North West Wildlife Trusts

North West Wildlife Trusts position statement

January 2022

Sustainable Fishing and Seafood in the North West

Introduction

Recent media attention on the fishing industry has prompted many people to consider the impact of fishing on the environment, and their seafood choices. This position statement provides clarity on the North West (NW) Wildlife Trusts view on sustainable fishing in the Irish Sea and choices of seafood for local consumption.

Background

Healthy marine ecosystems are vital for our coastal communities' economy, wellbeing and culture. Although fishing is only one of many activities and industries in our marine and intertidal areas that puts pressure on habitats and ecosystems, many scientific studies agree that a large proportion of fish populations are overexploited as a result of fishing, and that many fisheries use methods that are damaging to marine ecosystems. Films such as 'Seaspiracy' have challenged the misuse of terms like 'sustainable', and call for radical action to create a better future. Daniel Pauly, a renowned fisheries scientist, said that, "there are too many examples of unsustainable fishing around the world, however, there are also well managed fisheries that rely on data and science".

The NW Wildlife Trusts back the government's vision for "clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas". However, landings of demersal fish (including sole, cod, plaice and whiting) have plummeted over 90% since the 1980s (see annex 1). As whitefish populations have dwindled, there has been an increasing emphasis placed on the Dublin Bay prawn and scallop fisheries, which are now the most economically important fisheries in the Irish Sea. The NW Wildlife Trusts are working hard to prevent further habitat degradation, wildlife loss and overexploitation, in order to allow the Irish Sea to recover to Living Seas and former levels of productivity.

What is sustainable fishing?

Sustainable fishing is a term that should be used to describe fishing that is well managed, and has minimal impact on the environment and other marine species that are not being targeted. The objective is to sustain healthy marine ecosystems and the fisheries that they support. Unfortunately, it is a word that is often misused and often one of more of the key elements to sustainability is neglected or overlooked. Marine ecosystems can be incredibly productive and, when healthy, they are one of the most efficient ways to obtain protein for human consumption. However, if too many fish are removed or if an ecosystem is damaged, the system becomes vastly less efficient and cannot be sustained long-term.

All fishing has an impact of some kind. However, there is a big difference in the impact of large-scale fishing methods, such as industrial trawling or dredging, and smaller-scale fishing using a wide array of low-impact methods, such as pots and lines or hand gathering. In addition to impacting target species, fishing can also negatively affect non-target species (including marine mammals and seabirds) through bycatch and entanglement. There are a number of ways that fishing can be restricted or modified to reduce its ecological impact and to provide long-term benefits to fisheries (and the fishing industry) by ensuring a healthy marine environment that can support them into the future, for example:

Fishing effort limitations:

- **Vessel or permit restrictions –** The number and/or size of vessels or fishers accessing a fishery is limited;
- **Spatial management –** Areas of the sea or seabed are closed to fishing to allow protected or supporting habitats, fish populations and other marine life to recover;
- **Temporal management** – Restrictions placed on the timing of fishing activities to prevent fish from being caught at key times of year or day (for instance when spawning), or to limit the number of days or tides that can be fished;

Catch limitations:

- **Quotas, Total Allowable Catch or Bag Limits** – Local, national and international restrictions to limit fishing through the amount of the target species that can be caught;
- **Bycatch limitations** – Restrictions such as the Landings Obligation force and limit the amount of all quota species that can be caught (including bycatch) to prevent unwanted catch from being discarded for higher value catch;

Modification of gear:

- **Modifying gear -** (e.g. changing mesh sizes or using excluding devices) can reduce effects of non-target species or size classes;
- **Gear diversification** - switching to different fishing methods (e.g. from bottom trawls to creels) can limit bycatch and reduce other environmental impact of fishing activities;
- **Minimising the loss of gear and reducing the amount of fishing line in the water** - (e.g. by switching to non-tethered creels) can reduce entanglement.

There is a great opportunity to use science to guide decisions on the requirements to implement some or all of the measures above through species/habitat monitoring and population modelling. Ultimately, this will help sustain healthy seas and commercial fisheries. The NW Wildlife Trusts advocate the use of these methods and their enforcement, where appropriate, to improve fisheries management in the Irish Sea.

Current position statement from the North West Wildlife Trusts

It is difficult to achieve truly sustainable fishing – there will always be some negative impacts. However, the Trusts acknowledge that fishing is part of the cultural heritage of the North West, offers a healthy source of food, and provides jobs in fishing, processing and retail. As such, the NW Wildlife Trusts feel that there are huge gains to be made towards conserving our seas by working with the fishing industry, the UK Government and its agencies to help create effective improvements to fisheries, as well as working to inform consumer choice.

As wildlife conservation charities, our main aim is to protect nature and aid its recovery by challenging unsustainable practices and damaging activities. The NW Wildlife Trusts support action towards reducing the environmental impacts of fishing because the Trusts recognise the devastating impact that unsustainable fishing practices can have upon key habitats, fish populations and other marine life. As such, the NW Wildlife Trusts believe that the best way to reduce the impact that fishing has on our seas is to continue the current approach of:

a) working with fishers to help them adapt, diversify and reduce the impact of their activity;
b) lobbying for better management of our fishing industry, to ensure long-term viability and reduce environmental impacts;
c) raising awareness of sustainability issues with consumers, fishers, chefs and fish sellers; and

d) campaigning for an effective network of Marine Protected Areas (including those with no extractive fishing activities such as Highly Protected Marine Areas) to conserve and restore habitats and wildlife, which will have positive effects beyond their boundaries, as thriving wildlife and fish populations spill over to the surrounding sea.

The Trusts openly state which activities are not compatible with the conservation, protection and restoration of wildlife and wildspaces; for example, the use of heavy towed fishing gear. However, rather than campaign against fishing in all forms and engaging in polarising arguments, the NW Wildlife Trusts actively engage with government agencies, such as, the North Western Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authority (NW IFCA), the Marine Management Organisation, Defra and Natural England to highlight areas where improvement is needed to better manage fishing activities and to campaign for an ecologically-coherent and effectively-managed network of Marine Protected Areas.

What are the North West Wildlife Trusts doing?

The NW Wildlife Trusts run projects that aim to improve sustainability and raise awareness among consumers in choosing local seafood caught using low-impact methods. *The Cumbrian Creel project* is an innovative project working with local, small-scale coastal fishers to diversify away from destructive bottom trawling to more sustainable methods like creeling. Trawling involves towing heavy nets for miles across the seabed. These nets take or destroy everything in their path, from fish to other sensitive wildlife. They also destroy vital habitats that are not only important for supporting diverse communities of marine life, but also important carbon stores.

Creel fishing is a low-impact method of catching *Nephrops* (otherwise known as scampi, langoustine or Dublin Bay prawns) using baited pots over a limited area. The pots slowly sink to the seabed without causing damage to the seabed or wildlife. This method also keeps the catch alive and in good condition, meaning that catch can reach a higher market price and that fishers take only the largest individuals, allowing the juveniles, "berried" females (carrying eggs), and any bycatch (non-target species) to be returned to the sea alive to maintain healthy populations. Furthermore, the small boats use less fuel as they don't have to carry and tow heavy nets, so it also helps to reduce carbon emissions.

By supporting creel fishing, the NW Wildlife Trusts are not only helping local, small-scale fishers to diversify their business and adapt to the challenging economic climate, but the Trusts are also encouraging practices that protect the seabed and wildlife. To compliment this sustainable fisheries project, the Trusts are also running a marine awareness project called *My Local Catch* – working with coastal communities, suppliers, retailers, schools and youth groups, to raise awareness of the benefits of locally and sustainably-sourced seafood in the recovery of our seas.

Should we stop eating fish?

Many people take action to stop eating fish and the NW Wildlife Trusts respect that decision. No-one with an environmentally-aware conscience wants to buy fish that supports fishing practices that damage our marine ecosystems. However, it is not realistic to think that everyone globally will stop eating fish and that this is a solution to all fishery issues. Seafood is an important part of the diet of billions of people around the world, particularly in developing countries where it makes up a high proportion of people's income and diet, providing important protein and micronutrients. In the UK, 97% of households regularly eat fish. Therefore, the Trusts are working to make people more aware of the most sustainable options (e.g. small-scale inshore fishing using hook-and-line, pots/creels or hand-gathered methods), to ensure that consumers are given the information needed to support good fishing practices. Rather than pursuing a divisive campaign by calling on all people to stop eating all seafood, the NW Wildlife Trusts urge supporters to use collective power to call on the industry and our government to manage our seas properly.

Annex 1 – ICES Division 7.a. (Irish Sea) estimates of landings. Weights in tonnes

	Sole	Cod	Whiting	Plaice	Norway Lobster
Landings: (late) 1980s	2808	112900	11856	6220	8128
Landings: Recent assessment (2018-2021)	34	181	1118	465	7521
% change	- 98.8%	- 99.8%	- 90.6%	- 92.5%	- 6.6%

Annex 2 – Key fisheries inside (within 6nm of the coast) and outside (beyond 6nm from the coast) the North West District

Species	Gear	Area	Season
Cockle	Hand gathering, occasional dredge if Authority permits	Solway, Morecambe Bay, Ribble, Wirral, Dee Estuary	Closed season 1 May to 31 August
Mussel	Hand gathering size and permitted seed mussel.	Solway, Morecambe Bay, Ribble, Wirral, Dee Estuary	Size mussel anytime. Seed usually summer, autumn
Clams (Razor various species	Hand gathering	Wirral on large tides	Big tides anytime
Shrimp	Nets operated by hand/ tractors/ boats	Solway, Morecambe Bay, Ribble, Dee	Spring to Autumn
Prawn (Nephrops)	Trawl	Cumbria fished inside and outside the District. Landed in Whitehaven	Spring to Autumn
Queen Scallops	Dredge	Outside District - north, outer Solway, Some landed in Whitehaven.	
Whelk	Pots	Outer Solway, Liverpool Bay & outside District	
Sole, Brill, turbot, cod, roker (thornback Ray), dab, fluke, mullet	Trawls; Set nets, Angling	All areas.	All year round
Crab, lobster	Pots	Mainly north of Morecambe Bay	Spring to Autumn
Bass	Nets, Angling	All areas	Summer
Sprat, whitebait,	Nets	Estuaries	Spring to Autumn
Winkles	Hand gathering	Cumbria Coast. Occasionally Morecambe Bay	Summer Autumn
Bait collection	Hand gathering, worm digging, crab tiling	All areas	All year

Source: NW IFCA Eleventh Annual Plan: 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022