

Program Impacts

Ekofish Group North Sea plaice



This fishery is an example of how – in the absence of formal regulations – the impacts of bottom-trawling on vulnerable seabed habitat can be managed through voluntary agreements between fishermen and NGO stakeholders. It shows how the MSC program encourages partnership-based change in ecosystem management.

The fishery

- The Ekofish North Sea plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*) fishery uses large-mesh twin rigged otter trawls to target North Sea plaice. Initially the certificate covered a fleet of five UK-registered vessels owned by Dutch companies.
- Following certification, eight Danish vessels joined the certificate. Collectively these vessels have a joint catch quota of 5,000 metric tonnes. This is about seven per cent of the European Total Allowable Catch for North Sea plaice.
- This is a seasonal fishery from April to December and the main markets are in north-western Europe.

Current status

The fishery was certified to the MSC standard in June 2009.

Main sustainability issues

The main issues identified in the pre-assessment report were:

- Potential significant impacts from the fishing gear on vulnerable seabed habitats in proposed Natura 2000 (European Birds and Habitats Directive) areas for which no management plan had yet been implemented.
- Potential impacts from bycatch of North Sea cod (European recovery plan) and other commercial and non-target species.

Work undertaken

The fishery took a number of actions to improve their fishery's management so that they would meet the MSC standard.

- **Bycatch:** During the assessment period the fishery introduced technical measures to reduce unwanted bycatch and, as a condition of certification, the fishery will be making further improvements to minimize bycatch of undersized cod and other species.
- **Data:** A condition of certification requires the fishery to undertake an extensive catch-data sampling program (including discards).
- **Habitat:** As the use of twin rigs in the plaice fishery is a relatively new development, the impacts of the gear on the seabed are not yet fully understood. The assessment of the Ekofish gear configuration in combination with knowledge about the characteristics of the seabed indicated that there was no likely irreversible harm. As a condition to certification, the fishery needs to define the impact the fishing gear may have on the seabed and the life it supports and develop a spatial management plan to manage any identified significant impacts.
- **Closed areas:** As fishing also takes place in proposed Natura 2000 sites for which a formal management plan is still being developed by the national government authorities, the certifier gave a recommendation to include closed areas as part of the spatial management plan. Recommendations are not binding. The MSC assessment process led however to a voluntary agreement between the Ekofish Group and environmental NGO stakeholders to close certain sensitive areas for the Ekofish Group fishery. To underline its commitment to this voluntary agreement, Ekofish Group asked the certifier to monitor this recommendation, as well as the areas agreed, as if it were a condition. This means that non-compliance can result in suspension of the certificate.

“We changed our entire enterprise and made radical changes as we are convinced that there is only a future for sustainable fisheries. With MSC certification we could validate that we did the right thing.”

Louwe de Boer, General Manager of Ekofish Group

Other positive developments

As a direct result of the progress made to get certified to the MSC standard, there are some positive additional findings:

- Eight Danish vessels joined the certificate which means that they also have to comply with the management improvements that resulted from the certification, including the closure of fishing grounds to protect vulnerable seabed communities.
- The Dutch government is developing a management framework for fishing grounds that are designated as Natura 2000 sites. In the policy discussions, the Ekofish Group case has been used by NGOs and fisheries as an example of how tailor-made management can be implemented to balance environmental and economic interest.
- In September 2010, the Osprey Group North Sea plaice fishery was certified. This is a similar fishery to the Ekofish Group. The areas that have been closed to the Ekofish Group are now also closed to Osprey Trawlers by means of a binding condition. This means that the level of protection for vulnerable seabed communities has further increased.
- Assisted by a regional grant and in co-operation with the fisheries school in their village, Ekofish Group has refurbished their flag vessel PD147. The fishing vessel is now also a training vessel for young fishermen. The Ekofish Group management felt that it was important to raise awareness of sustainable fishing practices among young fishermen.

- As a result of their increasing environmental awareness and in anticipation of animal welfare concerns amongst some NGOs and consumers, Ekofish Group is working together with a consultancy firm to develop more humane slaughtering techniques to be used on board.

The Ekofish Group's commitments resulting from their MSC certification demonstrate that positive changes to responsible fisheries management do not stop at certification and even go beyond it.

“Throughout the certification process, we worked closely together with WWF Netherlands and other NGOs to address sustainability concerns. We agreed voluntarily on area closures as part of the ongoing certification and to participate in scientific research into the effects of our trawls on those habitats.”

Louwe de Boer, General Manager of Ekofish Group

