

Economic Affairs Scrutiny Panel

Following your invitation (JEP28th May 2009) to hear the views of the general public on 'bag limits' for leisure anglers, I would like to submit the following thoughts on the matter.

Firstly it might be of interest to know that I wrote regular weekly angling columns for various publications including the Jersey Evening Post over a period of some 30 years. I spent several years as a sea angling charter skipper in Scotland and have held several committee positions in Jersey angling clubs.

One point the Panel may wish to keep in mind is:

Unless the 'bag limit' proposal is based on sound scientific research Jersey anglers and the community at large will find the proposition very difficult to accept. Environmental laws are not normally based on assumptions and it would be expected that any new legislation is based on scientific research. Is this the case?

The pressure on bass

Every 'Gastro Pub' in London, let alone Jersey and Guernsey hotels, restaurants and pubs, highlight (sea) bass as a 'special'. If we then consider the rest of the UK, this once low-profile species is suddenly under massive pressure to meet demand. Needless to say this demand is *not* met by anglers; it is met through commercial fishing.

Throughout the 1960s the size limit for bass was 32 cm. Scientists told the commercial fishing industry that the minimum breeding size of bass was 38 cm. At that time it was sea anglers who fought to increase the minimum size. It took a decade to increase the minimum size and then it was only increased to 36 cm – still below the recommended breeding minimum.

Bass is not a species capable of sustaining such pressure. Outside the Channel Islands the growth rate alone suggests that without the support of imported 'farmed bass', increased minimum sizes and careful monitoring, the wild Atlantic bass will be replaced by a lesser species on the 'Daily Specials' boards throughout Britain.

Underlining this is the recent recommendation by Sainsbury that pollack is a gourmet's delight (although they've changed the name for marketing purposes). One would need to ask the average angler's opinion regarding the pollack's culinary qualities before rushing to the local fishmonger but taste apart, pollack is probably even less sustainable as a commercial species than bass. Most anglers would describe it as a 'feed for the cat'.

Shore Angling

Firstly I think there must be a distinction between boat anglers and shore anglers. Taking five bass from the shore at any time of year would represent 'best day ever' for the vast majority of shore anglers so bag limits would have almost no affect on either the shore angler or the livelihood of commercial fishermen. I believe that as long as size limits are maintained and regularly reviewed, shore anglers could confidently be excluded from the 'bag limit' proposal.

Boat Angling

Leisure angling for bass from boats proves much more productive because the natural habitat of the bass can be reached more easily and fished for longer periods. The natural food of bass, especially during summer - shoaling sand eel and white bait - can be followed resulting in more fish. There might be a case for some form of limit on leisure craft catch where a dozen bass per rod is not unusual. Here an argument for raising the minimum size limit of boat-caught bass rather than a 'bag limit' might be an alternative solution.

Semi-Professional Status

There is a serious difference between leisure boat angling and semi-professional fishermen who fish for bass from boats. They could be termed week-end professionals. They will fish commercially for bass in order to make a profit; pay for their boat, cover the cost of fuel and insurance; cover the cost of moorings; covering the cost of nets and fishing equipment. It seems that these fishermen are the ones causing most concern among commercial fishermen so it makes little sense to suggest bag limits should apply to all sections of the angling community.

Commercial V Leisure Take

Shore anglers consider a couple of good fish (and not necessarily bass) 'a good day'. Asking them to accept a 'bag limit' on the grounds that "it is designed to protect the interests of commercial fishermen" is a very hard pill for them to swallow in the light of the Island's commercial record on unsustainable fishing. From a Jersey point of view, though distant, 'the cod banks' are a good example and, more locally the 19th Century 'Oyster fishery' is another historic example of fishing to destruction. In the 20th Century plaice and spider crabs were almost wiped out by unsustainable commercial fishing during the 1960s and during the 1970s black bream almost disappeared from Jersey waters and are only now back in reasonable numbers. It took more than a fishing rod to accomplish such a record

Anglers, not the Government were instrumental in supplying bass scales to the UK for scientific research which led to the discovery that bass growth rate in Jersey was three times that of fish in the UK. Anglers are no different to other dedicated groups in that they take their pastime seriously and the majority are protective of the environment in which they fish. They are also extremely knowledgeable about the fish they seek.

Anglers will wish to know:

- On what scientifically based research did the need for 'Bag Limits' arise? When was the research carried out and where were the results published?
- What research has been carried out on the bass fishery off Guernsey and do we know whether the take from this commercial fishing (25 tons per boat per night have been recorded) is affecting Channel Island stocks?
- How have sustainably acceptable commercial catch rates been calculated?
- If there is an officially accepted commercial catch rate regarded as sustainable, which organisation set the limit?
- Why is there no States-run, bass-tagging project designed to find out exactly what is happening to Jersey bass stocks. Jersey anglers are perfectly aware that past tagging efforts have been limited through lack of funding to individual anglers. To make such a project work for the benefit of the bass, serious States funding needs to be invested – 'invested' being the operative word.

(Mr P Double – added by officer)