

Study Is Published Showing The Record Rise In Seal Populations Could Impair The Recovery Of Scottish Cod Stocks - 24 July 09

On 21st July 2009, Seafood News reported the publishing of a study on the impact of seals on cod stocks in Scottish waters.

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [Copyright 2009 Aberdeen Journals Ltd] By Jamie Buchan - July 21, 2009 - Grey seals take up to 500,000 tonnes a year of the dwindling fish stocks in the waters around Scotland, a new study has revealed.

Industry leaders said last night the figures scotched the myth that trawlermen were almost entirely to blame for the dramatic drop in stocks of key species, including cod. They want the impact the mammals have on their livelihoods to be taken into account when quotas are set.

The International Convention for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the main scientific body advising the European Commission, says the seal population has rocketed in recent years. Its report reveals that the population of the animals in the North Sea has grown to about 200,000 and, on the west coast, has risen from about 32,000 to 40,000. Seals generally eat between two and two-and-a-half tonnes of fish a year. The report says: 'Seals are known to feed on cod, among other species, and the mortality of cod due to seal predation is likely to be significant. This may impair the ability of the stock to recover.'

Struan Stevenson, vice-president of the European Parliament's fisheries committee, said it backed up what skippers had been saying. 'It was always the fishermen themselves who were blamed for over-fishing cod stocks,' he said. 'Now we can see that the growing seal population is having a major impact and could prevent any attempts at cod recovery, even if all fishing was banned. For far too long, the European Commission has refused to listen to our fishermen when they blamed seals for killing our cod stocks. It was not deemed to be politically correct to mention seals in Brussels, but now the truth has been revealed.'

Scottish Conservative MEP Mr Stevenson said the situation was critical on the west coast but even worse in the North Sea.

He said: 'The grey seal population in Scottish waters is now at a record high and is no longer ecologically sustainable. A solution will have to be found to protect our fish stocks and the future of our fishing communities.'

The study was welcomed last night by Bertie Armstrong, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. 'We're pleased that ICES are finally recognising what we have been saying all along,' he said. 'Scientific studies on fish stocks very rarely take into account factors like natural predators or climate change, so these findings are quite significant. 'Obviously, there has been a change in the way that seals have been dealt with over the years. The days of hunting them for oil are long gone. But it is high time this problem was addressed.'

While grey seal numbers are increasing, common seals are in decline. According to recent research, their population is now between 20,000 and 38,000. Mallaig and North West Fishermen's Association secretary John Hermse said the increase in seal numbers had never been taken into account when the annual fishing quotas were calculated. 'It is clear to everyone except conservationists that a seal management scheme must be put in place,'

The International Fur Trade Federation supports the proposed seal management programme in Scotland and encourages the European Parliament to adopt international welfare standards for all seals instead of a punitive and disproportionate ban on commercially sold seal products.

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