



A ghost net off Plymouth Hoe which was still in situ four months after a local diver reported the obstruction to the authorities

Call to reform rules on inshore fishing nets

Experts are demanding reforms to the rules that have allowed an explosion in the type of fishing nets which are blamed for the collapse of some fish stocks.

The Angling Trust and Institute of Fisheries Management are calling for reforms to outdated inshore netting regulations.

They say the main culprit is the proliferation in the use of monofilament gill nets.

Gill nets are not new, but man-made fibres, such as monofilament nylon, are cheaper, stronger and virtually invisible in the water.

Some boats are using nets 12 miles long, catching thousands of scarce fish. Yet the regulations around their use

have often not kept up with technological advances and declining fish stocks.

Martin Salter, the Angling Trust's national campaigns coordinator, said: "There is a complete dog's dinner of regulations, loopholes and exemptions covering inshore netting around our coast and it's high time the rules governing the use of nets were reformed."

Malcolm Gilbert from the Cornish Federation of Sea Anglers said: "Go to any port now and you will see vast bins of monofilament gill nets.

"After years of long-line fishing, it took just 18 months to wipe out the spur dog population in the 1980s.

"They've done the wrecks

with ling and cod. There was a huge bonanza for those who got in first; it was amazingly lucrative. But the netting fleets have shrunk because the stocks are no longer there."

Birdlife International says the nets kill large numbers of seabirds, with one estimate putting fatalities at 400,000 a year.

Dolphins and porpoises are also frequent victims of nets in areas where regulations are too lax, Mr Gilbert said.

An EU report said that monofilament netting accounted for almost 50% of the entire seabass catch.

"It's not unheard of for a vessel to net 1,000 to 1,500 seabass in one hit," Mr Gil-

bert said. "A hook and line fisherman would be happy with 20."

Mr Gilbert said each vessel there was allowed only 200 yards of net and had to keep watch over the netting to release birds or dolphins which became entangled. With nets left in the water for a shorter time, under-sized fish were more likely to survive and be released.

The EU banned drift netting for bass this year after the collapse of stocks, but Mr Gilbert said: "It's a massive problem, but as yet there is no willingness to confront it in Europe."

Monofilament nets lost at sea may go on fishing as "ghost nets" for years.