



APOCALYPSE NOW: THE TRUE COST OF OVERFISHING



**BLUE
MARINE**
FOUNDATION



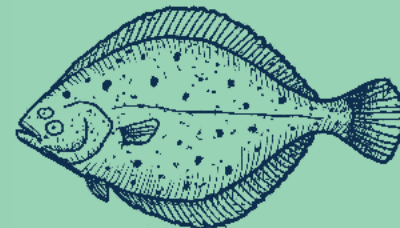
Cod Once the undisputed king of British fisheries, cod is a powerful demersal predator that has shaped the culture, diets and economies of coastal communities for generations. Found across UK waters, it is caught primarily by bottom trawls, longlines and gillnets. Today, this iconic fish, easily recognised by its distinctive “beard”, has become a symbol of the consequences of overfishing.



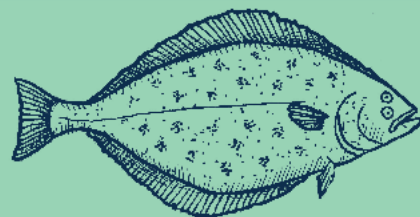
Mackerel A keystone species that lives in huge shoals across the Northeast Atlantic, it plays a vital role in the marine food web and supports one of the largest and most valuable fisheries in Europe. Its recent decline stands as one of the clearest examples of how political decisions can undermine even the most productive fish populations.



Haddock A distinctive member of the cod family, easily recognised by the black “thumbprint” behind its head, haddock is a seabed-dwelling fish found throughout the North Atlantic. Once abundant in all Britain’s waters, its contrasting fortunes across different sea basins provide one of the clearest examples of both the consequences of overfishing and the benefits of sustainable management.



Plaice One of Britain’s most recognisable flatfish, plaice is distinguished by its orange spots and sandy camouflage. Found on the seabed around the UK, it supports valuable commercial fisheries but is also frequently caught alongside other species and discarded, making it an important example of “hidden overfishing”.



Atlantic Halibut The “giant” of the North Atlantic, Atlantic halibut is the largest flatfish in the world, capable of growing well over three metres in length. Slow-growing, late-maturing and long-lived, it is particularly vulnerable to overfishing. Once common enough that a single boat could catch a tonne in a day on the Dogger Bank, it has now virtually disappeared from British waters. What was once a thriving fishery surviving largely as a memory.



Whiting Often overshadowed by its larger cousin cod, whiting is a small, slender-bodied, predatory member of the cod family that is widespread in UK waters. It is particularly vulnerable in mixed fisheries, where large numbers are caught unintentionally while targeting other species. In some areas, such as the Irish Sea, its decline has become a stark illustration of the consequences of overfishing and discarding.

POLITICAL DECISIONS OVER RECENT DECADES HAVE BROUGHT MANY OF THE UK’S FISH POPULATIONS, AND THE FISHERIES DEPENDENT UPON THEM, TO THE POINT OF COLLAPSE. AT THE HEART OF THIS FAILURE LIES CONTINUED AND EXTENSIVE OVERFISHING.



INTRODUCTION

Scan here to read
The Four Horsemen
of the UK Fisheries
Policy Apocalypse
Report:



Overfishing remains the single greatest and most preventable threat facing our seas. It is the primary driver of fish population depletion and the degradation of marine ecosystems. Yet unlike many of the other challenges confronting the marine environment, it can be ended through political will alone. No single action would do more to restore abundance to our seas, rebuild fish populations and secure a healthy ocean for future generations than ending overfishing.

In our previous report, we identified four persistent failures of governance that lie at the heart of British fisheries management: overfishing, failing marine protection, inequitable quotas and harmful subsidies. We called them the 'The Four Horsemen of the UK Fisheries Policy Apocalypse'. Together, they continue to deplete fish populations, drive the degradation of marine ecosystems, breach the Government's international commitments, undermine the long-term prosperity of the fishing industry and threaten the UK's food security.

Although all four horsemen still ride, overfishing is the one driving the apocalypse now.

58%

of fishing quotas in the UK were set above scientifically-advised sustainable levels in 2026.

Current fisheries management in the UK continues to prioritise short-term extraction over long-term sustainability. In 2026, 58 per cent of fishing quotas were set above scientifically advised sustainable levels. Despite repeated commitments to sustainable fisheries management, political decisions continue to allow more fish to be taken from the sea than scientists advise is sustainable.

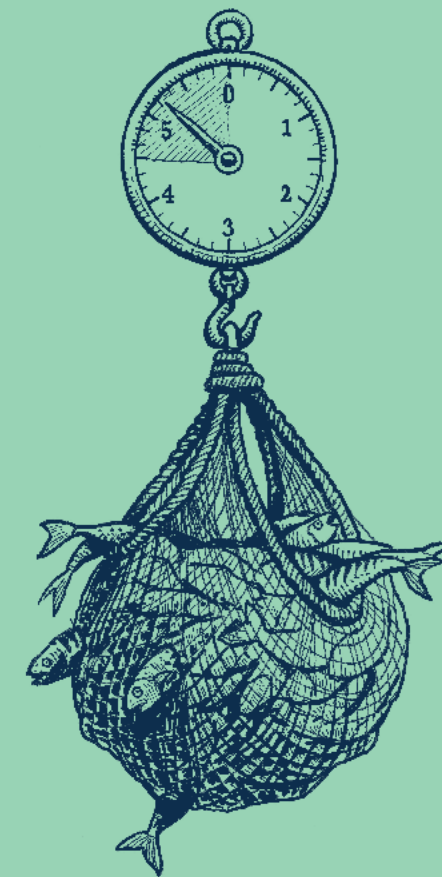
Decades of unsustainable fishing have reduced many fish populations to a fraction of their former abundance. Marine life, fishers,

coastal communities and the wider public are all paying the price. If this continues, we will see further declines in fish populations and our marine environment. These declines in the water will be mirrored by the human cost on land. The small-scale fleet which has long been the backbone of the British fishing industry, will continue to fade away and with them the coastal communities around the country will fall further behind.

Yet these outcomes are not inevitable, it is a political choice to restore or continue to degrade our marine environment.

The ocean has remarkable powers of recovery and simple choices by Government can turn the tide.

As the climate and biodiversity crises intensify, protecting and enhancing the resilience of marine ecosystems can provide a wide range of public benefits including carbon sequestration and flood prevention. Crucially, the ocean can only provide these climate benefits and support a thriving fishing industry when it is healthy and full of life. Therefore, restoring fish populations should be a strategic priority for the UK.



01. Catch Limits

Ensure all catch limits do not exceed scientific advice. Sustainable levels of fishing must be the bedrock of fisheries management. A thriving fishing industry is dependent upon abundant fish populations.



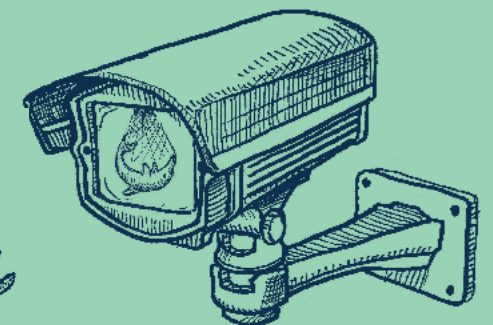
03. Recovery Plan

Implement stock recovery plans for fish populations that are at low levels. Introducing time bound, legally binding recovery plans will enable our most depleted fish stocks to recover.



02. Discards

Account for discards in quota setting. Ensuring discard estimates are factored into quota setting will prevent 'hidden overfishing'.



04. Monitoring

Introduce Remote Electronic Monitoring on fishing vessels. Introduce mandatory cameras on fishing vessels to improve scientific data gathering and monitoring of discards and catch.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report sets out the scale and consequences of continued overfishing in UK waters and recommends that the UK Government:



HISTORY

Overfishing is not a new phenomenon and has long been the primary driver of marine biodiversity loss around the world. In the UK it has driven many fish stocks to the point of total collapse, leaving populations at a tiny fraction of their natural level.

Between 1889 and 2009 the British fishing fleet has declined by **94%**

In the early 20th century, fish populations are estimated to have been 16 to 20 times higher than today¹. Studies show that catch per unit effort, a measure of the number of fish caught relative to fishing power and technological efficiency, fell by 94 per cent between 1889 and 2009², meaning that British vessels expend 17 times more effort to catch the same number of fish.

In 1830, a single sailing boat working the Dogger Bank in the North Sea could catch a tonne of halibut in one day. Today, there are almost no catches of halibut across the entirety of British

waters despite the combined might of the modern British, Dutch, Danish and German industrial fleets. In the North Sea, halibut has declined by 99.8 per cent³.

This pattern of overfishing is driving the decline of fish populations and leading to the inevitable loss of fisheries dependent upon them. This has been repeated time and again around the world. The collapse of fish populations remains the only thing that has consistently caused widespread job losses in the fishing industry.

Brexit: an opportunity missed...so far

Prior to Brexit, Britain's seas were managed under the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), a policy that became a convenient political scapegoat but whose central failure was not its design, but a failure to implement its sustainability components. The CFP required catch limits to be set at sustainable levels, yet this obligation was routinely overridden when short term political pressure from member states, including the UK, was prioritised over the long-term health of fish stocks. The result was predictable: catch limits that exceeded scientific advice and stocks that continued to decline. Tellingly, where catches were below these maximum levels, stocks have grown and fisheries for these species have become more secure.

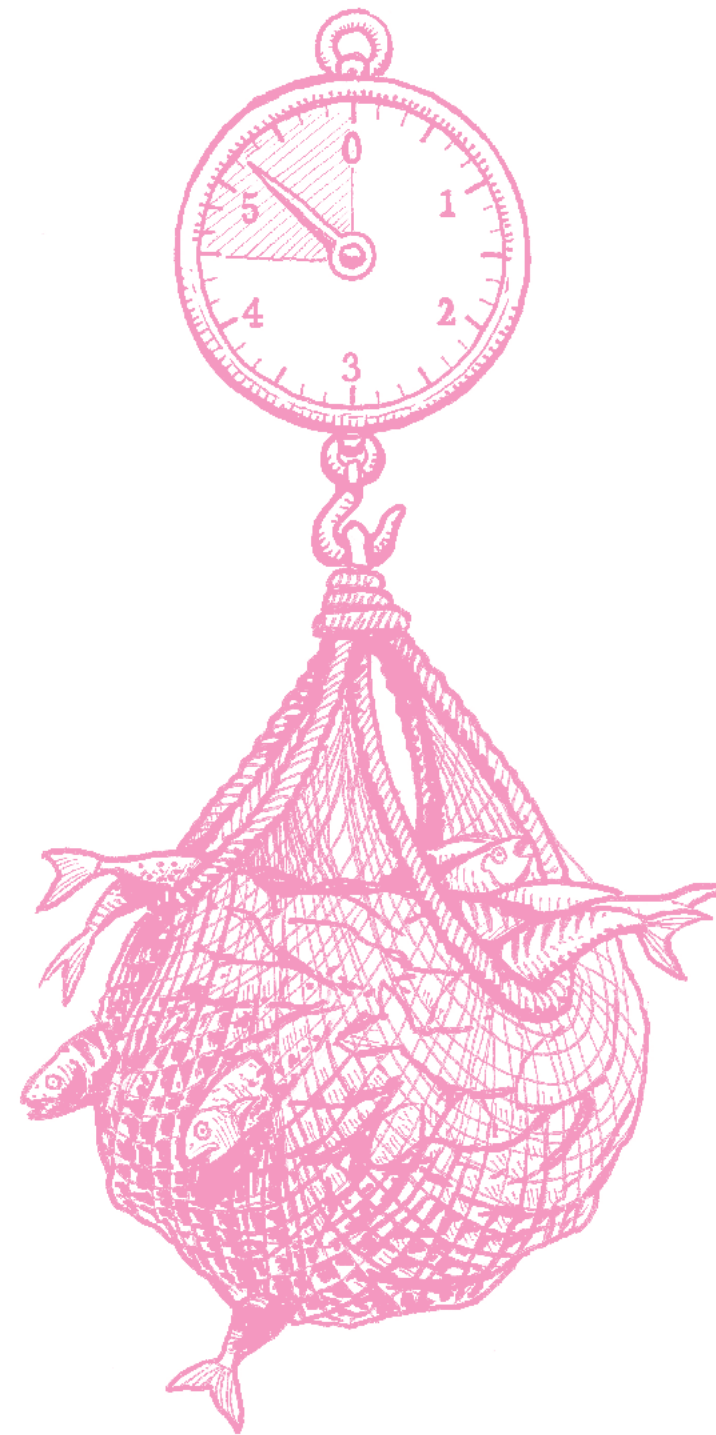
Brexit promised something different. By reclaiming control over its waters, the UK would have greater freedom to manage fisheries sustainably and rebuild depleted stocks. Instead, successive governments have largely replicated

the same flawed approach meaning that since 2016 the overall amount of fish from the 55 stocks assessed for this report has declined by approximately 41 per cent⁴.

This approach carries clear economic penalties. As stocks decline, so too do catches, highlighting the economic cost of declining stock health.

UK fishing opportunities (i.e. the value of the quotas) are worth **£136 million⁴ less in 2026 than in 2025.**

This stark number highlights the economic cost of declining fish stock health. Healthy fish populations are the foundation of a profitable fishing industry. Without sufficient biomass in the water, there are fewer opportunities to fish, lower catches and reduced stability across the sector.



Each Autumn, the UK enters negotiations with other countries to agree catch limits for shared fish populations. Yet the process remains largely opaque. The UK Government does not publish the catch limits it advocates for during negotiations, even after agreements are reached. So when catch limits exceed scientific advice, it is impossible to know whether the UK resisted overfishing, or actively supported it. But what is clear is that the UK continues to agree catch limits that are inconsistent with its own legal and policy commitments to restore fish populations and deliver sustainable fisheries.

Before and after Brexit, the problem has not been the laws themselves, but the failure to implement them.

The State of the stocks

This report shows that since the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016, fish populations in our seas have been in serious decline. We have analysed 55 distinct fish stocks⁵ around the UK and found that 62 per cent of fish stocks have declined since 2016.

67%

of fish stocks have declined since scientists began measuring them.

1. Thurstan RH, Brockington S, Roberts CM. The effects of 118 years of industrial fishing on UK bottom trawl fisheries. Nat Commun. 2010 May 4;1:15.
2. Thurstan RH, Brockington S, Roberts CM. The effects of 118 years of industrial fishing on UK bottom trawl fisheries. Nat Commun. 2010 May 4;1:15.
3. Thurstan RH, Brockington S, Roberts CM. The effects of 118 years of industrial fishing on UK bottom trawl fisheries. Nat Commun. 2010 May 4;1:15.

4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/economic-outcomes-of-negotiations-for-uk-fishing-opportunities-2026/economic-outcomes-of-annual-negotiations-for-uk-fishing-opportunities-in-2026>
5. This report analyses 55 stocks, of which 3 were non quota stocks. The report does not include nephrops, elasmobranchs, some deep sea species or stocks with insufficient assessments to analyse biomass.



Species	Stock/ICES area	Change 2016-25
Anglerfish	4, 6, 3a	9.95%
Black bellied anglerfish	7, 8a-b, 8d	109.11%
Black scabbardfish	Northeast Atlantic	-12.30%
Blue ling	6, 7, 12	53.17%
Blue whiting	Northeast Atlantic	-23.49%
Boarfish	Celtic Sea	255.60%
Brill	North Sea	-21.81%
Cod	Northern Shelf (Viking)	-27.38%
Cod	Northern Shelf (Northwestern)	-40.44%
Cod	Northern Shelf (Southern)	-45.03%
Cod	Irish Sea	-80.08%
Cod	Celtic Sea	-98.23%
Dab	North Sea	-44.02%
Flounder	North Sea	17.32%
Greater silver smelt	1,2,4	41.76%
Greater silver smelt	5b, 6a	17.62%
Grey gurnard	4, 7d, 7e	-62.00%
Haddock	North Sea	334.72%
Haddock	Rockall	162.34%
Haddock	Celtic Sea	-78.82%
Hake	Northern Stock	-62.01%
Herring	North Irish Sea	28.17%
Herring	North Sea	-24.23%
Herring	Celtic Sea, Southern Irish Sea	-45.33%
Herring	West of Scotland	-92.74%
Horse mackerel	8, 2,3,4,5,6a	30.40%
Horse mackerel	North Sea, English Channel	-42.81%
Lemon sole	North Sea	-42.74%
Ling	3,4,6-9,12,14	-49.14%

Mackerel	Northeast Atlantic	-75.75%
Megrim	7b-k, 8a-b, 8d	24.86%
Megrim	Rockall	14.39%
Megrim	West of Scotland, North Sea	-43.22%
Norway pout	North Sea	-73.86%
Plaice	North Sea	-6.03%
Plaice	Western Channel	-40.30%
Plaice	7d	-62.12%
Plaice	Irish Sea	-87.64%
Pollack	Celtic Sea	-40.79%
Saithe	North Sea	-34.05%
Seabass	North Sea, Celtic Sea	68.44%
Sole	Irish Sea	72.27%
Sole	North Sea	50.09%
Sole	7f, 7g	35.86%
Sole	7e	-16.10%
Sole	7d	-37.13%
Sprat	North Sea	-15.42%
Turbot	North Sea	-11.80%
Tusk	4-9, 3a, 5b, 6a, 12	-34.71%
White bellied anglerfish	7, 8a-b, 8d	14.07%
Whiting	North Sea	142.78%
Whiting	Irish Sea	45.06%
Whiting	6a	-22.12%
Whiting	Celtic Sea	-72.60%
Witch	North Sea	24.66%

41.69% of the total amount of fish in UK waters has declined since 2016



The failure to follow scientific advice

Overfishing remains the norm in British waters. In 2026, nearly 60 per cent of catch limits are above scientific advice. This is the first time since the UK left the European Union that the number of overfished stocks has increased compared to the previous year and means most stocks are being fished at unsustainable level. Over time, this lowers the total number of fish in the population, weakens a stocks ability to reproduce and increases the risk of stock collapse.

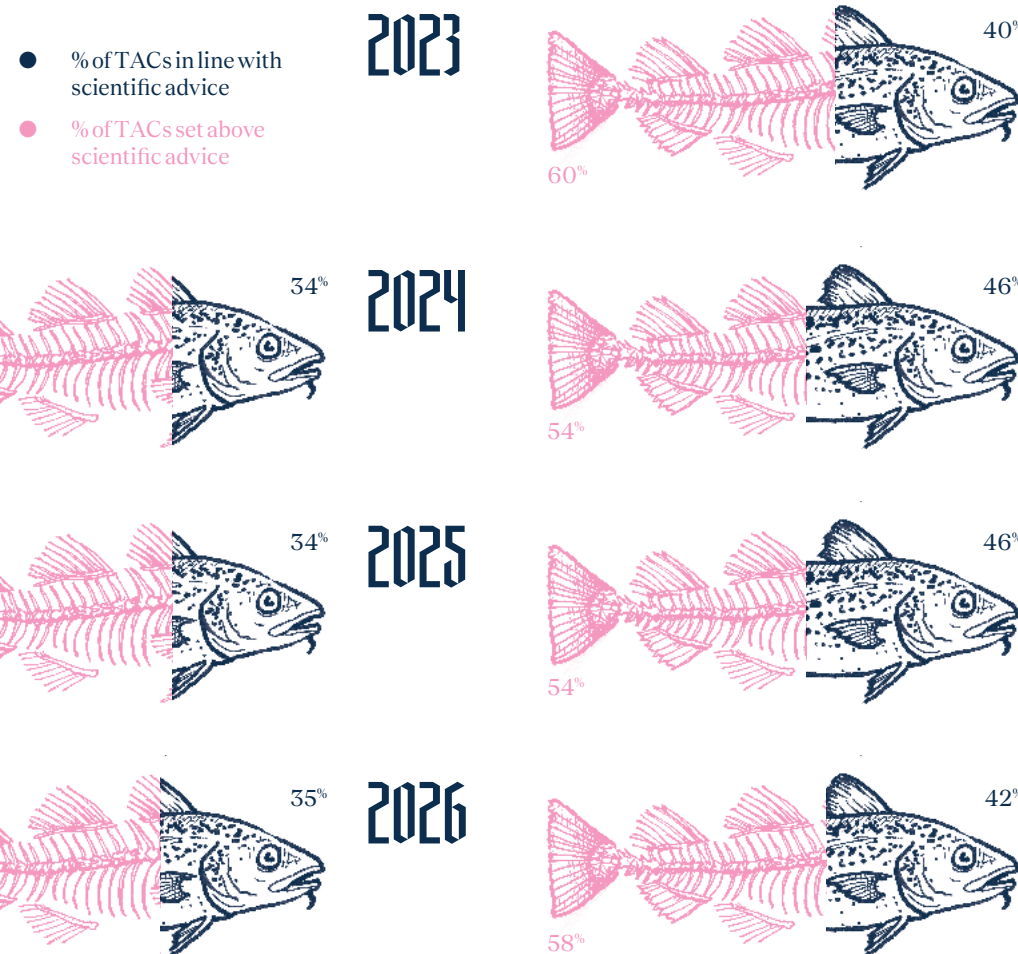
Fish populations are a form of natural capital. Sustainable fisheries live off the interest while leaving the underlying capital intact. Overfishing occurs when catches exceed what a stock can replace through reproduction. Instead of living off the interest, we begin spending the capital itself. At first, this can increase catches, but as the stock shrinks, its ability to replenish itself declines. When catches exceed scientific advice, we are not taking a surplus, we are drawing down the capital. The apparent gains of today are paid for with the losses of tomorrow.



The UK will seek to increase the overall number of stocks fished at MSY or suitable MSY proxy, consistent with the best available scientific advice and taking into account best available evidence on the effects of fishing activity”

UK Government stated policy, yet the reality is that nearly 60 per cent of catch limits are above scientific advice

Figure 1:
The percentage of catch limits set in line with scientific advice since 2020.



55%

of stocks declined between 2023 and 2025.

38%

of stocks are below the minimum legal level.

Image
©Mayo5

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Recommendation

Government must set catch limits that do not exceed the maximum level advised by scientists.

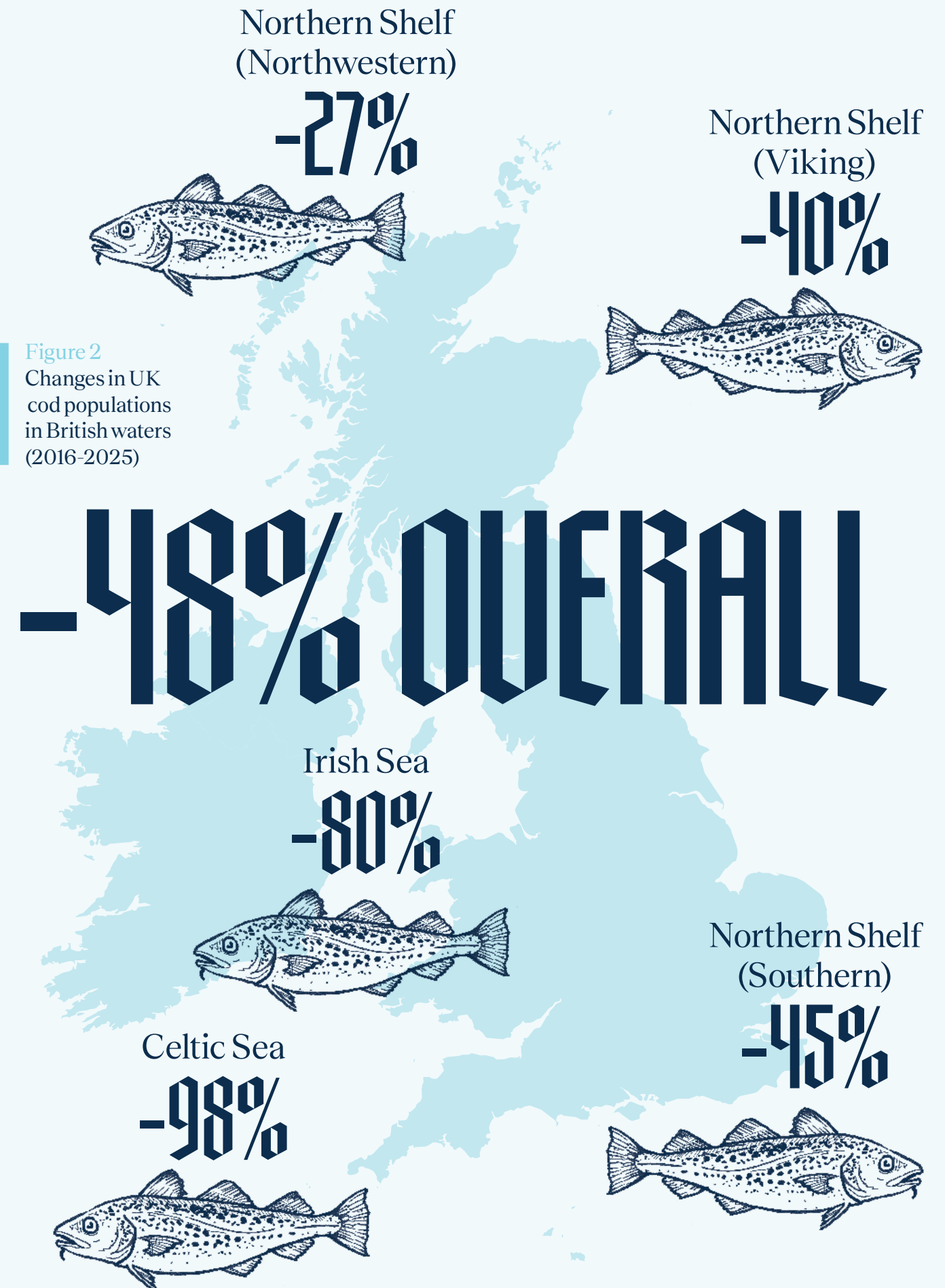
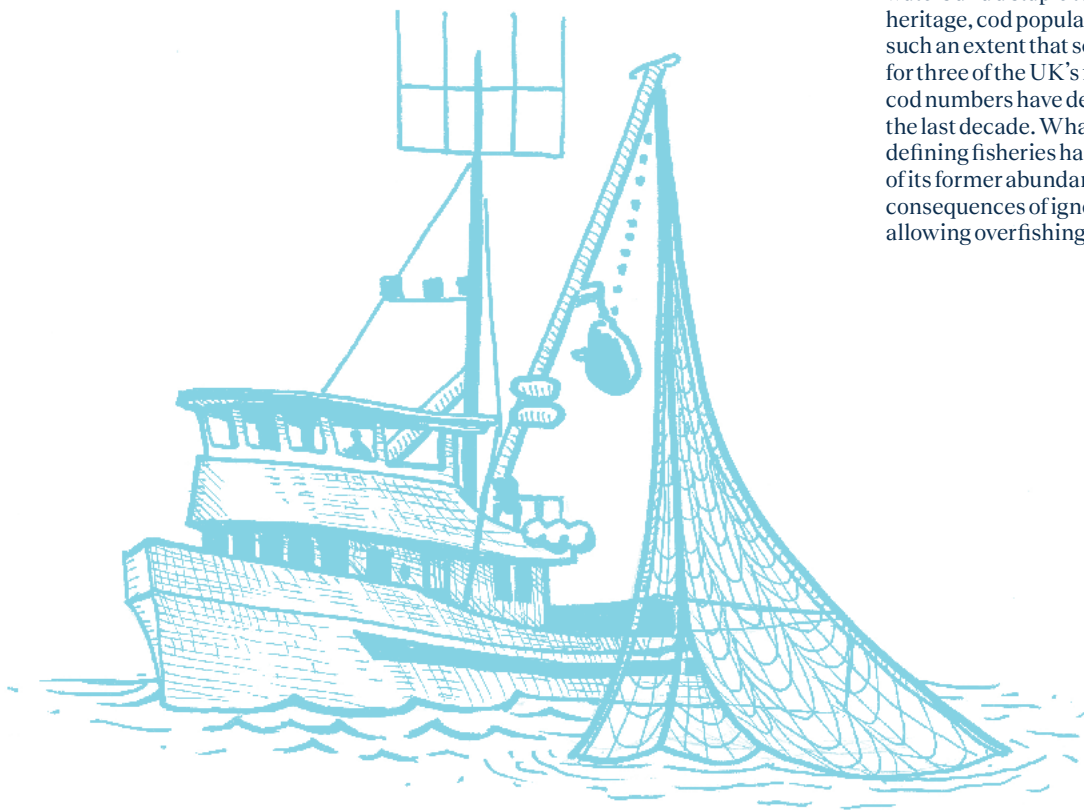


LOST ICONS

The Downfall of King Cod

Some of our most iconic fish populations have been pushed towards and into collapse. Several stocks have declined to such critically low levels that scientists have recommended closing fisheries altogether, giving depleted populations the opportunity to recover.

The case of cod most clearly illustrates the extent of this decline. Once abundant in British waters and a staple to the nation's diet and fishing heritage, cod populations are now depleted to such an extent that scientists advise zero catches for three of the UK's four cod stocks. Overall, cod numbers have declined by 48 per cent in the last decade. What was once one of Britain's defining fisheries has been reduced to a fraction of its former abundance, a stark reminder of the consequences of ignoring scientific advice and allowing overfishing to continue.





Catastrophe in the Celtic Sea

Nowhere is the tragedy of overfishing as starkly laid out as in the Celtic Sea. Once home to thriving populations of cod, pollack, whiting, herring and haddock that supported communities across south-west England, these commercially important fish populations have all experienced severe declines.

This is the predictable result of a management system that has repeatedly prioritised short-term catches over long-term recovery. The catastrophe in the Celtic Sea played out in a 'domino' fashion, with stocks falling one after another, with the

same rationale being used each time. These fish were caught together in the same fishery and in effect, sacrificed for short term political and economic gain.

Isn't Climate Change to blame?

While a warming ocean may add further pressure, it does not explain the pattern seen across UK waters.

Where stocks are overfished, populations continue to decline; where fishing pressure has been reduced and scientific advice heeded, recovery has followed.

Climate change is not a justification for overfishing. If anything, it makes the need for precautionary management all the more urgent.

It is not too late to restore fish populations in the Celtic Sea if the Government prioritises stock recovery. Other countries have shown that responsible management can allow fish stocks to recover but it has to be a deliberate choice by Government.

Case study: Recovery works

Across the Atlantic, the United States once faced widespread overfishing and declining fish stocks. To avert the collapse of its fisheries, the Magnuson-Stevens Act was introduced in 1976, establishing a framework for science-based fisheries management. Under this system, catch limits are legally required to be set in line with scientific advice. In 2024, approximately 91 per cent of all stocks did not exceed their annual catch limits⁶.

The Act also mandates rebuilding plans for depleted stocks. Through strict recovery measures, more than 50 US fish stocks

have been rebuilt since 2000⁷. The West Coast groundfish fishery provides a notable example of the benefits of science-led fisheries management. By 2000, after decades of intense fishing pressure, the fishery had collapsed. In response, the Government introduced emergency recovery measures, including a strict quota system to reduce catches and the establishment of conservation areas where bottom trawling was prohibited. Bottom trawling was banned in designated Essential Fish Habitats⁸. By 2014, the fishery had been declared rebuilt.

6. Status of Stocks 2024 | NOAA Fisheries
7. Status of Stocks 2024 | NOAA Fisheries status-stocks-2024

8. Groundfish FMP Amendment 28: Essential fish habitat - Pacific Fishery Management Council

91%
of all stocks across the United States did not exceed their annual catch limits.

50
US fish stocks have been rebuilt since 2000.

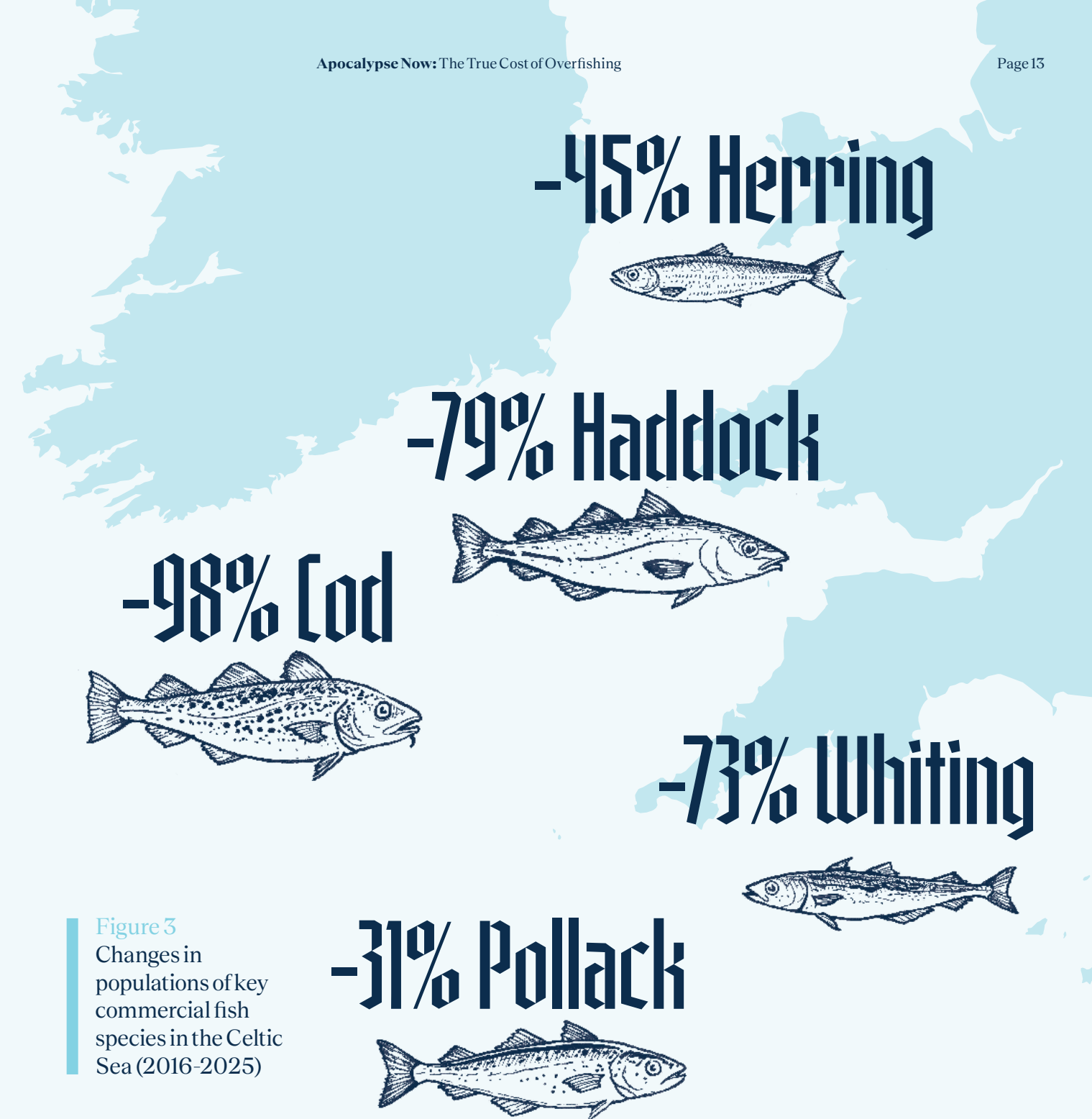


Figure 3
Changes in populations of key commercial fish species in the Celtic Sea (2016-2025)

02

Recommendation

The Government must introduce time bound recovery plans for depleted stocks.



The difference management makes

Overfishing is not always apparent when viewed at the level of a species. The same species can be thriving in one area and collapsing in another, depending on how it is managed. Unlike cod, which is overfished throughout British waters, haddock and whiting stocks around the UK provide a clear example of how ending overfishing and prioritising sustainability does deliver for the environment and people.

Since 1980 whiting has declined by **96%**

Image © Gema Alvarez Fernandez

In the Celtic and Irish Seas, scientific advice has been repeatedly ignored and stocks have collapsed. Irish Sea whiting abundance has fallen by 96 per cent since 1980. The stock is now so depleted that scientists advise zero catches. The same advice applies to Celtic Sea haddock and whiting.

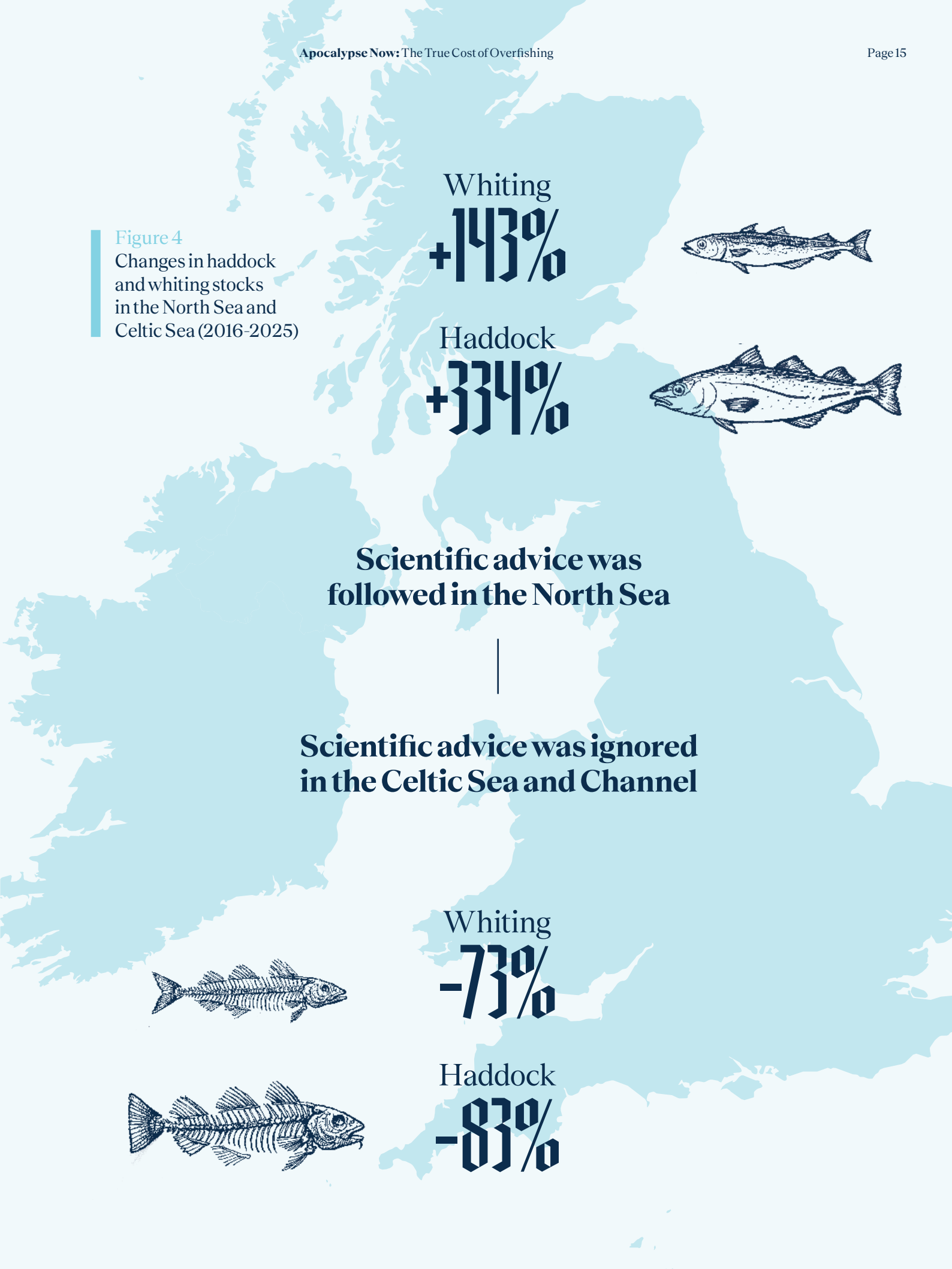
The North Sea presents a stark contrast, where fishing pressure is at sustainable levels and stocks have recovered. Haddock and whiting are fished at levels well below the maximum

recommended by scientists. As a result, both populations have increased substantially and now stand at more than twice the minimum level required to support sustainable fisheries.

The outcome is predictable. Where scientific advice has been ignored, stocks have been driven to collapse. Where it has been followed, stocks have recovered. In the North Sea, larger fish populations support high and stable catches while requiring less effort to catch them.



Figure 4
Changes in haddock and whiting stocks in the North Sea and Celtic Sea (2016-2025)





Food insecurity?

In a time of growing concern about food security, Britain's seas should be one of our greatest assets. Rich, productive and teeming with life, they should provide food, support coastal communities and underpin thriving marine ecosystems. Instead, decades of political decisions have left many fish populations depleted, delivering far less ecological, economic and social value than they could.

This decline is justified by the Government as a necessary trade-off to support food production and fishing livelihoods. In reality, the opposite is true. The foundation of food security is abundance. Catching fish faster than populations can replenish themselves does not create a system that can provide more food, especially in a system like ours, which lacks the necessary safeguards to restore depleted fish populations.

By setting catch limits above scientific advice, successive governments have eroded food security, while simultaneously claiming to enhance it. A depleted fish stock does not

contribute to food security, but large, healthy populations can sustain productive fisheries for generations to come, making a significant contribution to national food security and local economies.

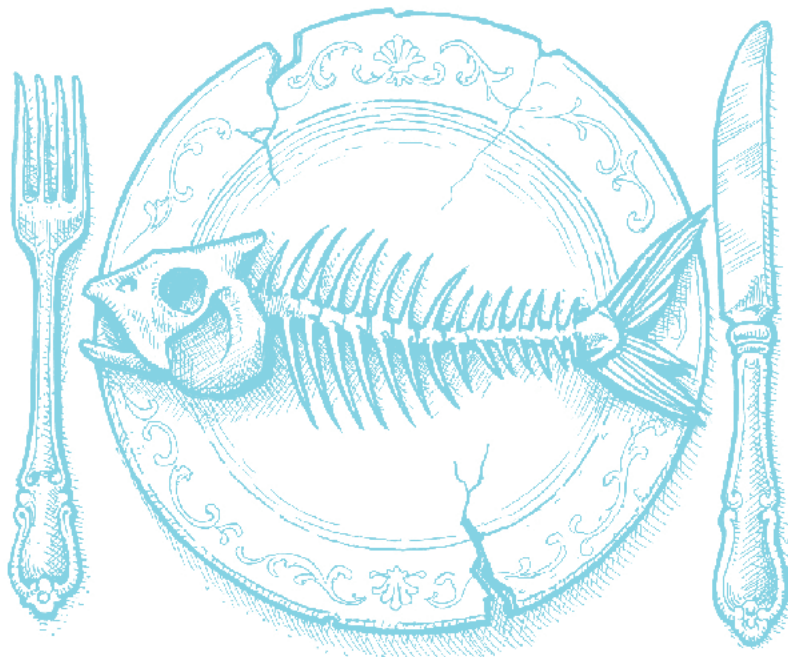
Every fish removed beyond sustainable levels reduces the population's ability to recover and weakens future food production.

The result is a vicious cycle. As stocks decline, pressure grows to maintain catches at existing levels, meaning a higher proportion of the population is taken. This creates the bizarre situation that as fish populations plummet, catches remain temporarily the same, accelerating the decline. Opportunities diminish, catches become less reliable and fishing communities become increasingly dependent on a shrinking resource. A healthy and resilient marine ecosystem would deliver the opposite outcome.

The solution is not complicated. Rebuilding fish populations through science-based catch limits combined with genuine protection for at least 30 per cent of the sea in Marine Protected Areas, would dramatically increase the abundance of life in our seas and the amount of food they can provide. Making our ocean better able to support levels of fishing far in excess of that of today and safeguarding a resource which sustains future generations.

The choice facing Government is not between conservation and food production. It is between abundance and decline.

One path, and our current trajectory, leads to shrinking fish populations, weaker coastal economies and growing food insecurity. The other restores the wealth of our seas and secures a sustainable source of food for generations to come.



How to collapse the largest fishery in the Northeast Atlantic

76%

Decline in the Northeast Atlantic mackerel stock in just ten years.

Historically mackerel has supported one of the largest fisheries in Europe. However in the last decade, the mackerel population has declined by 76 per cent, caused by consistent and massive overfishing with catches between 30 and 40 per cent above the scientifically advised maximum level. This year's total quotas for mackerel have been set at approximately double.

£100m

is the minimum value the UK's mackerel quota will lose in 2026 compared with 2025.

Not only is this likely to have a significant impact on the ecosystem; but it has already cost the fishing industry huge amounts of money. With the UK's mackerel quota being worth £100 million less in 2026 than it was in 2025⁹.

Countries, including the UK, have prioritised short term interests over long-term sustainability, despite it running counter to the long-term interests of the fishing industry.

Governments frequently justify excessive catches by pointing to unresolved disputes over quota shares focusing on whether allocations

should be based on historical fishing patterns or where fish are found today. The reality is that this is secondary to a more fundamental question: are catches sustainable in the first place?

While countries argue over who gets what, they continue to ignore the scientific advice designed to protect the resource itself.

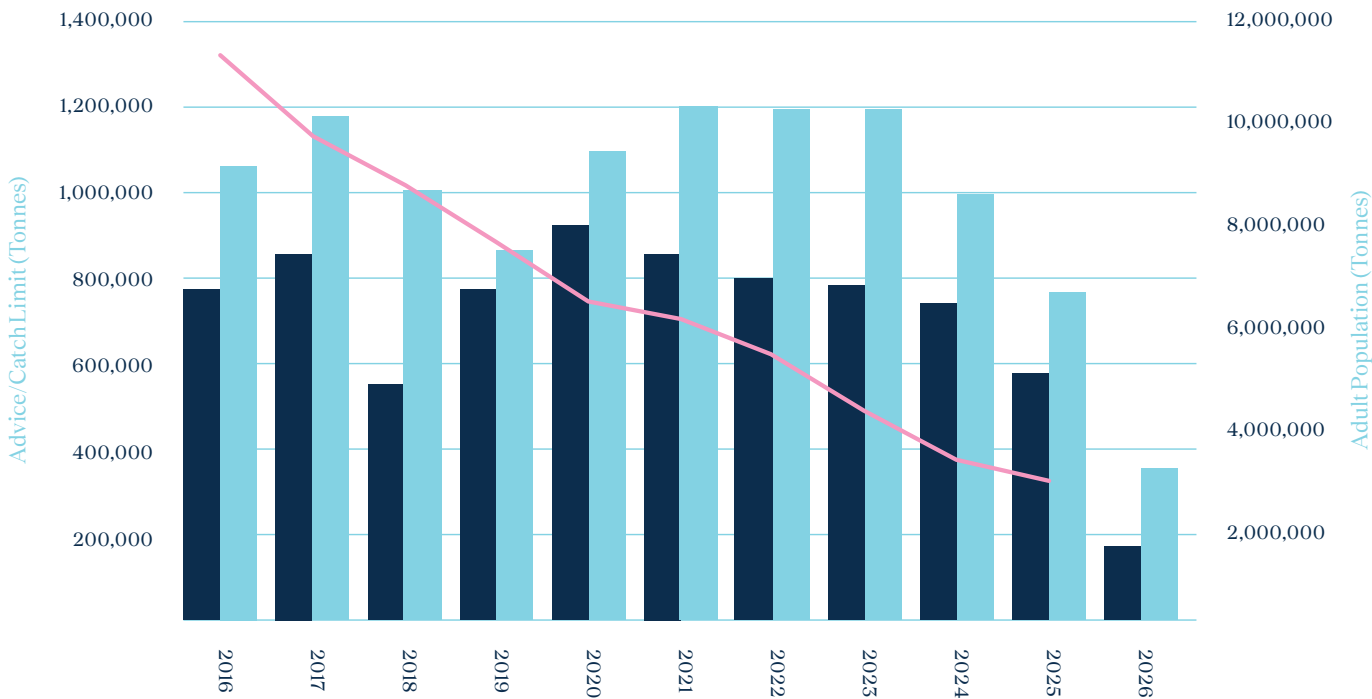
The result is a race not for a larger share of abundance, but for a larger share of decline.

9. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/economic-outcomes-of-negotiations-for-uk-fishing-opportunities-2026/economic-outcomes-of-annual-negotiations-for-uk-fishing-opportunities-in-2026> - Pacific Fishery Management Council



Figure 6
The impact of catch limits set above scientific advice on the NE Atlantic mackerel population.

● Advice ● Catch Limit ● Adult Population



In February 2026, Waitrose became the first UK supermarket to suspend sales of Northeast Atlantic mackerel in response to growing concerns about the condition of the stock. Several other major retailers later took the same decision. Unlike cod, whose depletion in UK waters has been partially masked by imports from healthier populations elsewhere, there is no alternate Northeast Atlantic mackerel stock to rely upon.

As the stock has declined, the benefits of the fishery have become increasingly concentrated. A small number of quota holders have accumulated substantial wealth from its exploitation, while the consequences of its deterioration are being felt more broadly across the fishing industry, coastal

communities, seafood businesses and the wider marine ecosystem.

Waitrose's decision reflects the growing concern surrounding the management of the stock.

While retailers are removing Northeast Atlantic mackerel from their shelves, governments continue to set catch limits above the levels advised by scientists.

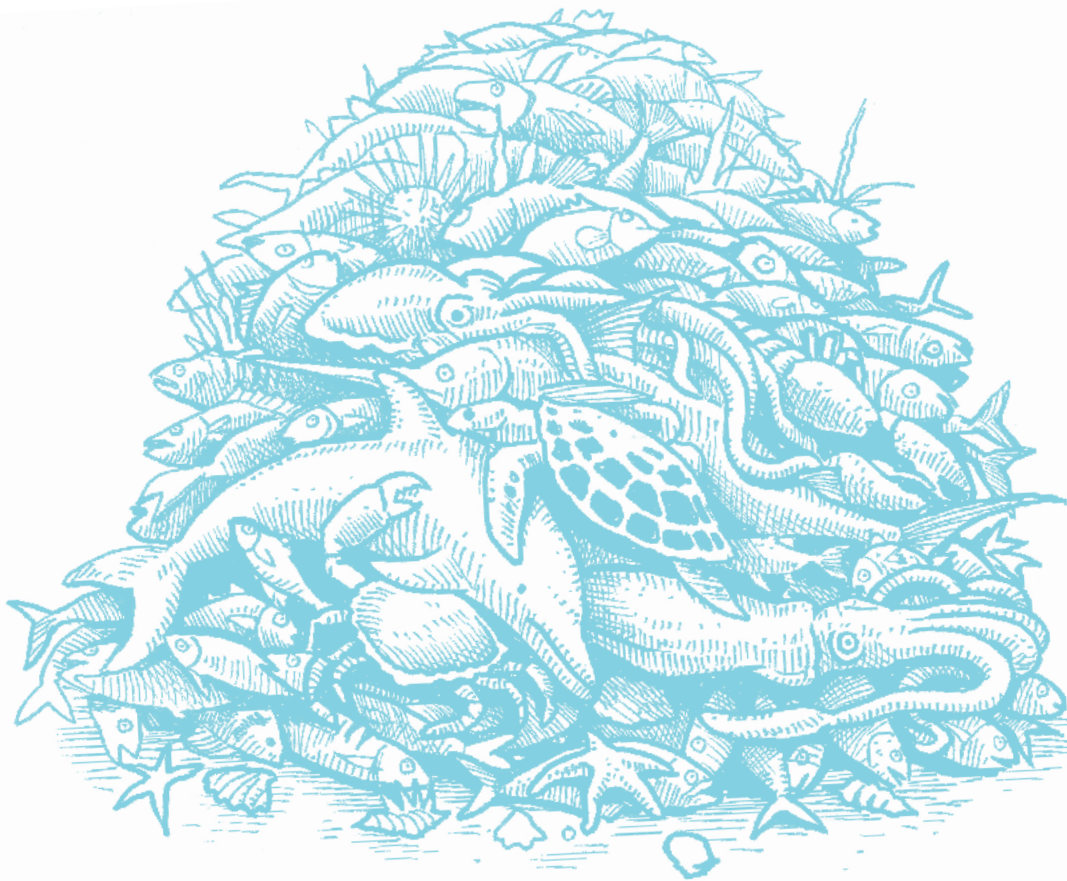
The result has been a sustained decline in one of the North Atlantic's most valuable fish populations.



Jake Pickering
Head of agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries at Waitrose.

By suspending sourcing of mackerel at Waitrose, we are reinforcing our ethical and sustainable business commitments, acting to tackle overfishing and protect the long-term health of our oceans and this crucial fish¹⁰.

10. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgl5gee07xzo>



What a waste – the discards scandal

In 2012 following widespread public outcry, the EU introduced the landing obligation, commonly known as the discard ban.

This policy required fishers to land every fish they caught¹¹ rather than discard them at sea. Its objective was to reduce waste, encourage the use of more selective fishing gear and ensure that fishing mortality was fully accounted for.

More than a decade later, discarding remains a widespread and common practice. Although discarding quota species is prohibited, limited monitoring and enforcement mean that large quantities of fish continue to be returned to the sea. The rollout of mandatory Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) on vessels with a high risk of discarding would provide an effective means of recording catches, improving compliance with fisheries regulations and ensuring that fishing mortality is properly accounted for. Without accurate monitoring, the true scale of discarding will continue to remain largely unseen.

The problem is particularly acute in mixed fisheries, where multiple species are caught together. Fishers may exhaust their quota for

one species while continuing to target another, resulting in additional catches of the quota-limited species being discarded.

The consequences are increasingly evident in several flatfish stocks, particularly plaice. Plaice are frequently caught alongside sole, a species of much higher commercial value and are often discarded as a result. In some fisheries, a majority proportion of plaice are caught only to be thrown back into the sea.

Catch limits are intended to control the number of fish removed from a stock. Yet discarded fish are no less dead than landed fish. Where discarding is widespread, total fishing mortality can far exceed the quantity landed. Because this mortality is not fully reflected in annual catch limits, the number of fish killed can substantially exceed the quota, increasing pressure on fish populations even where catches appear sustainable on paper, creating 'hidden overfishing'.

11. The landing obligation only applies to species with a quota. Non-quota stocks can legally be discarded.

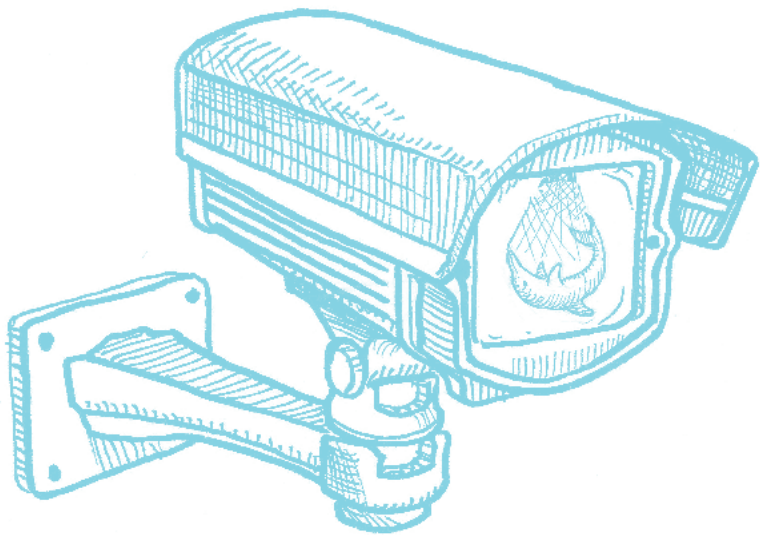


Figure 7
Condition of UK plaice stocks and associated discard rates.

Discarding also affects non-quota species. Our analysis shows that dab and grey gurnard populations have declined by 44 per cent and 62 per cent respectively since 2016. Both are subject to extremely high discards rates, with 93 per cent of dab and 78 per cent of grey gurnard catches returned to the sea.

Plaice is just one of many stocks experiencing dramatic declines not just to years of overexploitation but due to the invisible catch which isn't counted.

Stock	Is the stock healthy	Is fishing pressure sustainable	Discard rate
North Sea	Yes	Yes	68%
Eastern Channel	No	No	73%
Western Channel	No	Yes	34%
Irish Sea	No	No	88%
Bristol Channel & Celtic Sea	No	No	50%

03
04

Recommendations

- Set catch limits that account for estimated discarding to prevent ‘hidden’ overfishing.
- Introduce mandatory remote electronic monitoring on vessels with high risks of discarding for better monitoring and enforcement.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN?

The greatest cost of overfishing is not simply the decline we see today. It is the abundance that has already been lost over previous decades.

This opportunity cost is rarely factored into Government calculations. The scale of this loss can be difficult to comprehend because it has happened gradually. Each generation inherits a sea that is less full of life than the one before it. What is considered normal today would have been considered extremely depleted by previous generations.

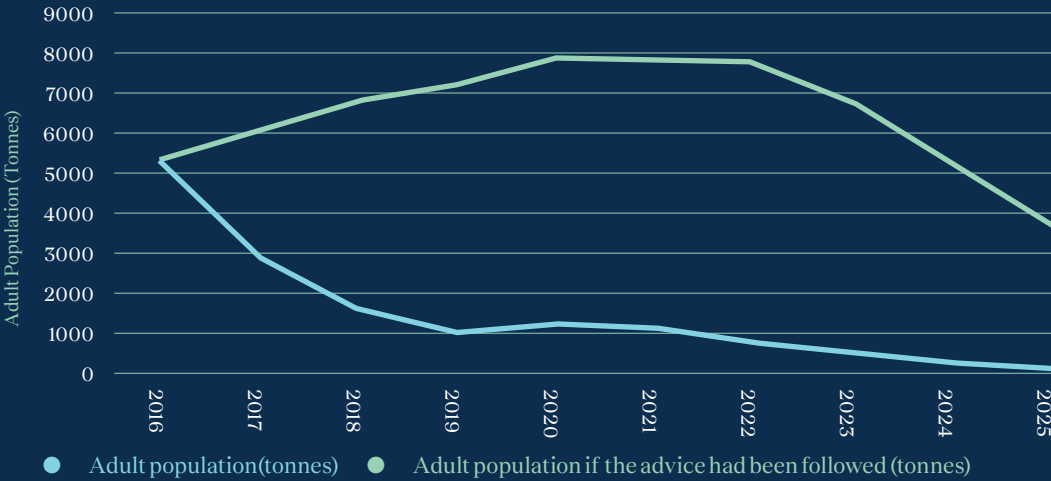
Analysis shows that if scientific advice had been followed consistently over the last decade, many commercial stocks would now be substantially larger, and catches would have been significantly higher. For example, cod in the Celtic Sea is at about 3 per cent of the size the population would have been if advice had been followed¹².

More fish in the sea would mean greater economic value, higher sustainable catches and healthier marine ecosystems.

If advice had been followed since 2016 for Celtic Sea cod the estimated value of catches would have been approximately 20 per cent higher over the time period (£12 million)¹³.

Figure 8
Celtic Sea cod if scientific advice had been followed since 2016.

Note: The decline in the ‘Adult population if the advice had been followed’ line after 2022 reflects the stock’s recovery to a level at which higher catches can be sustainably taken. As Celtic Sea cod rebuilds, scientific advice based on Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) increases, allowing greater fishing opportunities. This leads to biomass falling from its peak as more fish can be harvested sustainably, while the stock remains within healthy biological limits. The stock is therefore managed to deliver the maximum long-term yield, rather than maintaining the highest possible biomass indefinitely.



12. Data behind these calculations can be found here: <https://github.com/laurieKell/backtest-ices>

13. This estimate is at 2024 cod prices.



When catches exceed scientific advice, we are not taking surplus fish. We are borrowing from the future, weakening the stocks ability to recover and leaving tomorrow's fishers with less.

Instead, repeated decisions to prioritise immediate gains have reduced the benefits these stocks could have provided. This exposes the central flaw at the heart of overfishing.

Exceeding sustainable limits may increase catches today, but it reduces opportunities tomorrow. Every decision to ignore scientific advice effectively borrows from future generations of fish and fishers alike. No one ultimately benefits from depleted fish populations. The promise of larger catches has delivered fewer fish, reduced economic opportunity and greater vulnerability to future shocks. It is a lose-lose outcome for both nature and people.



CONCLUSION

Overfishing is not the result of uncertainty or a lack of understanding. Each year, scientists provide clear advice on the level of catches that fish populations can sustain to remain healthy and productive. The decline documented in this report is the consequence of political decisions to disregard that advice.

Since the UK left the EU in 2016 there has been a decline in the amount of fish in our seas of **41%**

Brexit provided an opportunity to change course. The Fisheries Act, introduced in 2020, was presented as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild fish populations and establish the UK as a world leader in sustainable fisheries management. Instead, the same pattern has continued. Since leaving the European Union, there has not been a single year in which the majority of UK catch limits have been set at sustainable levels.

The consequences have been entirely predictable. Fish populations have continued to decline; scientific warnings have become more severe and fishing opportunities have diminished. As stocks deteriorate, pressure grows to maintain catches in excess of scientific advice. The very decisions that caused the decline are then repeated, further deepening the problem. Since the UK left the EU in 2016 there has been a 41 per cent decline in the number of fish in our seas. This was neither inevitable nor unforeseeable.

Importantly, decline is not irreversible. The future of our seas is not predetermined. As overfishing is a choice, so too is recovery. Around the world, depleted fish populations have recovered when governments have reduced fishing pressure and allowed stocks to rebuild. The UK's seas retain that same potential.

Recovery requires a different set of decisions to the ones currently being made. Decisions made in pursuit of larger catches have left us with fewer fish, weaker fisheries and reduced opportunities for coastal communities. Rather than securing the future of the industry, they have undermined the resource upon which it depends. Healthy stocks provide greater stability for both ecosystems and the fishing industry.

The UK already possesses the knowledge, legislation and management tools needed to reverse this decline. What has been missing is the willingness to act.

Ending the routine setting of catch limits above scientific advice would be one of the most significant steps the Government could take to restore the health of UK seas. Combined with effective monitoring and meaningful recovery measures for depleted stocks, it would begin the process of rebuilding abundance.



THE CHOICE FACING GOVERNMENT
IS SIMPLE. IT CAN CONTINUE TO
OVERSEE THE GRADUAL DEPLETION
OF ONE OF THE NATION'S MOST
VALUABLE PUBLIC RESOURCES,
OR IT CAN BEGIN REBUILDING IT.



