

Subject: Bass Bag Limits

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Sir

In response to the article in the JEP dated 30th May 2009 regarding the proposed introduction of bag limits for bass. I would like to make the following observations:

1. There can be no doubt that the bass stocks around Jersey are in decline and whilst I would welcome bag limits, 5 fish per angler per day is pretty generous, I believe the proposed introduction is being driven by the commercial sector rather than for any conservation reason and is seen as a means of protecting the profits of the commercial fishing sector rather than fish stocks.

2. I have recently spent 3 months travelling in Australia, New Zealand and the USA. All these countries have bag limits for certain species which are accepted by anglers. However, the reason they are accepted is probably because they have been implemented as part of a package to protect fish stocks. These include realistic Minimum Landing Sizes which allow the fish to breed before they can be kept, closed seasons to allow the fish to breed, Marine Reserves where no fishing of any type is allowed (in NZ the maximum fine for any infringement is \$NZ150,000), Maximum Landing Sizes to allow the bigger stronger fish to be released to breed thus ensuring a healthier, stronger stock, and certain species of fish which are classed as recreational fishing only. Jersey, and the rest of the UK are lagging far behind in any effort to protect stocks and the bass in particular are at the mercy of the commercial fishermen. If bag limits are to be implemented locally it should be part of a strategic plan to protect stocks.

3. Whilst in the years up to 2006 the bass catches remained fairly steady, 2007 saw a huge decline. In 2006 almost 31 tons were caught. In 2007 this had dropped to 18 tons. This is a staggering 41% deficit in one year. In fact wetfish catches were down a total of 60 tons on the previous year but Fisheries only briefly mentioned this in their report stating - "*while a real drop in catches no doubt occurred some of the recorded drop **may** be down to new data gathering systems*". I met with Dr. Bossy, Senior Fisheries and Marine Resources Officer in October 2008 who stated that it would be difficult to bring in any legislation regarding an increase in Minimum Landing Size or a close season for bass because '*the stocks are healthy*'. Although I have yet to see the Fisheries Report for 2008, Dr. Bossy informs me that bass catches for last year are up 10.5% on the previous year and states that stocks '*appear to be holding up*'. Although by my reckoning that would still make the catches down almost 30% on what they were in 2006 so not what I would really call 'holding up'. The increase of 10.5% may be down to increased effort by the commercial sector - certainly on the SE coast I have never seen such a large amount of netting or such huge lengths of net being used.

3. The bass catches recorded do not tell the whole picture. There are now fewer and fewer larger fish around, and the larger fish tend to be females. These fish are important to the future of bass stocks because they tend to produce more robust young which are more likely to survive. Most fish now tend to be school bass up to about 3lb in weight although the majority probably are around the 2lb mark or less. Our bass stocks are now mirroring what happened to the striped bass fishery on the eastern seaboard of the United States in the late 1970's and early 80's. Due to overfishing too many large females were caught leaving the population vulnerable. The larger the fish the more eggs it is able to carry so with fewer larger fish the bass stocks plummeted. The US government and local

fishery departments introduced stringent measures in particular in relation to Minimum Landing Sizes and Maximum Landing Sizes and a bag limit of 1 fish per day remains in force in most states - there was also strict limits on commercial fishing. Farmed fish were also introduced into the wild to supplement the remaining stock. As a result the fishery recovered and is now thriving. This in turn has generated increased tourism with recreational fishermen travelling from all over the world visiting these areas for the fishing and often bringing their families. The benefit the economy is far more than the initial expectations with angler expenditure rising from US\$85 million (1981) to US\$560m in 1996 - it is now estimated to have reached 2 billion.

4. While other developed countries have adopted the aforementioned strategies, Jersey and the rest of Europe (except Wales and Southern Ireland) have a minimum landing size for bass of just 36 cm. At this size the bass has not reached sexual maturity so the fish does not have a chance to breed even once before it is of legal size to be landed. There is no maximum landing size. Dr. Bossy states he is not against an increase in the minimum landing size but argues that he does not see what benefit it would have as the bass are an "English Channel fish" and therefore travel around. He also has concerns about enforcement issues, however surely there are enforcement issues with any introduction of bag limits and that hasn't stopped this proposal being put forward. I have a lot I could say about enforcement by the Fisheries Department, which frankly I feel is wholly inadequate, but that is not currently the issue in question.

5. In my experience there are bass around Jersey's shore all year round, in fact I have had some of my best catches in January and February. So whilst bass may move around we do have a lot that remain in these waters and we need to protect these fish, even more so in the winter months - January to March - when they are breeding and a closed season should be introduced.

6. In January 2009 the Bass Anglers Sportfishing Society issued a press release relating to a study which showed an alarming reduction in the number of juvenile bass in the nursery areas on the south coast of the UK which indicated a collapse in recruitment in recent years. The recent harsh winter would have only added to the existing problem. It was also revealed that bass landings in Brittany had fallen by 40% in 2007. As the Breton catches were down 40%, being a similar figure to the local findings this tends to support that the bass stocks are in serious trouble.

7. The Coastal Zone Management Strategy identifies the need for sustainability of our fish stocks, however we continue to allow bass to be landed when they are not old enough to breed, we allow the landing of the large fish which are so important to the survival of the fishery and we allow bass to be caught during their breeding season. This is not sustainable, it is the steady destruction of what once was a superb fishery. Bag limits do need to be introduced and backed up with a heavy fine for any persistent offender. However if the bass stocks are to be protected, bag limits imposed in isolation are not the answer. This is merely a step to appease the commercial sector, who are much more responsible for the depletion of the stocks than recreational fishermen. The sea is a public domain and commercial fishermen do not have exclusive rights to it.

8. Finally, yesterday I spoke with a fellow angler who like me has fished for bass for the past 30 years. The first words he said to me as we both brought our boats in from a days fishing were 'Dead isn't it'. I had to agree with him, there are areas which always used to hold bass that are now totally devoid of fish. Yesterday he had caught nothing, although I practice 'catch and release' from the

3 small bass I caught, I could legally have kept 2 had I been so inclined as they were (just) over the 36cm limit. We discussed the problem and tried to think what had been done locally to protect the bass stocks - we both came up with the same answer - absolutely nothing.

Regards

Derek Buesnel.