

Politics is driving fish stocks to collapse

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Cod waiting to be sold in a fish market.

Stocks of fish like cod and herring are likely to collapse within 40 years if European fisheries ministers continue to ignore scientific recommendations on how much fish should be caught each year, warn researchers.

They add that costly reforms to the Common [Fisheries](#) Policy, due to take place in 2012, are likely to be doomed unless quotas are based on sound science rather than politics.

The researchers analysed the extent to which agreements negotiated among European ministers are based on scientific recommendations on how much fish should be caught – to sustain stocks – from 1987 to 2011. These are known as total allowable catches (TACs). They focussed on 11 types of fish, including staples like cod, plaice and haddock. The study is the most comprehensive analysis of European fisheries yet.

They found that total allowable catches were set higher than recommended in over two-thirds of cases. And, on average, officials adjusted TACs to be 33 per cent higher than recommended by fisheries experts.

In the Spain, Portugal and the Bay of Biscay fisheries zone, the TAC for hake was set 1100 per cent higher than scientists proposed in 1993. At the other end of the spectrum, the researchers discovered that Iceland's politicians are much more likely to heed scientific advice.

"Productive and sustainable fisheries will not be achieved if fisheries ministers' cavalier disregard for scientific advice continues. Such behavior virtually guarantees the collapse of fish stocks according to our model," says Bethan O'Leary from the University of York, lead author of the study, published in *Marine Pollution Bulletin*.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) came into force in 1983 to manage fish stocks for the European Union as a whole, and to put an end to disputes over fishing territories, and how much fish should be caught. The idea was to create a thriving and sustainable European fishing industry.

Yet, despite the policy having now been in place for nearly 30 years, this complex and expensive system is one the world's least successful. As a result, many stocks are now seriously depleted. Reforms made in 2002 to make the system more sustainable made little difference. There was a sharp increase in the number of moratoria advised after 2002, but this zero-catch advice wasn't followed once.

"Failure to follow scientific advice is a major weakness, and possibly a fatal flaw, of the CFP," says Professor Callum Roberts from the University of York, co-author of the study.

At the moment, TACs and quotas are the cornerstone of fisheries management, with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) making recommendations on suitable catches to the European Commission. Fisheries ministers are then supposed to base TACs on these figures.

"This decision-making process has led to the paradox of ministers protecting their national interests, while at the same time trying to allocate quotas among member states for mutual benefit and to achieve conservation goals," says O'Leary. "Ministers end up arguing about fishermen, not fish."

Media focus on discards

Lately, the media has focussed heavily on discards, and incentives like catch shares, which are supposed to encourage the industry to [fish](#) more responsibly. But, "none of these measures will succeed in achieving sustainability unless the process for catch allocation is reformed to place science at the heart of decision-making," says O'Leary.

"Without a legal remit to follow science, they won't," she explains. "Politicians are subjected to strong socio-economic pressures and often argue that there's inherent uncertainty in the scientific recommendations to avoid reducing quotas."

But when O'Leary and her colleagues calculated the probability of stock collapse, they found that, despite the uncertainties, following scientific advice reduces the risk of collapse and promotes sustainability.

"How quickly the stocks disappeared in our simulations was probably the biggest surprise for us," she says.

According to one estimate, in 2003 the EU spent \$1 billion promoting

resource conservation in fisheries through scientific research, stock assessments and in ensuring compliance with regulations and quota allocations. "If the science is sidelined, you've got to ask: is this just a waste of money?" Roberts says.

She suggests that decision-making under the CFP should engage in a wider debate on the proper role of science in the management of renewable resources.

"Competitive bargaining doesn't work. It's already led to quotas for Atlantic bluefin tuna being so over-inflated that they're now delivering what many see as the institutionalised extinction of a species."

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More information: Bethan C. O'Leary, et al., Fisheries mismanagement, *Fisheries mismanagement*, published online 21 October 2011, [doi:10.1016/j.marpolbul.2011.09.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2011.09.032)

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