

The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP
Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

21st November 2023

Dear Minister,

World Fisheries Day 21st November

We are writing this World Fisheries Day to express our serious concerns regarding the deeply troubling state of the UK's fish populations and urge the government to set sustainable catch limits during this year's fisheries negotiations.

Over a third of UK fish stocks are overfished, and a quarter have been depleted to 'critical' population sizes according to the Oceana UK report [Taking Stock](#), published this autumn. Despite the clear warnings that this and other data have provided, the UK government continues to set catch limits that exceed the independent scientific advice provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). This puts these fish populations, and entire marine ecosystems which depend on them, at serious risk of decline and possible collapse.

In 2023, [57%](#) of the total allowable catches for the UK's staple fish stocks were set higher than advised by ICES, according to the government's own advisers, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science.

Our *Taking Stock* report, examining the majority of UK commercial fish stocks, revealed that over a third are being overfished (34%) and only 45% are sustainably fished: the rest could not be assessed because of lack of data, leaving them at greater risk of overexploitation.

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. UK marine ecosystems and fisheries need an immediate change of course.

We are therefore marking World Fisheries Day, an annual celebration of the importance of fisheries around the world and the vital need to maintain them, by making an urgent plea for the UK government to follow the science and end overfishing.

Continued disregard for scientific advice risks the collapse of key UK fish populations. It is not a question of choosing between supporting industry and safeguarding wildlife: when fish populations collapse, they take with them both the wider marine life and the human livelihoods which depend on them.

Rebuilding thriving fish populations through sensible management decisions and adequate marine protection will safeguard ecosystems, coastal communities and the future of the fishing industry alike.

We therefore call on the UK Government to take urgent action to end overfishing by:

- Committing to set catch limits that do not exceed the scientific advice provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea. Ideally, the government should set catch limits well *below* the upper limit advised by scientists: this would provide a buffer to ensure fish populations are adequately protected from the impacts of climate change, bycatch, and other threats facing the ecosystem alongside direct fishing pressure.
- Developing a clear and ambitious strategy to end overfishing.

The UK government had promised to achieve a gold standard for fisheries management following its exit from the European Union – we hope you will mark World Fisheries Day by delivering on that promise and following the science.

Yours faithfully,

Hugo



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