

North Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee Sea Bass



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DATE CERTIFIED 3 December 2007

SPECIES Sea bass
(*Dicentrarchus labrax*)

FISHING METHOD Intertidal fixed gill nets

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



Between low- and high-water marks on the Holderness coast of north-east England, UK, from Flamborough Head lighthouse to Spurn Point

FISHERY TONNAGE 7 tonnes

THIS UNSPOILT STRETCH of the Yorkshire coast is the marine equivalent of Piccadilly Circus, with migratory sea bass, sea trout and salmon making their seasonal passage off the Flamborough Head cliffs. Of these, sea bass was least protected by byelaws until local fishermen opted for MSC certification.

The taking of salmonids (salmon and sea trout) during the summer months had always been well controlled, but sea bass in winter was a different matter. "There was no regulation in most of the district between November and March," says David McCandless, Chief Fishery Officer for the North Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee (NESFC). "It was pretty much an open season."

Low impact fishing

However, the fishing method had a very low impact on the seabed and the wider environment. This is beach net fishing, in which nets with cork floats and a weighted groundrope are set at low tide, running up to 180m straight out from the beach and anchored. As the tide comes in, they assume their proper shape for fishing and are cleared twice a day when the tide goes out.

The gear is highly selective, targeting the size and species intended with an occasional bycatch of sole, cod and whiting – all of which are retained and marketed, apart from under size fish. These are mainly small whiting, peaking at five to ten fish per tide in the autumn and dropping away sharply after that. In four years, no live seals, porpoises or other cetaceans have been caught – and large sea mammals are rarely seen in these shallow waters unless it is due to unexplained stranding or sickness. Despite this, the Holderness fishermen had voluntarily fitted acoustic "pingers" to their nets – small electronic devices that emit a regular sonic noise to scare cetaceans away.

While the accidental netting of sea birds (mainly guillemots) had been observed, the incidence was low and the fishery had very few adjustments to make to meet the MSC standard. It was pretty

much sustainable anyway.

Tangible environmental benefits

However, it is the changes made as a condition of certification that have brought the most tangible benefits for the environment. The main one has been the implementation of a new byelaw, limiting fixed-net permits to just five fishermen (for a district running from the River Tyne in the north to the River Humber in the south, a distance of about 100 miles) between mid-October and April. Each would have to submit a monthly catch report, detailing the species and weight of all fish caught off the Holderness beaches – including bycatch. The aim was to monitor all impacts on the marine environment, not just those on the target species.

"If it hadn't been for the MSC, we wouldn't have considered requirements like these for our fisheries regulations," says McCandless, candidly. "All the improvements will help strengthen the fishery and its future management."

Market benefits

What he also hoped was that fishermen would find themselves in a stronger market position if their product carried the MSC label. As anticipated, they have racked up premiums of up to 25 per cent (compared to local values prior to certification) when selling to top London restaurants.

A future for fisheries

Frank Powell, 55, has fished since he was 15 – from Hull-based trawlers ploughing the seas off Iceland and Greenland, as well as the East Riding's beaches. He, too, is glad the sea bass fishery is MSC certified. At a time when inshore fisheries in Britain are threatened with closure, he says, "It may help prolong the life of ours. We can say, 'We are sustainable. It is proven that we are, so why shut us down?' It gives us something to fight with."

Less theoretical is his propulsion into the media firmament and the world of celebrity chefs. "We've had the BBC here," he says – "and you know that Tom Aikens from down where you are? He stopped at our house for the night."

“ The MSC assessment has driven and speeded up our management improvements. It gave us the impetus to move our plan forward more quickly. We simply could not have achieved this without the MSC ”

David McCandless, Chief Fishery Officer, NESFC

“ What the MSC does is bring all these like-minded people together and give them a sense of direction, a sense of community. Nowhere have I seen this more than with the the sea bass fishermen of Bridlington ”

Caroline Bennett, Restaurateur and Owner of the Moshi Moshi sushi chain



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