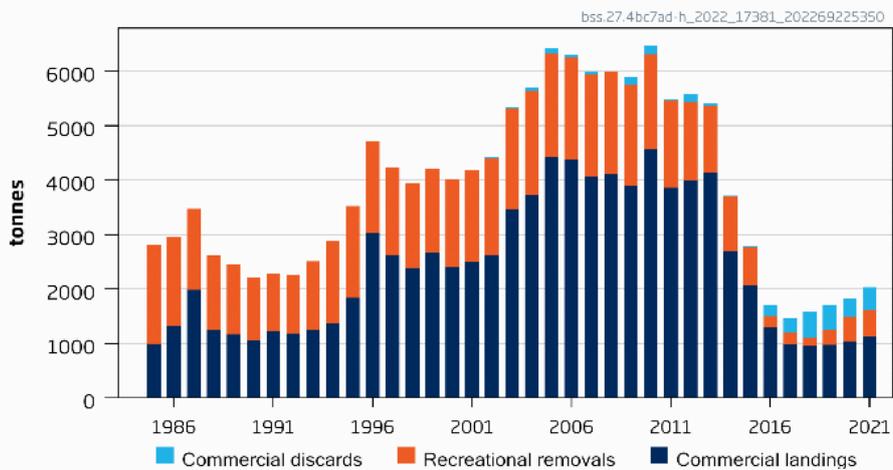
Recruitment (age 0)



SSB



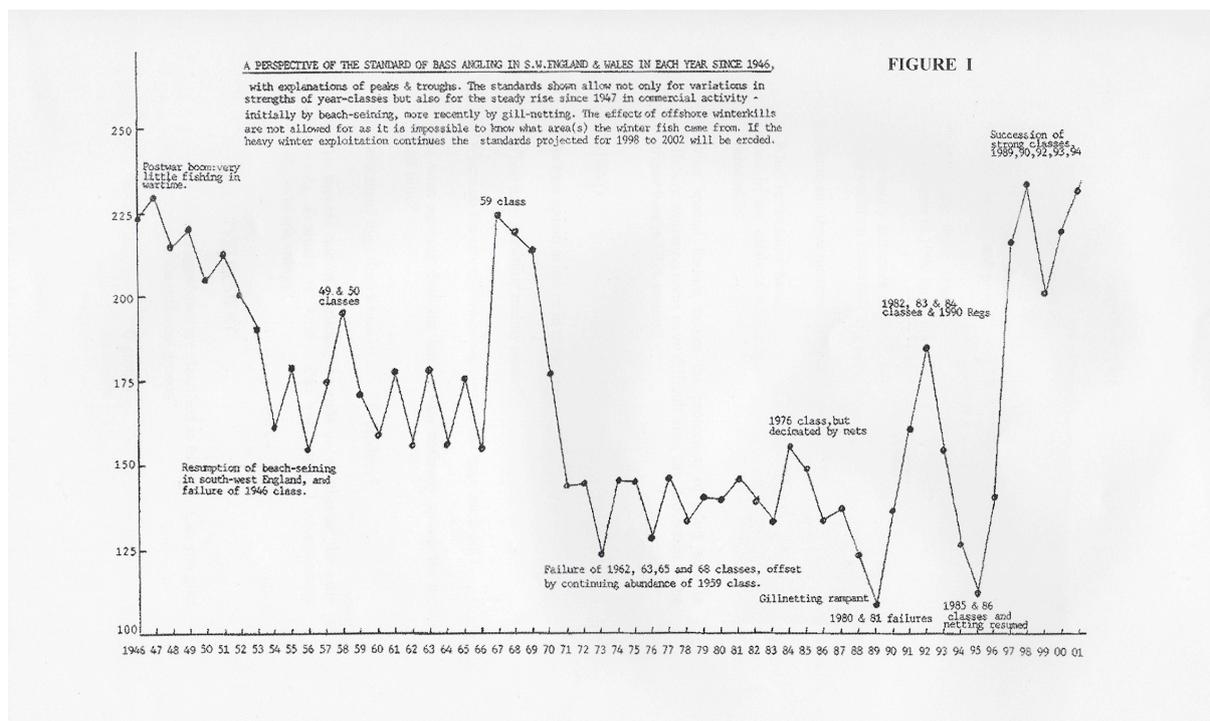
Catches



From the ICES advice on fishing opportunities, catch and effort for Sea Bass June 2022.

Figure 1 below, from Donovan Kelley's 'Life With Bass' 1998 (The influence of year class strengths), shows the standard of bass angling in SW England and W Wales between 1946 and 2001. It uses an index based on the relative numbers present each year at ages 8 to 17 (~ 50 to 70cm), and how this is influenced by year class strength and fishing pressure. The X axis shows the fishing year, the Y axis shows an arbitrary scale used for comparing the relative standard of fishing from year to year: 100 to 150 is poor, 150 – 200 quite good, over 200 very good.

The graph shows how the standard of fishing has fluctuated markedly over the years due to the effects of weak and strong year classes, and the steady rise since 1947 in commercial activity. Several things stand out – the high quality of fishing just after the second world war when very little fishing was carried out, how the standard of fishing declined thereafter when beach-seining was resumed, the boost to fishing given by very strong year classes such as 1959, and the decimation of the strong 1976 class by gillnetting.



The excellent fishing predicted in the graph for 1998 – 2001 as a result of strong year classes in 1989, 90, 92, 93, 94, does not seem to have been borne out in my own catches, presumably giving further evidence of just how much commercial fishing can impact on stocks.

At no point in the years I have been bass fishing would I describe the fishing as very good. This is even after fishing later in December and early January (from 2014), when fishing is usually boosted by migrating fish, sometimes of better size, and being able to choose more favourable conditions since retirement (2013). How could I, when the number of fish per trip averages around 0.9 for the whole series, dipping

as low as 0.3 and only reaching a maximum of 1.5. Likewise, the percentage of trips with fish has been as low as 24.6, meaning that on 75% of trips that year I caught nothing. Even in the best year I only caught fish on 62% of trips. Only in 2006, due to a combination of 62% of trips with fish, 1.3 fish per trip and 11.3% of fish of 60cm and over, would I consider my fishing to have been quite good. This was part of a spell which I would describe as fair from 2003-2007. The remaining years can only be described as poor, with the possible exception of 2021, which could be considered fair. The poor results of these years must be judged against the many other changes to our fishing which should have resulted in higher catches,

My methods have changed over time, and like many other bass anglers, I use lures more these days. In 1998, I used lures on 33% of trips; by 2021 this figure had increased to 76%. The bait I used has changed over time – from lugworm and sandeel to crab, razor, squid and most recently mackerel. I don't think my increasing use of lures has affected the number of fish I catch (if anything it has increased it), and the split of my 60cm and above catches between lure and bait in 2021 simply reflects the pattern of use. My biggest fish (weighed at 9lb 6oz and estimated from this at 75cm) came on bait.

When compiling these statistics, I found myself wondering how I put up with so many blanks (trips with no fish) in a row – sometimes as many as 17! Not to mention the time and cost involved, sometimes travelling long distances only to catch a single 'schoolie' (or nothing at all). It's not all about catching fish though, and there are other rewards in our sport. However, such returns as mine are unlikely to encourage new entrants to take up the sport, and even the most dedicated enthusiast will only carry on for so long if things don't improve.

Perhaps one reason why I kept going is that I have tended to blame myself for a lack of success – I chose the wrong mark/tide/conditions etc., and didn't focus enough, spending too much time experimenting. While these factors will have a bearing, it's now clear to me that the poor state of bass stocks is the underlying cause; as they say, you can only catch what's out there. My catches are dictated by the year classes prevailing at the time, and whether these are growing steadily or being removed by harvesting.

In terms of fishing quality i.e. the proportion of the bigger fish which most anglers are so interested in, it is difficult not to be subjective. The 'holy grail' for bass anglers has always been the 10lb+ or 'double-figure' bass. Even in 1947, they were considered rare (see above – in 'The Art of Angling'): "A ten-pounder is a really big one – for most anglers the fish of a lifetime." They have not become any more common, and I have yet to catch one myself.

Perhaps a more realistic target for most serious bass anglers is the 8lb or 70cm+ fish. The 5lb, or 60cm, bass has become a benchmark, and overall fishing quality is generally measured in terms of the number of fish caught each year of this size or above. As the comparison with Don Kelley's results shows, it has become harder to catch these larger fish. For the general angler, the number of bass caught of 42cm (the current Minimum Conservation Reference Size) and over ("keepers") is perhaps a better indicator of fishing quality. In 2021, when all fish were measured, 63% of the fish I caught were over this size.

Other perspectives

It's important to try to take a balanced view of things, and not to base any conclusions on a single person's experience. We must also bear in mind that many anglers do not specialise in bass fishing. Such people are likely to experience poorer results in times when fish are less abundant.

Let's start with **Austen Goldsmith**, bass fishing guide, whose business involves taking anglers boat fishing off the South Coast of Cornwall. He writes:

So much has changed in the 11 years it's hard to imagine things in the Bass fishery could evolve so much in a decade.

When I launched Zen2 for the first time the bass fishery was very different - we were facing a crisis as poor recruitment of juvenile fish due to a succession of bitter winters a few years prior and decades of over fishing was seriously affecting stocks. The fishing was much slower and my average catch per day was probably 25 % of my catches today. I do think we had a higher percentage of larger fish out there but that makes sense really, we had the left-overs from previous good year classes swimming alongside a depleted base stock.

I have seen nothing but positive changes to the fishery in 11 years. The pair trawlers have been all but excluded from the fishery, 10 mild winters in a row which is very significant, bag limits on the recreational fishery. I remember the days when "recreational anglers" would fill boxes with bass and illegal sales of bass were commonplace. We have a close season on bass during spawning season, an increased minimum landing size, the number of commercial boats able to fish for bass was slashed by the introduction of bass entitlement certificates, so no new boats are able to join the bass fishery and a good number lost their ability to target bass, netting still happens but not on the vast scale it was years ago. It's not perfect but I remember how bleak the future looked 10 - 20 years ago and how helpless and powerless we felt.

You cannot overlook the impact that UKBASS and SOS have had, they helped to force these changes. I will never forget a conversation I had with Malcolm Gilbert years ago and between us the idea of picketing the then fishery minister George Eustace's office was sprung to life. I think we had around 250 anglers wielding fishing rods like pitchforks and banners in the street outside his office. It was awesome!!

So yeah, I think there is a lot to look forward too, massive thanks to all those who have worked so hard and Hi to all those new bass anglers who can now go fishing with rays of sunshine on the horizon rather than bleak storm clouds!!

Malcolm Gilbert has been a leading campaigner for bass stocks for many years. He writes:

Some anglers, depending on how and where they fish, are witnessing an increased abundance of bass between 42 cm & say 48 cm. Should anglers be satisfied with an

increased abundance (if indeed they are experiencing such fishing) of bass aged 6 and 7?

Wouldn't UK sea anglers like to see a greater opportunity to target and catch 10 lb + bass? I don't believe I've met an angler yet who wouldn't appreciate an improved chance of connecting to a double figure bass, nor one who would relish a realistic chance of a handful of 7 lb+ fish each season.

Bass can live for 20+ years and weigh as much as 15 to 20 pounds, and yet fish of just 11 years old [typically around 5 lbs] are 'relatively' scarce.

Striped bass have almost an identical life span as European bass and one of their key management objectives is to increase the proportion of individuals aged 15+. For our bass that's fish of between 6.5 and 9 lbs. It isn't realistic to think fish of that size are readily available on a daily basis, but competent and experienced anglers should be able to expect a few of those annually.

Those of us who are experienced and knowledgeable must also avoid looking at our own current catches as typical. There is a saying that 95% of fish are caught by just 5% of anglers and although I doubt those specific percentages, I do believe there is a lot of truth in the underlying sentiment. A really successful recreational fishery is when stocks are sufficiently abundant that even inexperienced anglers can experience an occasional good catch.

I believe there are thousands of sea anglers who during recent years have not caught a bass over 5 pounds.

It is unquestionably the case that the existence of abundant bass aged 15+ is today greatly reduced from what is used to be 40 years ago. I recall the first large landing of bass into Newlyn by a pair of Scottish pair trawlers. It was a sight I'll never forget of over 15 tonnes of bass strewn across the deck, all well over 8 pounds. This was followed by numerous landings into Plymouth including 60 tonnes over just 10 days. It was landings like this that resulted in MAFF implementing a 5 tonne per week limit. These fish were probably generally offshore feeding on pelagics, but occasionally some would come inshore. I was fortunate to be fishing a local reef one November and a shoal of huge fish took up residence for a few days. One day I caught 28 bass that weighed 295 pounds, the largest was 14 lbs – 10 oz and I'd lost a far larger fish at the side of the boat. That day I took the fish from two other boats, together with mine to Newlyn as I was going there anyway. That was Spencer Vibart whose boat 'Deep Too' was in Mylor and Tony Cary of Coverack. Both of them had bass of over 17 pounds! I do not believe fish of that age/size exist now except at extremely low abundance. The cumulative tonnage landed by both Scottish and French pair trawlers during that period must have done immeasurable damage.

I used to know a man who each year would catch bass in excess of 12 pounds at low water in the mouth of a local estuary (mid 1940s). The headmaster of Helston primary school used to fish a local reef in the 1940's with a hook passed through a piece of the red rubber seal used in glass preserving jars. He used to catch numerous pollack and bass over 15 lbs.

John Tisdale has been fishing for bass and other species in Cornwall for many years. He notes:

Facts are that those of us who have fished here for 40 years know that fish are less abundant and big fish harder to find. The causes of the decline are speculative but must include commercial pressure by inshore gill netting.

Brian Collick has in excess of 50 years sea angling experience in Cornwall. He writes:

The demise of the bass fishery in Cornwall

In 1968, I joined the Redruth SAA as novice angler and by the mid 1970's was a competent angler winning many awards each year. The bass fishing in the early 60's to mid 80's in the club was far superior to what we see today, with bass and mackerel being the two most prominent species being brought to the club scales. As people became more knowledgeable and tackle improved, the quality of the fishing also improved, and for several years from 1975 to the mid-eighties generally the best bass for the year weighed in excess of 8lbs with several over 10 lbs. The club record at this time was 12+ lbs and the junior record 11+ lbs which was caught on a junior outing in daylight.

I myself could fish with 1 rod for a 5-hour session and catch up to 10 bass which weighed between 3lbs and 8lbs. It is now rare to catch any bass over 3lbs in any quantity.

In 1978, there were 35 clubs affiliated to the Cornish division of the NFSA and a further 28 affiliated to the Cornish federation of sea Anglers. Some of these clubs were dual affiliated but there were certainly in excess of 50 clubs in Cornwall. Membership of clubs such as Truro, Camborne, Redruth, Mounts Bay, St Columb was generally around 100 members. The number of clubs in Cornwall is probably around 18 now. Redruth has 21 members and I think most clubs are between 20 and 30 with the exception of ECC ports. (RB: Ralph Elcox, CFSA Secretary, reports that 12 clubs are affiliated to the CFSA in 2022 and estimates the combined membership of these at around 600).

Open Competitions were well supported with entrants around 225 to 250. The largest event was the prestigious Westward TV /TSW TV competition which was based at Redruth and ran for some 12 years. The average turnout for that competition was 390 entrants per year the best year being 428 entrants.

This was a 6-hour roving competition in daylight and bass were regularly brought to the scales - these fish weighed up to 5lbs. Other competitions, such as the St Columb bass and the Trevithick Arms based at Camborne, had excellent turnouts and were fished at night, bass being the target species. If you brought a bass below 5.5 lbs back to the weigh-in you would definitely not be in the top 8 prizes which qualified you for the CFSA final. Competitions are now being fished for up to 28 hours and often bass do not feature in the prize list and in the bass only competitions

sometimes not even 8 bass are brought to the scales and certainly very few over 5 lbs.

We certainly have superior tackle and a considerable amount of knowledge, top quality baits and are travelling greater distances to marks to catch less fish and generally smaller fish.

There is no doubt in minds of people such as myself that have in excess of 50 years angling experience that the decline in bass and most other species began with the introduction of the monofilament gill nets. When will the penny drop and people realise what damage has been done and continues to be done?

Jon Williams has fished for bass in Cornwall for around 60 years. He writes:

I started bass fishing with my father at the tender age of 7 years old, so on and off (the 'off' being when I was at sea in the RN) I have fished for bass for around 60 years. Those early years saw lots of bass occupying my local estuary waters so there was no necessity to venture out of the harbour to have a successful days angling.

In the 1970's the introduction of the gill net saw a large uptake for this type of fishing, with several people deciding that the nets were so successful (and cheap) that they set them for their own use rather than commercial gain, this practice along with heavy commercial pressure saw a dramatic reduction in the numbers and the size of bass that we caught and, within just a few short years the numbers of bass being caught by my father who was a very experienced and dedicated angler were so low that he saw no benefit in keeping his boat, so it was sold and he gave up bass fishing.

I have owned my own boat for nearly 40 years and practice mostly catch and release, only keeping around eight bass a year. Over the last 20 years or more I have found it necessary to travel greater distances from my local estuary to find any bass in numbers and most of these are not of any significant size, this despite the banning of pair trawling a few years ago, the number of larger bass above 55cms have dropped dramatically since the early 2000's and if it wasn't for my passion for bass angling I too would have considered selling my boat.

Bass fishing has been an important part of my families recreation since the 1950's, and I have that passion in buckets, so much so that I have been visiting Southern Ireland annually since 2005 for between three weeks and a month, taking an inflatable dinghy to enjoy the bass fishing over there, bass are a sport fish in Ireland (although illegal netting does take place), which means more and bigger bass are available as a reward for putting the effort in to fish for them, this can involve rising well before daylight and fishing the darkness and the dawn, the immense feeling of wellbeing and satisfaction cannot be described when doing this combined with finding bass that are plentiful and of good size.

I often fish with long-standing friends and when my wife asks what we talked about she cannot understand it when I say we didn't say much whilst fishing, to stand waist deep in the sea, or drift casually along the shore in my inflatable is absorbing, totally relaxing and I often get completely engrossed in the local environment I am in, where

the issues of the world don't exist until I look at my watch to see if it is time to drift back into the real world.

If bass were as plentiful as they are in Ireland, I probably wouldn't go and spend my money over there, and should the bass stocks in the UK deplete further due to the dilution of the current regulations or lack of enforcement to prevent illegal bass fishing, it is likely I will sell my boat and use the money I spend on that on more visits to Ireland.

Should bass stocks be improved by effective management processes that are effectively policed (I have been approached and interviewed by the fisheries enforcement in Ireland, but never in the UK), then I would be inclined to fish more than I currently do.

Roger Harvey lives in Suffolk now but fished in Cornwall during the 70's. He writes:

I was born in Cornwall and started fishing when I was 13 with a friend and his father mostly in a local estuary during the day. We used to catch bass not infrequently. This would be 1969.

I used to stay on the North Coast for the summer holidays and would fish regularly at low tide. Bass were regularly caught, up to 5lbs, although not every trip.

I used to fish other North Coast beaches, mostly in the mid 70s. Each year we would hear of good catches of Bass, maybe 7/8 fish up to 10lbs. These catches did not happen very often, but there were several good catches each year, indeed in 1979 I had my best catch. The largest 8lb 4oz, 6.5lb, 3.8 lb and 2.6lb. I stopped trying to catch and just left several big bites to not hook the fish. Had I tried a bit harder I am sure there were fish over 10lbs to be caught. Over the limit fish were never returned then. Never happened again. Even at this time we kept our catches secret as inshore boats would try to trawl off these productive beaches and ruin the fishing.

In Mid June this year we had a holiday in Padstow. I have fished this area many times over the years, and up till this year never connected with any Bass. This year was different. My Brother and I caught 9 schoolies to 2.5lbs. Most were under 1lb. I have not had such a good session even though they were small.

Conclusions

While many factors influence the success or failure of individual fishing trips, without doubt the main factor in determining the overall standard of our fishing is the level of bass stocks and the age/size profile of these.

The standard of bass angling in Cornwall has varied over the years as a result of fluctuating year classes and rising commercial activity. The general trend until the late nineties is one of falling standards of fishing, rescued by occasional very strong year classes (e.g. 1959), producing some very good fishing (e.g. 1966 -1968, 1992). A potential large boost to fishing standards from the late nineties from the strong 1989, 90, 92, 93 & 94 classes does not seem to have found its way into my catches, presumably because of commercial exploitation reducing the impact of these.

These falling standards of fishing are reflected in several of the additional perspectives from local anglers included in this document. It seems that there was a noticeable decline from the mid 80's, by when the influence of gill netting was being felt. My own bass fishing experience began around this time, and I have never experienced the 'good times' of bass angling in Cornwall. The fact that bass stocks have even fallen by 50% since then may explain why standards of bass fishing have fallen so much in recent times – perhaps without many of us realising.

My own results demonstrate that catches follow the trend in stock levels. This is in the context of technological and other advances, and greater knowledge and experience which should have been working to increase catches. It sometimes feels as though I'm running to stand still, or even going backwards.

The decline in my fishing standards was particularly noticeable from 2012 – 2017 when stocks crashed as a result of a succession of poor year classes and increased commercial catches. Although stricter controls have been in place since 2015, recruitment since then has only been average or poor.

Based on productivity (percentage of trips with fish, fish per trip) and quality (percentage of fish of 60cm and above), my perception is that the standard of my fishing between 1998 and 2021 was poor, except for the period between 2003-2007 which I would describe as fair, including 2006 which was the only year I would consider as quite good. Compared to the past, I caught more small fish and fewer medium to large fish in 2021. In only three of the 24 years covered by my records did the number of fish I caught measuring 60cm (~5lb) or above exceed 10%.

There are some signs that the fishing may be recovering, but according to my results, this has yet to reach even the standard seen in the early to mid-2000's, which in itself was not exceptional compared to some periods in the past.

Any sustained recovery will be dependent on fishing pressure and the level of recruitment to the fishery. This in turn depends on growing the stock, allowing fish to spawn, and climatic conditions favourable to spawning and settlement. At current levels of recruitment and catches it will take some time for the standard of fishing to return to levels seen in the heydays of the past. What is particularly troubling is the almost total failure of the 2018 class we saw in Cornwall following the 'Beast from the East' at the peak spawning time. This illustrates just how fragile any recovery will be, and underlines the need to be cautious in any relaxation of current restrictions.

The current restrictions have rescued the situation. The Fisheries Management Plan now gives us an opportunity to develop a 'world-class' bass fishery, which satisfies the needs and aspirations of both commercial fishermen and recreational anglers, with more and bigger fish.

Robin Bradley, CFSA Conservation Officer

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