

# TAKING STOCK

## The state of UK fish populations 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

 **UK FISH STOCKS  
ARE IN A DEEPLY  
TROUBLING STATE.**

Our report found that over a third of the 104 stocks analysed are being overfished and a quarter have been depleted to critically low sizes, according to the latest scientific assessments. Of the 'top 10' stocks on which the UK fishing industry relies, half are overfished or their stock size is at a critically low level.

To safeguard marine ecosystems, coastal communities and the future of the fishing industry, the UK government must act urgently to end overfishing and meet its national and international biodiversity commitments.



 **MORE THAN A THIRD OF STOCKS ARE BEING OVERFISHED, QUARTER ARE AT A CRITICALLY LOW SIZE.**

Over a third (34%) of the 104 stocks analysed are being overfished and only 45% are sustainably fished. The remainder could not be assessed because of lack of data.

As well as fishing pressure, the analysis assessed stock size, revealing that less than half (41%) are deemed to be of a healthy size and a quarter (25%) are in a critical condition. The health of the remaining stocks could not be determined due to lack of data, leaving them at greater risk of overfishing.

 **ZERO CATCHES ARE ADVISED FOR MULTIPLE STOCKS IN CRISIS.**

This report considers the top five best (sustainably fished and healthy size) and worst (overfished and low size) performing stocks. Compared to the 2020 baseline, four of the five worst performing still have critically low stock sizes and are being overfished.

Three of these five worst performing stocks are in such a state of crisis that a total ban on all catches is advised by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). These stocks are Celtic Sea cod, West of Scotland cod and Irish Sea whiting.

The five best performing stocks are typically caught in comparatively small quantities and are of relatively low economic value.

 **PROGRESS IS LACKING.**

The ongoing political decision to set Total Allowable Catches (TACs) higher than scientifically advised continues to lead to overfishing of North East Atlantic stocks. Comparing changes between the baseline and today, for instance, shows that six stocks that were a healthy size in 2020 have now declined to a critical state, and only three stocks have moved from being critically low to healthy since 2020.

**SUSTAINABLE CATCH LIMITS MEAN HEALTHIER STOCKS.**  

This report confirms that sustainable catch limits lead to healthier fish stocks. For instance, for the five best performing stocks, TACs for 2020-2023 were mainly set in line with ICES scientific advice. However, for four of the five worst performing stocks, TACs were set higher than scientific advice for sustainability.

 **HALF OF THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT STOCKS ARE OVERFISHED OR IN A 'CRITICAL' STATE.**

Of the top 10 stocks landed in greatest volumes by UK vessels, five are being overfished or their population size is critically low. These include North East Atlantic mackerel, North East Atlantic blue whiting, North Sea anglerfish, North Sea cod and Eastern English Channel king scallops.

Therefore only half of the top stocks on which the UK fishing industry relies are both of a healthy size and sustainably fished. These stocks are North Sea herring, haddock, whiting, saithe and Nephrops.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

These results show that fisheries management in the UK is far from reaching the 'gold standard' that the government is aiming to achieve. Continued exploitation exceeding sustainable limits not only puts fish populations at risk,

but also everything that relies on them, including marine ecosystems and the fishing industry itself. It is time for the UK to show political leadership in sustainable fisheries both domestically and in international negotiations on shared stocks.

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### OUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT ARE:

- ✓ **SET CATCH LIMITS THAT DO NOT EXCEED THE SCIENTIFIC ADVICE** of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea. Ideally, these catches should remain well below this upper limit to account for wider ecosystem, climate change, discard and bycatch issues.
- ✓ **DEVELOP A CLEAR AND AMBITIOUS STRATEGY TO END OVERFISHING**, deliver sustainable fisheries for future generations, and meet the precautionary objective, as well as providing a timeframe to achieve it.
- ✓ **FULLY IMPLEMENT THE FISHERIES ACT FISHERIES OBJECTIVES**, including ensuring that all Fisheries Management Plans contain clear measures, targets and a timeframe to achieve the Fisheries Act objectives.
- ✓ **ENSURE THAT FISHING OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIXED FISHERIES ARE CONSISTENT WITH SUSTAINABLE EXPLOITATION OF THE MOST DEPLETED STOCKS.**
- ✓ **ENSURE A HIGH STANDARD OF SUSTAINABILITY, TRANSPARENCY AND LEGALITY** of fisheries is met when granting reciprocal access to waters and resources.
- ✓ **PHASE OUT NON-SELECTIVE, CARBON INTENSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE FISHING PRACTICES** (especially bottom-towed fishing gear) in all marine protected areas and an inshore zone within three nautical miles of the coast.

READ THE FULL REPORT AT [UK.OCEANA.ORG/REPORTS](https://uk.oceana.org/reports)



This brief is the executive summary of *Taking Stock: The state of UK fish populations 2023*, produced by Oceana in the UK. To read the full report, visit: [uk.oceana.org/reports](https://uk.oceana.org/reports).



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