

CFSA Conservation Officer report AGM 2015.

Although I'm referred to as Conservation Officer, I've never felt that label accurately described my role. Allow me to explain.

Regardless of why we go fishing – socialising, competitive angling, catching a feed of fish, thrill of the hunt, being outdoors in the fresh air, etc. – the single most crucial ingredient is FISH.

And there are undoubtedly less fish than there use to be and those that remain are smaller. It's not all bad news. Some species are more abundant now than previously such as gilt head bream and this year some bonito appeared in the mix. But looking at the big picture for traditional species like turbot, dabs, flounder, plaice, pollack, bass etc.,

the situation is grim. That's not to say no specimens are being caught - it's about looking at the big picture for the majority of anglers and the message from those who have been sea angling for more than 30 years is consistent - things aren't what they once were.

Why?

What's happened? In a word - well actually two words: Over fishing. Too many fish are being removed from the sea and in many cases they are being removed as immature baby fish.

Here's an example.

No surprises that I've selected bass, a) because bass management is

currently very topical and b) because I know more about bass than

other species.

Currently across most of Europe and I include UK of course, bass are subject to 36 cm (just over 1 lb) MLS. So at 36 cm they 'recruit to the fishery'. In other words they become legally retainable. During their first year after reaching 36cm, 50% are currently caught. So out of 100 fish that recruit to the fishery, 50 are captured and retained during their first year. That leaves 50, and the following year, 40% of those are taken. That leaves 30. By then those 30 remaining bass will be aged 7 and typically measure 43 - 45 cm (2.0 lbs). The following year 30% of the remaining 30 will be caught leaving 21. The following year 20% of the remaining 21 will be caught leaving 16. Those remaining 16 (out of the original 100) will by now be 50 -55 cm (3.0 - 3.5 lbs). By the way, none of these calculations take account of natural mortality so that figure of 16 remaining bass from the original 100 is best case scenario. Essentially, it is nothing short of miraculous that we still have a few bass of 5, 6, 7, lbs and larger, given the huge proportions of young immature bass that are removed.

Now I want to make something very clear. I, nor I suggest the CFSA, are opposed to commercial fishing per se. There is nothing inherently wrong with harvesting fish stocks commercially. There is however a proviso to that statement. Commercial exploitation should only be allowed to take place at 'sustainable' levels. And we can enlarge upon that by defining what we mean by 'sustainable'

"*Sustainable* fishing involves fishing at a level that does not

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

That patently is not happening at present. Just look at official statistics and compare today with how it was thirty years ago.

Thirty years ago the UK had 22,000 commercial fishermen, today the figure is just 12,000, down 45%.

UK landings for demersal species like bass, brill, cod, dogs, gurnard, haddock, sole, monk, plaice, Pollack, whiting, turbot etc down from almost 500,000 tonnes to just 149,000 tonnes. That's a 70% drop!

Little wonder that anglers have less fish to catch!

So what is the core problem? It is the way commercial fisheries are being managed – or rather NOT managed – that is the problem. Instead of the priority being the wellbeing of the fish, the focus has been, and continues to be, the short term earning opportunities of fishermen. Indeed, even today, many fisheries leaders deny there is a problem with fish stocks. It really is quite remarkable to hear fishing leaders clamour the seas are full of fish and that stocks are recovering. Sure, a particular stock may well show some signs of improving from an all time low, but invariably the stock is still a long way from what it should be. Lets keep it simple. If you start with 100 fish and through poor management you end up with just 10 fish in ten years time, but in the eleventh year, you have 15 fish, that additional 5 represents a 50% increase – hip, hip, hooray -- but it's still 85 fish (or 85%) short on what

you started with!

Across the world fisheries management has failed but some Countries have learnt the lesson and have addressed the problem with fresh thinking. First and foremost, is a cultural mindset shift away from regarding marine fish stocks as 'commercial fish'. They are actually public renewable fishery resources. The fish belong to society - they are the property of the commons. They belong to you, to me, to your aunties and uncles, to your mothers and fathers, to your nephews and nieces. They even belong to those who neither have any interest in angling or in eating fish! Our marine fish are in the same category as the woodlands of the New Forest or Forest of Dean. Just imagine if furniture manufacturers descended on the Forest of Dean with chain saws and tried to help themselves to the oak trees!

There are a couple of short stories that I think will help to get across to everyone how the culture is different in other parts of the world.

In 1992 The Coastal Conservation Association in Florida (largely recreational sea anglers), USA succeeded in collecting 201,000 signatures in just one day to bring an end to all entanglement netting in State waters. Not surprisingly, their efforts were contested by commercials. A legal wrangle ensued over the next three years but in 1995, Florida's Governor and Cabinet approved the abolition of all entanglement netting in State waters. The Coastal Conservation Association's press release went to great lengths to point out that they had not sought to stop commercial fishermen from entanglement netting just to provide more fish for anglers, they had fought to take back control of the people's marine fishery resources from commercially dominated interests and

return control to the people of Florida for the long term benefit of the

State of Florida.

As some of you know, I visit the North East of USA to fish for striped bass and with a group of anglers from all around the UK, we generally rent a house. Imagine my surprise one day to find that a large house we were renting in the town of Montauk, at the far eastern end of Long Island, NY, was actually owned by a 45 year old women who skippered a 45 foot gill netter operating out of Kodiak Island in Alaska for salmon during the summer. Her husband was first mate and their son was a deck hand. Inevitably we got talking about fisheries management and the profound differences between how things were done in Alaska and here in UK. A few years earlier, the fisheries managers in Alaska had introduced mandatory observers in order to get accurate details on bycatch of non targeted fish as well as birds and mammals. The mandatory independent observers had to be paid for by the boat, so not only were all their fishing activities going to be accurately recorded; the boat operators had to pay for the privilege. Tempers escalated and some boats point blank refused to co-operate. Eventually, a meeting

was called and the authorities told the boat owners that if they didn't wish to take and pay for independent observers, that would be OK, they didn't need to. However, any boat not complying would be chained to the quay under armed guard and wouldn't be allowed to fish. And here's the really crucial bit. The authorities told the commercial fishermen/women, that they needed to remember that the fish weren't theirs and that they were privileged to exploit public fishery resources commercially and that to carry on doing so they would have to comply with fisheries legislation as determined by

the owners, the public. If they didn't like that, they could go and find another occupation.

Regrettably, across Europe, including the UK, the entire process of formulating fisheries policy and management measures has become totally industry centric and in short, the foxes have been left in charge of the hen house. And how has that situation been allowed to develop?

For evil to prosper, all that is needed is for good men to remain silent. In other words, there has been insufficient engagement with the public in fisheries issues and over time, politicians, scientists, civil servants and above all, fishermen, have lost sight of the fact that the fish and the marine environment are societal and part of our natural heritage.

For far too long, the RSA community has remained silent and has failed to collectively provide the necessary resources to represent its interests. Far greater numbers of anglers and all those who supply the goods and services consumed by RSA need to stand up and be counted.. That means engaging with politicians, with Government, civil servant, with IFCA's etc. It is that representation I'm most keen to see happen so I don't regard what I do as just conservation but improving recognition of the validity and value of RSA and ensuring we have a fair say in the process of formulating fisheries policy and management measures

Essentially the fish are ours as much as any one's and it's high time our voice was at the table, loud and clear, and being listened to.

Malcolm Gilbert

