

# SEA BASS



# UNDER THREAT!

# EAA SOLUTIONS

(ICES DIVISIONS IVBC, VIIA, AND VIID-H)



**20%**

BASS STOCKS HAVE DECLINED BY MORE THAN 20% SINCE 2005, REPORTS ICES

**2 MILLION**

TWO MILLION ANGLERS IN WESTERN EUROPE FISH FOR SEA BASS AND BRING MONEY INTO COASTAL COMMUNITIES

**200 MILLION**

TWO HUNDRED MILLION EURO IS THE MINIMUM TOTAL VALUE OF RECREATIONAL SEA BASS FISHING IN WESTERN EUROPE



# EAA NORTH WESTERN WATERS AND NORTH SEA BASS STOCK RECOVERY POSITION PAPER

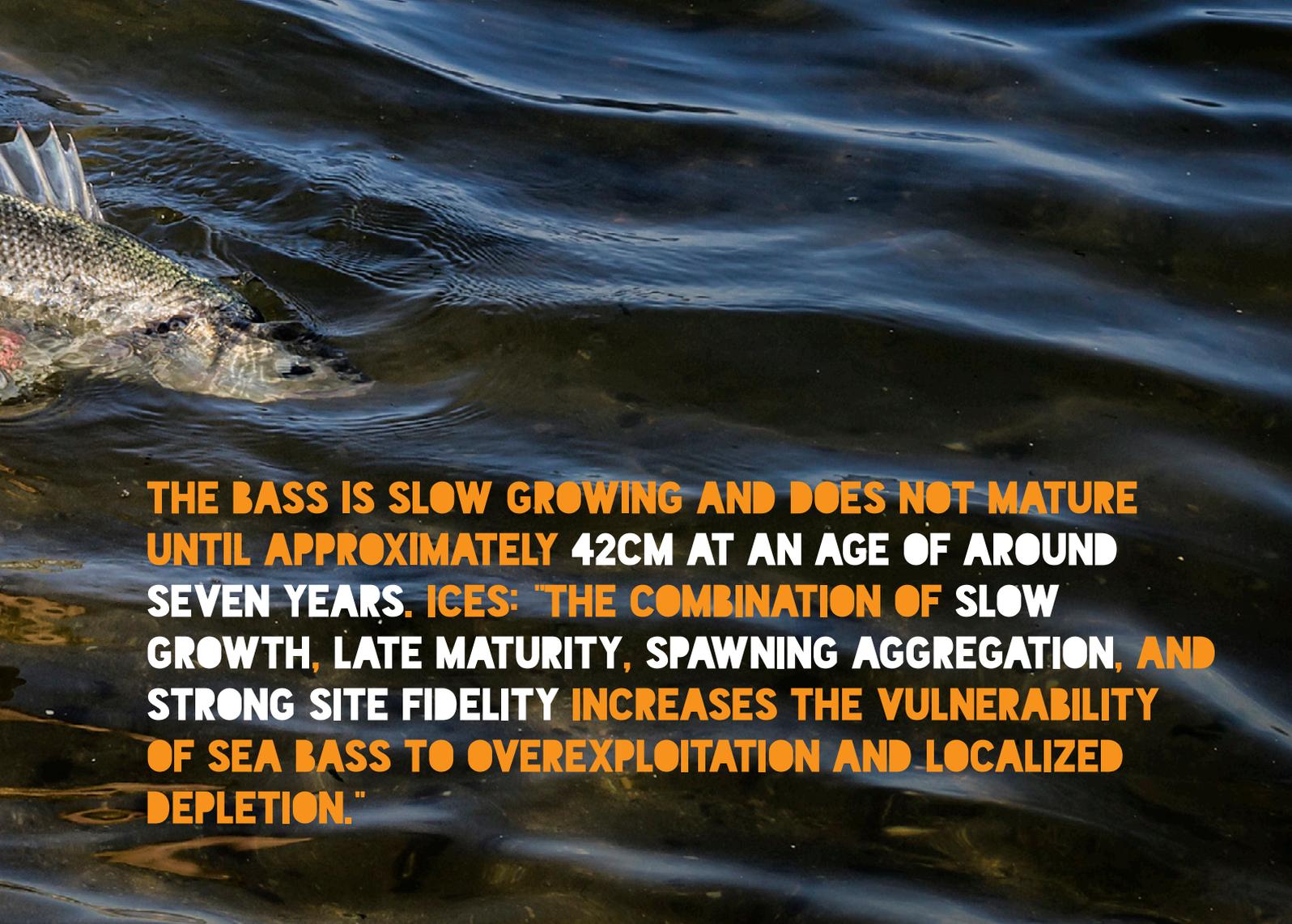
THE EUROPEAN SEA BASS (*DICENTRARCHUS LABRAX*) IS A HIGHLY PRIZED AND MUCH SOUGHT AFTER SPECIES FOR RECREATIONAL ANGLERS THROUGHOUT THE WATERS ON THE WESTERN SEABOARD OF EUROPE. WE ESTIMATE THAT IN FRANCE, THE UK, IRELAND AND THE NETHERLANDS ALONE THERE ARE AT LEAST 1 MILLION RECREATIONAL SEA ANGLERS WHO TARGET BASS REGULARLY AND WHO SPEND IN EXCESS OF EURO 100,000,000 A YEAR IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORTING THEIR EFFORTS TO CATCH BASS. RECREATIONAL ANGLING FOR SEA BASS THUS PROVIDES A SIGNIFICANT LEVEL OF EMPLOYMENT AND TOURIST INVESTMENT IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES. WITH CONSERVATION IN MIND, RECREATIONAL ANGLERS ARE INCREASINGLY ADOPTING SUSTAINABLE CATCH & RELEASE TACTICS WHEN TARGETING BASS.

Distributed from the eastern Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, bass has also now become an important commercial target species, where in the 1960s and 1970s it was exploited mainly by recreational anglers and a very few commercial operators fishing rod and line to take specimens, which were highly prized and valuable table fish. Currently bass are targeted by inshore fleets targeting local stocks; by rod and line, gill netting, bottom trawling and by larger fleets operating offshore targeting pre-spawning aggregations with pelagic pair trawls and single trawls.

This move to bass by the industry has occurred because of depletion of other inshore fish stocks, new catching techniques (monofilament

nets) and fast growing interest for bass as a gourmet table fish. In Ireland there was a serious depletion of sea bass stocks during the 1970's. The population and year class structures have recovered following the implementation of a moratorium on commercial landings in 1990, with additional measures introduced to regulate recreational catches, which include:

- A daily bag limit, which limits the retention of sea bass to two per angler per day,
- An increased size limit of 40cm, in comparison to the EU minimum landing size (36cm), and
- A closed season for the capture and retention of sea bass during the peak spawning period of 15th May to 15th June.

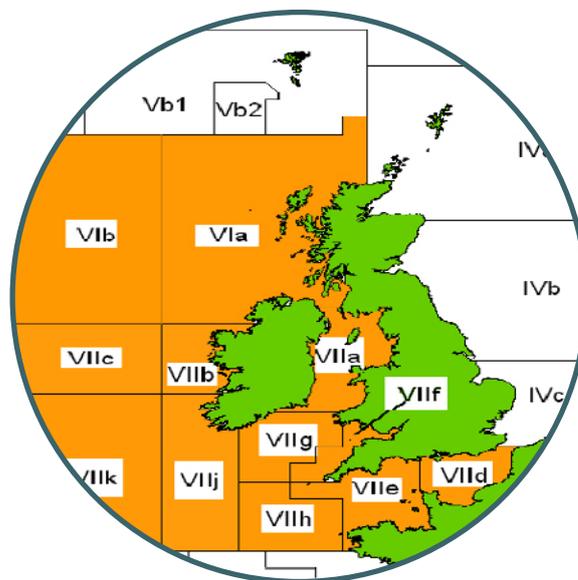


**THE BASS IS SLOW GROWING AND DOES NOT MATURE UNTIL APPROXIMATELY 42CM AT AN AGE OF AROUND SEVEN YEARS. ICES: "THE COMBINATION OF SLOW GROWTH, LATE MATURITY, SPAWNING AGGREGATION, AND STRONG SITE FIDELITY INCREASES THE VULNERABILITY OF SEA BASS TO OVEREXPLOITATION AND LOCALIZED DEPLETION."**

Rod and line fishing for bass – recreational as well as commercial - is highly selective as undersized and immature fish can be released with a very high survival rate, giving the released fish a chance to reach maturity and enhance future stocks.

Netting of bass inshore often captures a significant proportion of immature fish and restricts the free movement of fish and reduces other stakeholders' fishing opportunities. The return of undersized or immature fish is significantly less successful or productive in this fishery. Offshore trawling and netting of spawning aggregations of bass is short sighted in the extreme, especially given that bass is a slow growing and long lived fish.

Bass stocks in the North Western Atlantic Waters and North Sea are affected by a number of factors from one year to another including weather conditions and water temperature. The difference between good and bad recruitment years is significant. Removal of immature bass, which is current practice, works against healthy bass stocks and is in part the explanation why the stock is in trouble today.

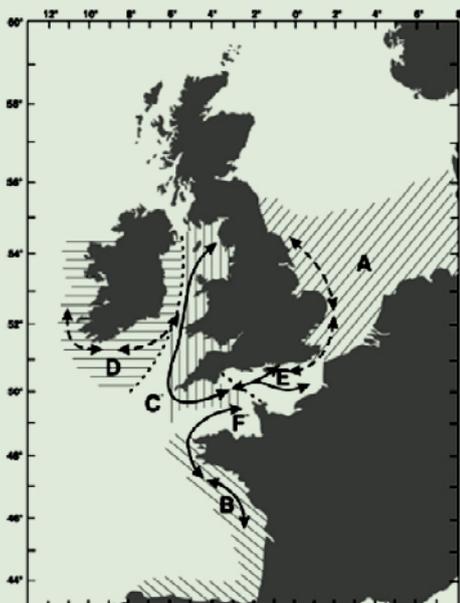


**In Ireland bass is managed as a recreational species.** It is prohibited for Irish commercial vessels operating in ICES area **VI & VII (orange areas)** to fish for, retain on-board, tranship or land bass. And no person shall sell or offer for sale bass other than bass which has been imported into the state.

## What Europe's sea anglers want for the short and medium-term management of bass stocks to assist stock recovery:

# EAA OPPOSES A TAC FOR BASS

- TACs set for other fish stocks have not prevented overfishing. We believe a TAC would not be the right tool for the recovery of the bass stock. On the contrary, the situation could be worsened by a TAC regime. Bass stocks form strong local geographic attachments. A quota could be filled by totally depleting one or more of the administrative stock divisions. Damage of this kind would take years to repair.
- Establishing a TAC normally requires a track record of commercial landings. This is not available for bass because bass-landing vessels have not been required to report bass catch data fully in the past. Inshore vessels are commonly excluded by regulations from reporting all landings of bass. Commercial fishing for bass in Ireland has been banned since 1990. Any TAC awarded on historic catch data will unfairly benefit those nations with the completest recorded landings.
- Consideration should be given to the regular collection of data from the recreational bass fishery as required by the EU Data Collection Regulation.
- Sea bass in the North East Atlantic consist of one genetic stock. However, ICES operates through more than one 'stock'/ management unit. ICES is still discussing how many management divisions of bass should exist: "A new stock definition is considered in 2013; however, it is not clear if sea bass in Divisions IVbc, VIIa, and VIId–h constitutes a separate stock. It is possible that sea bass in the area has a connection with sea bass in Division VIIj." <sup>1</sup>
- It is obvious that more research and discussion are needed to be able to establish the 'correct' or appropriate number of 'stocks'/ units - biologically reasoned as well as sensible for management.
- Throughout all likely stock management sub-units there is insufficient information about fishing mortality, discards and biomass to provide reliable stock assessment and catch advice according to ICES and STECF. <sup>2</sup>
- The CFP reform's discard ban/landing obligation for TAC species could incentivise an increase in commercial landings of immature



## Six unit stocks of bass

- A) North Sea;
- B) Biscay;
- C) UK west-south-west coast;
- D) Ireland;
- E) eastern Channel,
- F) western Channel – south part.

Arrows indicate the main range of movement of adult bass in each "stock", and four hatched areas denote putative biological populations. (ICES 2004)

<sup>1</sup> [www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2013/2013/bss-47.pdf](http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2013/2013/bss-47.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/571417/2013-07\\_STECF+13-11+-+Review+of+advice+for+2014+Part+2\\_JRC83564.pdf](http://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/571417/2013-07_STECF+13-11+-+Review+of+advice+for+2014+Part+2_JRC83564.pdf)



## BASED ON ICES APPROACH TO DATA-LIMITED STOCKS, ICES ADVISES THAT COMMERCIAL LANDINGS SHOULD BE NO MORE THAN **2707 TONNES** IN 2014.

bass thus undermining stock recruitment and depleting biomass. The onus is on EU Member States to first prove that the new CFP regime and the discard ban can and will deliver as intended for other species/fisheries before even considering making bass a TAC species. EAA wants to see improvements in gear selectivity and fishing practices. And we want to see fully documented fisheries.

- In these North Atlantic EU waters all MLS will be replaced with Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes. This rule applies to both TAC species as well as non-TAC species like sea bass. However, this does not mean that sea bass fisheries are subject to the landing obligation. This will only happen if the Member States concerned request it. EAA urges Member States to not request a landing obligation for bass at this point in time.
- Recreational fishing landings are assumed 'considerable' according to ICES. The recreational landings according to ICES "...could amount to 20% of total fishery removals" but there is "no procedure to include the recent data in the assessment" and there

are no indications how recreational fishing for bass otherwise would be dealt with under a TAC regime. Based on our experience we expect a TAC not to benefit recreational angling; instead it could be a hindrance to the development of the recreational angling industry. A procedure should be adopted soon for how to include recreational landings in the assessment.

- In the UK landings by the inshore fleet are by and large unknown. Furthermore, UK allows for sales of bass and other fish caught by non-licensed small scale fishermen. This loophole has to be closed as it is not in compliance with EU law as we understand it.
- A few decades ago recreational fishing landed more bass than did the commercial sector. Today, after the commercial fisheries for bass expanded in the 1980s, it is the other way around. The CFP is not engaged with or drafted to deal with recreational fishing in its own right. Recreational angling under a TAC regime would inevitably be treated unfairly and this large and economically important sector could be excluded partly or fully from accessing the stock for this reason alone.



The EU and many Member States show a great interest in the amount of fish caught recreationally but little understanding of or no interest in the socio-economic value of recreational fishing. However, recreational fishing (angling) provides significantly more economic value and jobs per bass landed than does the commercial sector. A common sense approach based on "best value to society of the resource" would dictate a shift in management approach from the present commercial fisheries orientated one to a primarily recreational angling one. This would also make much sense from an ecosystem based approach and tie in well with objectives in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. A TAC would work against such a sensible shift.

## EAA BELIEVES THE EU SHOULD AIM FOR A BALANCED APPROACH TO ADDRESS THE KEY NEEDS OF BASS STOCKS:

- A Reduction of fishing mortality on mature bass
- B Reduction in overall mortality on all ages of bass
- C Extended protection of immature bass

Scientific advice indicates that to achieve these aims the following management measures should be considered further:

- Restrictions on offshore bass fishing in spring in the key South West spawning areas.
- Phasing out pair trawling for bass.
- The establishment of a reduced monthly licence tonnage limit attached to licences as an EU standard – primarily intended to cap effort per vessel and avoid displacement of activity.
- Establishment of juvenile nursery areas in all relevant Member States.

Measures A and B reflect the need to balance the necessary reductions in mortality across all age groups and maintain the age diversity needed for the stock to sustain extended periods of poor recruitment which have been apparent in the past, and may be occurring now. The licence cap also reflects an economic measure to avoid the vicious circle of high catch volume and depressed price, particularly with lower-quality fish caught in spring. The level of the suggested licence cap should be kept under review to respond to updates of the scientific assessment of the state of the stock.

These measures would aim to protect spawning potential with an appropriate reduction in mortality on all age classes from spawning to nursery areas without recourse to setting a total allowable catch (TAC). The EAA believes that the way a TAC is established based on track records of Member States, and also used to establish quota allocation to individual vessels, only perpetuates the established exploitation pattern for bass that has developed, and has led to the current situation. The aim of the EAA proposals is to change the exploitation pattern, not to cement as it is now.

Selectivity improvements for bass fishing are also needed, particularly where very weak year classes are entering the fishery, with potential for future tuning of the measures if required. Gear selectivity improvements need full consideration to determine impacts for local and mixed fisheries and avoid unintended consequences, and need further examination, particularly in trawl fisheries near nursery areas. The above package is suggested as an interim strategy to address immediate needs. However, EAA recognises that there are a range of complex and varied bass management issues in need of address of fine tuning. We expect this to happen when more and better scientific data are provided, in order to develop a properly considered long term management plan.

# KEY NEEDS OF BASS STOCKS

- **REDUCTION OF FISHING MORTALITY ON MATURE BASS**
- **REDUCTION IN OVERALL MORTALITY ON ALL AGES OF BASS**
- **EXTENDED PROTECTION OF IMMATURE BASS**

# SUGGESTED **SHORT TERM** PACKAGE DETAILS

- Restrictions on targeting bass during January – April to apply in VII e, h in offshore fisheries outside of Member State 6 mile zones, as VII e, h contains a key spawning aggregation area. Additionally to apply to the spawning area in VIIf in the area off Trevoze Head.
- Phasing out of pair trawling to target bass, especially on spawning stocks and in nursery areas.
- Licence restriction for EU vessels fishing for bass in IV and VII to cap effort, and avoid displacement of effort from VII e, h to other areas during closed spawning season, or large scale refocusing of effort to other fishing methods from pair trawling.
- Any licence restrictions for vessels fishing for the bass population in southern waters in area VIII, and in IX being managed separately, to prevent displacement of effort to IV, VII, and vice versa.
- Identification and protection for bass spawning and nursery areas in all Member States.
- An increase of the mls from 36 cm to 42 cm for commercial fishers as well as recreational fishers. Smaller bass for the table market are adequately supplied from the aquaculture sector.

# SUGGESTED MID TERM PACKAGE DETAILS

- Improve the quality and quantity of scientific knowledge and data on all bass management units and their fisheries.
- Improve the monitoring and control of bass fisheries.
- Allow all bass to spawn at least once before capture in any fishery, by a gradual increase in the Minimum Landings Size (MLS) from 42cm, to be introduced immediately and to 48cm in the longer term with increases in net mesh to suit the revised MLS.
- Ensure that all commercial bass landings are recorded or sampled, and recreational catches are sampled as required by the Data Collection Regulation.
- Prevent new entries to commercial bass fisheries.
- Ban Pair-trawling for bass.
- Cap annual commercial landings to 2,707 tonnes as advised by ICES.
- Identify fishing metiers and fishing gear, which allow release of bass with a high survival rate”,
  - Modify fishing metier and gear, to allow release of bass in good condition for survival.
- Identify bass nursery and spawning grounds and protect them seasonally or all year. Consider the introduction of real-time closures.<sup>3</sup>
- Prohibit retention of bass during the reproduction period in all of its spawning areas.
- All bass selling fishers to be registered and all their catches (including by-catches and discards) to be recorded/reported.<sup>4</sup>
- Recreational catches to be sampled, as required by the data collection regulation, and the socio-economic value to be estimated.
- Promote control and compliance to prevent illegal sale of bass by recreational fishers.
- Member States should be allowed to set a higher MLS and bigger mesh than prescribed by EU regulations within their 12nm territorial waters for own as well as other nations’ vessels.
- The Irish ban on commercial landings of bass should not be affected by any of these proposed measures.

<sup>3</sup> UK already has designated 37 bass nursery areas with fishing restrictions in domestic legislation. [www.ukbass.com/inshore-rules](http://www.ukbass.com/inshore-rules)

<sup>4</sup> There is an exemption in the UK legislation, which allows for sales by small scale non-licensed fishers.

# ANNEX 1

## CUTTINGS FROM ICES' SEA BASS ADVICE FOR 2014 - CELTIC SEA, WEST OF SCOTLAND, NORTH SEA

ICES advise that commercial landings in 2014 should be reduced by 33.3%, compared with the 2012 landings:

"Based on ICES approach to data-limited stocks, ICES advises that commercial landings should be no more than 2707 tonnes in 2014."

"Discards are known to take place but the data are insufficient to estimate a discard proportion that could be applied to give catch advice."

"...recreational catches cannot be quantified. Therefore total catches cannot be calculated."

"Fishing mortality is increasing, and an exploratory evaluation indicates that  $F$  is above a possible FMSY proxy. The total biomass has been declining since 2005. Total biomass, assumed as the best stock size indicator in the last two years (2011–2012), was 32% lower than the total biomass in the three previous years (2008–2010)."

"Commercial landings (2012) = 4060 t (UK and France: 24% bottom trawlers; 29% pelagic pair trawlers; 14% fixed/drift nets; 12% lines; 7% other gears. Other countries: 14% all gears)."

"Recent surveys indicate that recreational fishery harvests could amount to 20% of total fishery removals of sea bass, but there are no data on long-term trends in such catches and no procedure to include the recent data in the assessment."

"Stock structure in Subareas IV, VII, and VIII remains poorly defined and further studies are needed using tagging, genetics, and other population/individual markers. Historical sampling of fishery catches is of variable quality, and data should be collected representatively across the fleets taking sea bass."

"Time-series of relative abundance indices are needed for both the adult and pre-recruit components of the stock. Pre-recruit survey series included in the assessment were terminated in 2009 and 2011. More up-to-date estimates of maturity across the full stock range are needed."

"The basis for the advice is an analytical assessment, presented for this stock this year for the first time. The assessment is considered to be appropriate to describe stock status trends."

"The methods applied to derive quantitative advice for data-limited stocks are expected to evolve as they are further developed and validated. The harvest control rules are expected to stabilize stock size, but they may not be suitable if the stock size is low and/or overfished."



**ICES ADVISE THAT COMMERCIAL  
LANDINGS IN 2014 SHOULD BE REDUCED  
BY 33,3%, COMPARED WITH THE 2012  
LANDINGS**

# SHOWCASES



## USA STRIPED BASS

The striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) is the American big sister of the European sea bass. In the seventies, when the sea bass stock collapsed, a focused and careful management with regard to limited fishing measures was introduced for recreational as well as for commercial fisheries.

The objective was to ensure optimal recreational use. This was based on the fact that the sea bass value is higher when it is caught by recreational fisheries. Ever since then the stocks have recovered, recreational fishing for striped bass thrives, and the expenditures by recreational striped bass fishers increased exponentially to more than 600 million US dollar per year.



## IRELAND EUROPEAN SEA BASS

Ireland is an excellent example of how stock recovery and economic profitability can go together. Following the near collapse of the sea bass stock in the eighties resulting from commercial overfishing, Ireland imposed a commercial landing ban.

For recreational fishers a bag limit of two sea bass per day (for personal consumption) was imposed, together with a close season from 15th May to 15th June. This is now beginning to pay off for the Irish: recreational sea bass fishing is currently a sustainable activity, whereby the economic value of recreational sea bass catches proves to be of a significant higher value than the value of the commercial landings as edible fish. This is the reason why sea bass fishing has become durable ecotourism in Ireland, which could be realised in the rest of Europe as well.

### Facts and figures:

- Ever since 2004, the ICES warned that the sea bass stock in the north-eastern part of the Atlantic Ocean is reducing. As from 2005, sea bass stock has been reduced by more than 20%.
- Fishing mortality (due to recreational and commercial fishing) has increased (4000 tonnes commercial landings in the North Sea and The Channel in 2012). The average size of a caught bass has decreased over the years – a sure sign of overfishing.

Commercial landings (in tonnes) European sea bass in Divisions IVbc, VIIa, and VIId-h (Irish Sea, Celtic Sea, English Channel, and southern North Sea).

