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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Sea bass must be kept for anglers, experts say

Kevin Dowling Published: 30 November 2014



Sea bass could disappear from British waters through overfishing (Nathan Jones/Corbis)

EXPERTS have called for a ban on trawlermen catching sea bass after a study revealed that anglers provide a boost to the economy more than three times greater, even though they account for a fraction of the fish caught.

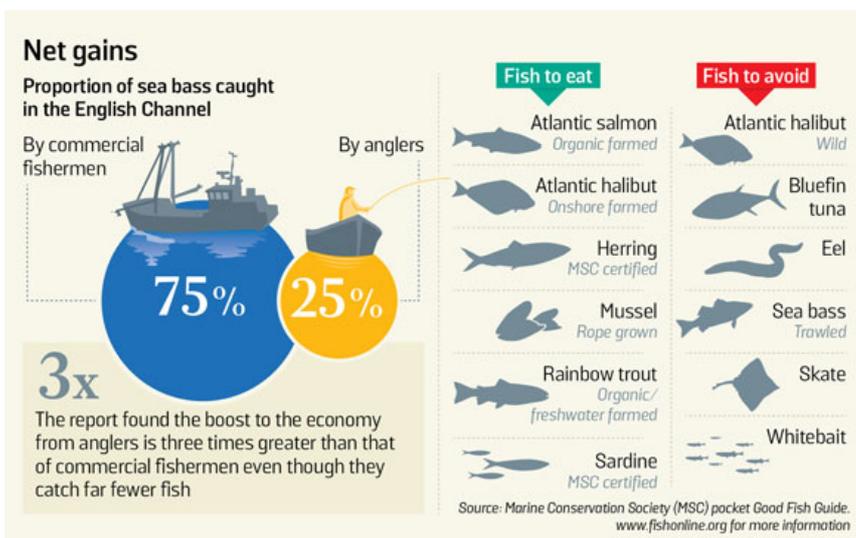
Making sea bass the exclusive preserve of leisure fishermen would generate many times more money and jobs while allowing stocks to recover from dangerously low levels.

Sea bass are the most popular fish among anglers because they put up a fight and taste good, but experts have warned unless drastic action is taken they could disappear from British waters through overfishing.

Earlier this year the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, a scientific body that reviews fish stocks, recommended an 80% cut in the sea bass catch next year. The EU has proposed anglers should be fined if they catch and keep more than one sea bass a day, despite strong evidence that commercial fishermen, particularly French trawlers, are responsible for the decline.

Schemes in other countries where fishing has been restricted to anglers have boosted tourism and restored fish stocks.

MRAG, the fisheries consultancy, studied activity on the Sussex coast to measure the economic value of commercial and leisure fishermen.



It found anglers in Sussex spent £31.3m on tackle, boats and accommodation in 2012 and created the equivalent of 353 full-time jobs. Commercial landings during the same period generated only £9.25m and 111 full-time jobs, even though the volume of fish caught was many times greater.

Three-quarters of all bass caught in the English Channel is landed by commercial fishermen with French fleets accounting for half, British fleets taking 14% and Holland and Belgium taking the rest. Around a quarter of all bass caught in the English Channel is taken by recreational fishermen.

The report says that as well as delivering the lowest economic benefit, commercial fishing causes significant environmental damage. Dolphins and porpoises get caught in the nets and other fish get unintentionally caught including rare species. By contrast, recreational fishing is said to cause almost no environmental harm, apart from the removal of the fish or the death of some of those thrown back in by anglers.

Charles Clover, a Sunday Times columnist and chairman of the Blue Marine Foundation, which commissioned the study, said: "The overwhelming economic, environmental and democratic logic of what the report says is that we should only be fishing for bass with hooks, especially when stocks are on the verge of collapse."

He pointed to a ban on commercial fishing of bass introduced by the Irish government in 1990, which had boosted angling tourism. Similar schemes introduced in the US had led to many former commercial fishermen switching to a new livelihood catering for angling tourists.

Barrie Deas, chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, said: "Of all the sea bass fished in the English Channel at present, roughly 30% is taken by targeted commercial fishing, 30% by anglers and the rest as commercial by-catch. Therefore a ban on commercial fishing of sea bass would not only be unfair but also impractical."

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 Charles Clover

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