

**Contribution of the United Kingdom to the 15th round of Informal
Consultations of the State
Parties to the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (ICSP-15)
Implementation of an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management**

1. Introduction

1. In the UK, an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management is enshrined within the Fisheries Act 2020¹ as ‘an approach which ensures that the collective pressure of human activities is kept within levels compatible with the achievement of Good Environmental Status (GES)² and does not compromise the capacity of marine ecosystems to respond to human-induced changes.’ Achieving GES is about protecting the marine environment, preventing its deterioration and restoring it where practical, while allowing sustainable use of marine resources. It represents a shift in fisheries management from focussing on single species, to a more holistic approach that recognises the wider impact fishing activities have on ecosystems and food webs.

2. This approach can be broken down into the following key areas:
 - Reduction of unnecessary mortality
 - Protection and conservation of habitat
 - Precautionary approach to management

3. These key areas are further explored throughout this report, which focuses on joint measures being undertaken by all four nations of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). As fisheries management in the UK is a largely devolved matter across the four nations’ fisheries policy authorities, differences in approach to policy development may occur between the nations however this report does not capture any additional measures being undertaken by individual nations.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/22/contents/enacted>

² [The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1000/contents/make)

4. UK fisheries legislation sits within the UK Fisheries Management and Support Framework³, (Fisheries Framework). The Fisheries Framework is an agreement relating to the management of fisheries by the four fisheries policy authorities which recognises both the devolved competence, but also that a degree of convergence, at least at a high level is required to effectively manage fisheries and our ocean. The main components of the Fisheries Framework are the legislative elements including the Fisheries Act 2020, other legislation, the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS), and Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs).
5. It is partly through the Fisheries Framework that the UK will implement measures to achieve its ambition of world class fisheries management. The Fisheries Act is underpinned by our commitment to sustainability – supporting future generations of fishers while allowing our marine environment to thrive. The Act contains a ‘Bycatch Objective’ seeking to avoid or reduce the wasteful practice of discarding fish; an ‘Ecosystem Objective’ to minimise and, where possible, eliminate negative impacts on marine ecosystems and incidental catches of sensitive marine species; and a new ‘Climate Change Objective’ which recognises and seeks to minimise the impact of fishing on the health of our ocean and our planet, and the need to support fisheries to adapt to the effects of climate change.
6. The Act includes a requirement to have a UK-wide JFS and FMPs, and the fisheries policy authorities have now published a draft JFS⁴ which sets out a UK wide strategic policy framework to deliver world-class sustainable fisheries and marine aquaculture. It commits the fisheries policy authorities to work together to adopt an ‘ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management’ that will underpin a vibrant, profitable fishing industry that is resilient to climate change.
7. As a vital part of our post-EU fisheries management approach, the draft JFS sets out our strategic policies to achieve, or contribute to achieving, the eight fisheries objectives in the Fisheries Act through:
 - Protecting and, where necessary, recovering our fish stocks.

³ [Fisheries management and support: provisional common framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fisheries-management-and-support-provisional-common-framework)

⁴ [Draft Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/draft-joint-fisheries-statement)

- Reducing the effects of fishing on the marine and coastal environment.
 - Supporting a modern, resilient, and environmentally responsible fishing industry.
8. The overarching policies in the draft JFS are designed to address the specific needs of the UK's fishing industry and environment. The JFS will support the achievement of the objectives of the Marine Strategy Regulations (GES) in UK seas by ensuring fish stocks are harvested within Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY); that key forage species are protected; that fish stocks and fisheries activities are managed so that any negative impacts on marine ecosystems are minimised and, where possible, reversed (including damage to the seabed, harmful pressure on sensitive species, and reduction of marine litter); and that the bycatch of non-target fish species is avoided or reduced.
9. The UK is one of the 15 Governments party to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment (OSPAR Convention) in the North-East Atlantic. OSPAR is the mechanism through which these 15 Governments and the EU cooperate to protect the marine environment. Participating in OSPAR is important for the UK given the Convention area covers UK waters. Whilst OSPAR does not have a mandate for fisheries management, it does have a responsibility to assess the environmental effects of fisheries on the marine ecosystem across this region. To facilitate this process OSPAR has adopted memoranda of understanding with both the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission and North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation that detail their roles in conserving marine biodiversity within their respective mandates. The draft JFS will further support OSPARs work as set out in its North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 supporting adaptation and building resilience in the marine environment in the face of climate change and encouraging adaption within the fish and aquaculture sector.
10. In order to maintain food webs and wider biodiversity that are imperative for the correct functioning of the ecosystem, it is important to address wider ecosystem impacts that may directly, or indirectly, affect fisheries. Measures developed through the Fisheries Framework will support the wider adaptative management approach set out in the UK

Marine Strategy⁵, (UKMS) covering 15 elements (known as descriptors) including: seals, cetaceans, seabirds, fish biodiversity; non-indigenous species; commercial fish; food webs; eutrophication; sea-floor integrity; hydrographical conditions; contaminants; contaminants in seafood; marine litter and underwater noise.

2. Policy and Implementation

11. Details of fisheries management measures in place to directly contribute to an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management are set out below.

2.1 Reduction of Mortality on non-target species

12. The Fisheries Act's 'Bycatch Objective' seeks to avoid or reduce the wasteful practice of discarding fish; and the 'Ecosystem Objective' commits to minimising and, where possible, eliminating negative impacts on marine ecosystems and incidental catches of sensitive marine species

i) Maximum Sustainable Yield

13. The UK is committed to sustainable fishing, including the principle of fishing within a Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) whilst ending the wasteful practice of discarding fish. Due to the international nature of fishing and fish stocks which span national boundaries, MSY can only be achieved through international negotiation, and relies on the goodwill and shared ambition of other parties. We will use our negotiating power as a coastal state to seek to achieve sustainable fishing at an international level.

ii) Addressing Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated Fishing

14. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing globally undermines our collective ability to fish at MSY and implement an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management as we cannot know the volume of fish extracted by illegal operations. The

⁵ [Marine strategy part one: UK updated assessment and Good Environmental Status - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61222/marine_strategy_part_one_uk_updated_assessment_and_good_environmental_status.pdf)

UK will play its full part globally in supporting initiatives to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing. To achieve this, cooperation will be strengthened through the sharing of information and intelligence, working with international partners and the sharing of best practice and expertise. The UK will also be taking a strong participatory and influential role within international forums. At the World Trade Organization, the UK is pushing for a prohibition on subsidies to vessels conducting IUU fishing. In Regional Fisheries Management Organisations the UK will seek to strengthen measures to prevent and deter IUU fishing. Through intelligence sharing forums such as North Atlantic Fisheries Intelligence Group and Interpol, the UK will share vital intelligence towards tackling fisheries crime.

15. Domestically, the UK continues its commitment to eliminate IUU fishing by requiring catch certificates for imports of fish into the UK from all other countries through the retained Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Regulation⁶. Catch Certificates provide assurance that fish and fisheries products have been caught in line with the relevant conservation and management measures applicable to the area fished. The UK's Fisheries Authorities continue to work hard to monitor fishing activity in our waters with dedicated enforcement and surveillance work, including offshore patrol vessels for at-sea surveillance. They also monitor, assess, and manage the activity within Marine Protected Areas where appropriate.

iii) [Bycatch reduction and monitoring](#)

16. The Fisheries Policy Authorities across the UK remain fully committed to ending the wasteful discarding of fish and want to continue working with industry and others to address this issue. Discarding is a symptom of bycatch, and The Bycatch Objective within the Fisheries Act aims to address the root cause of the issue. The Bycatch Objective has been strengthened to include as one of its pillars the recording and accounting of catch. This will improve the accuracy of the data available on fishing mortality in turn improving stock analysis and enabling sustainable quota setting that avoids overfishing.

⁶ [Section D: Illegal, unreported and unregulated \(IUU\) legislation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

17. Regarding the impact of fishing on the broader ecosystem, the JFS reaffirms the national fisheries authorities' commitment to working with the fishing industry to minimise and where possible eliminate incidental catches of sensitive species including marine mammals, seabirds, and elasmobranchs. The fisheries policy authorities will soon publish the UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative, which outlines how the UK will deliver on its ambitions to minimise and where possible eliminate the bycatch of sensitive species. It identifies policy objectives that will be important to achieving the overall aim including to improve scientific monitoring and research, develop, and adopt effective mitigation measures, support fishers to implement mitigation measures, and work with international partners to reduce the bycatch of sensitive species globally.
18. The UK government funds a comprehensive and well-respected bycatch monitoring programme, which since 2005 has provided essential observer data on incidents of sensitive species bycatch. This information is used to further our understanding on impacts of sensitive species and inform discussions on bycatch elimination. From April 2022 the monitoring programme will be expanding to include other methods of monitoring such as Remote Electronic Monitoring, (REM), to increase monitoring coverage so it can be more representative across all sensitive species and different part of the fishing fleet in UK waters. In 2021, the UK implemented a licence condition on vessel operators in the UK Exclusive Economic Zone to make it compulsory to report all intentional and incidental mortality and injury of all marine mammals in the course of commercial fishing operations.

2.2 Aquaculture

19. The JFS commits the fisheries policy authorities to support a diverse and economically viable aquaculture industry, which contributes to food security and the economy and minimises environmental impact. Aquaculture can play a positive role in addressing climate change through providing sustainable sources of low-carbon, high-quality protein, whilst sub-sectors of aquaculture have potential roles in carbon capture, such as seaweed and shellfish aquaculture. The UK's aquaculture sector is expected to adapt to

environmental and climate change, and developments in the aquaculture sector should be based on the best scientific evidence.

2.3 Protection and Conservation of Habitat

20. The protection and conservation of fish habitats is a key aspect of the ecosystem approach, as small changes can have cascading effects across the entirety of the food web.

i) Marine Protected Areas

21. In addition to the UK Marine Strategy other measures the UK has taken to protect the wider ecosystem include designating Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). MPAs can act as a nature-based solution that will improve the state of our seas, address biodiversity loss, and ensure a more climate resilient marine ecosystem which will deliver benefits for society. The UK is at the forefront of marine protection with 372 MPAs protecting 38% of UK waters⁷. We have built a comprehensive network of MPAs and are focusing on making sure they are protected properly. Protection does not always mean closure to fishing; regulators use a range of tools to manage and where necessary to restrict fishing to protect vulnerable species and environments.

22. The UK intends to introduce a number of pilot Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) for biodiversity recovery. HPMAs will have the highest protection in our seas, allowing nature to fully recover and enabling the ecosystem to thrive. HPMAs will contribute to the government's vision for 'clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse ocean and seas' and take a 'whole site approach', conserving all species and habitats within the HPMA boundary. Stakeholders will have the opportunity to share their views and provide additional evidence to be considered before any pilot sites are designated.

⁷ [UK Marine Protected Area network statistics | JNCC - Adviser to Government on Nature Conservation](#)

2.4 Wider Ecosystem Impacts

i) Marine Litter

23. Abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) is currently the form of marine litter with the greatest known impact on marine life, and has been estimated to cause a 5-30% decline in some fish stock levels⁸. To address this, and other sources of marine litter, the UK:

- Has, through its 2021 presidency, driven the G7 to commit to step up international action to tackle ALDFG, including an agreement to carefully consider the recommendations of the UK commissioned Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD), report 'Towards G7 Action to Combat Ghost Fishing gear'⁹.
- Is an active member of the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, an alliance of the fishing industry, private companies, NGOs and governments. It is the first initiative dedicated to tackling the problem of ghost fishing on a global scale.
- Joined the Group of Friends to Combat Marine Plastic Pollution (GoF) as one of the 45 founding countries. The GoF aims to strengthen and improve co-ordination on actions to address plastic pollution at the global level, including by supporting work under the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA).
- Funds the Marine Conservation Society to carry out beach litter data surveys to record litter from sections of our coast. This helps us monitor the levels of plastic pollution, and the data are used in combination with other monitoring data, to inform our decisions about how to address marine litter. Our Executive Agency, Cefas, is leading work through the Clean Atlantic programme, to document marine litter in the Northeast Atlantic area, and analyse the toxicity of cigarette butts in the marine environment.
- Supports Operation Clean Sweep, an initiative led by industry through the British Plastics Federation to address incidents of pre-production plastic pellet loss, also

⁸ [GGGI 2017 Annual Report — Global Ghost Gear Initiative](#)

⁹ [Towards G7 action to combat ghost fishing gear: A background report prepared for the 2021 G7 Presidency of the United Kingdom | en | OECD](#)

known as nurdles. This initiative addresses this problem at all stages of the supply chain. We also support Fishing for Litter (FFL), a voluntary, unpaid litter bycatch removal scheme facilitated by Kommunernes International Miljøorganisation (Local Authorities International Environmental Organisation) (KIMO) to support commercial fishers, providing large bags to collect litter present in their regular catches. When full, these bags are deposited on the quayside and collected for disposal.

ii) Underwater Noise Pollution

24. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that underwater noise can have impacts across the full ecosystem, including on fish. Underwater noise is increasing in the marine environment and includes noise from pile driving for wind farm foundations, seismic surveys for locating oil and gas reserves and removal of unexploded ordnance. Impacts on the marine environment can include disturbing, displacing and injuring marine mammals.

25. Through the UK Marine Strategy, a programme of measures has been put in place to regulate underwater noise. Most activities creating sounds exceeding levels judged to be harmful to marine animals sensitive to disturbances must be licensed or notified and conducted under strict conditions. A Marine Noise Registry¹⁰ has been developed to record impulsive sound from various activities in the UK seas, which feeds into a European registry through the OSPAR Convention.

26. In addition, the UK's Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies' have published *Guidance for assessing the significance of noise disturbance against Conservation Objectives of harbour porpoise Special Areas of Conservation for England and Northern Ireland (2020)*¹¹. This publication represents a significant milestone in managing underwater noise and protecting our marine environment. In collaboration with the regulators, we are continuing to consider other strategies to manage and reduce the impacts of underwater noise.

¹⁰ [Marine Noise Registry \(incc.gov.uk\)](https://incc.gov.uk)

¹¹ [Guidance on noise management in harbour porpoise SACs | JNCC Resource Hub](#)

3. Implementing an ecosystem-based approach through other agreements

27. Close working with the fishing sector and other stakeholders will be a key factor in the successful implementation of the Ecosystem Approach to fisheries management in UK waters – to this effect the draft UK Joint fisheries statement contains a range of commitments on collaboration and partnership working with our international partners, coastal states, the fishing sector and wider stakeholders across a broad range of policy development, evidence gathering, and the development and implementation of fisheries management plans.
28. The UK wants to see the broader impacts of fisheries taken into account in the different fora the UK is a part of. The UK has played a significant role in Regional Fisheries Management Organisations in agreeing area-based fisheries management measures with a view to reducing and mitigating the impacts of fishing on sensitive species and sensitive habitats, such as recently co-sponsoring a proposal at the North-West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation to protect Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems.
29. Furthermore, the UK is committed to playing a leading role in developing an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework to be adopted at COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). As part of this framework the UK will be supporting ambitious targets to bend the curve of biodiversity loss by 2030, including targets to ensure at least 30% of the global ocean is protected, ecosystems are restored and to ensure that fishing activities are sustainable and legal.

4. Future Policy Development

30. In April 2022, the UK will launch its flagship 3-year Research and Development (R&D) programme, The Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme, to transform environmental and socio-economic decision-making. The programme will provide a robust evidence-base, suite of tools and a framework where ecological, societal,

and economic information is brought together in a holistic way, to improve our understanding of the complex trade-offs faced in the sustainable use of the marine environment. The programme will help frame fisheries management within the context of wider natural capital growth and will fill priority evidence gaps in areas such as marine biodiversity, carbon sequestration, fish nursery grounds and cultural and recreational services of fisheries. It will invest in innovative data collection and analysis technology, including using private sector expertise, for fisheries management. Furthermore, it will support development of fisheries management plans and create an easy to access data system to capture multidisciplinary evidence products that will catalyse the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. Evidence gathered through its first year has already been used to great effect to model impacts of a fisheries closure on wider fisheries, birds, cetacean, and wind farm development in the North Sea.

31. More broadly, the UK's Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) are documents that will set out policies and measures to help manage fishing activity to restore and/or maintain fish stocks at sustainable levels and will be our key delivery tools, as outlined in the Fisheries Act 2020 and draft JFS. Once developed these plans, together with the JFS and other policies, will help us achieve or contribute to the achievement of the fisheries objectives set out in the Fisheries Act 2020. Building on our already strong and collaborative approach, FMPs can provide a mechanism to:
- bring fisheries managers, scientists, fishers, and wider stakeholders together to develop new solutions to addressing fisheries management issues;
 - facilitate broader stewardship of our fisheries resources and marine environment;
 - provide the flexibility to work across administrative boundaries to manage common stocks, fisheries, or areas;
 - help develop approaches to the management of complex mixed fisheries and ecosystems to deliver sustainable outcomes;
 - consider quota and non-quota stocks together, within a plan for an area.
32. FMPs will provide a mechanism to support the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management to ensure that the wider effects of fishing activities on the marine

environment are considered and minimised by fisheries managers, ensuring healthy seas on which our fisheries resources rely.

33. FMPs will use advice from all parties with an interest in the target stocks/fisheries/areas, including fisheries scientists, fisheries managers, industry experts and fishers themselves on the most appropriate way to deliver sustainable fisheries. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) already provides advice for internationally shared stocks that countries use to inform the setting of catch limits for Total Allowable Catches (TACs). The UK will continue to engage in the ICES process in conjunction with our own domestic data-gathering developments to improve our understanding of our domestic fish stocks.

5. Conclusion

34. Each fisheries policy authority within the UK can develop policies to best address their individual priorities and adapt to the needs of their fisheries. Recognising that a joint approach may be best for some fisheries management issues and to support delivery of international obligations, we have agreed a JFS to help provide a strategic policy framework to deliver world class fisheries management within the UK. The JFS demonstrates our commitment to global leadership on sustainable fisheries management by also being applicable to our international work.