

Mackerel Advice – Buy Best of British

There appears to be no end in sight to the political tug-of-war over mackerel in the North East Atlantic, and the Marine Conservation Society remains very concerned for the fish stocks that have been caught in the middle.

Continued overfishing and suspension of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification in March 2012 prompted the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) to down-list its rating of mackerel in January of this year - once the 'poster-boy' of sustainable seafood and rated as a 'Fish to Eat' on its seafood ratings website www.fishonline.org. The MCS has been working closely with the fishing industry since this event, however, to ensure consumers are as well informed as they can be, and to strongly advise them to seek out the most sustainable sources of mackerel if they wish to keep eating this most wonderful of fish.

MCS is today publishing a set of revised ratings that better reflect the damaging effect the political stand-off is having on mackerel stocks and the wider marine environment. The political impasse is playing a dangerous game with fish stocks, resulting in the twin perils of poor fisheries management and increasing levels of by-catch.

The MCS ratings, detailed in the table below, indicate that:

Best Choice: South West hand-line caught mackerel (2)

Best Alternative: UK / EU / Norwegian pelagic caught mackerel (3)

Least Sustainable: Icelandic and Faroese pelagic caught mackerel (4)

Background

To date, catch share negotiations involving all interested parties have failed to reach agreement to achieve the sustainable exploitation of the mackerel stock. Based on the best available data, this would represent a multilateral Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 542,000 tonnes as advised by the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES). In recent years, however, both Iceland and the Faroe Islands have unilaterally and aggressively increased their respective catches in defiance of this advice.

The total catch is now far in excess of what has been scientifically recommended and previously agreed upon by all participating countries. Without resolution the North East Atlantic mackerel stock is set to be overfished to the tune of 200,000 tonnes annually. MINSA countries (EU and Norway) are committed to a binding long-term fisheries management agreement with strict quotas for their vessels to ensure the long term health of the stock (based on ICES advice). As of yet neither Iceland nor the Faeroes have entered an equivalent long-term international management plan and this is reflected in the refined MCS fish ratings.

The MCS is calling for all parties to end this saga of fruitless negotiations and concentrate on safeguarding the health of the fish stock – for the economic and environmental benefit of all concerned. If there are no mackerel, then everyone stands to lose, not to mention the mackerel themselves and the seas they swim in.

Although the political process is currently failing to resolve the issue, consumers have the power to help break the deadlock by only buying mackerel from the most sustainable fisheries available. This means only buying local, EU & Norwegian caught mackerel from fisheries that remain within the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) programme (albeit suspended). Consumers need to look carefully at the labels on their seafood products to know where the fish was caught. Retailers also have a significant role in this and have a responsibility to source all their fish from well-managed fisheries with scientifically based quotas.

“The best choice for mackerel remains fish caught locally using traditional hand lining methods. This method is without doubt the most sustainable method of fishing for mackerel and other species. It is labour intensive and produces quality fish which should attract a premium price. Any market flooded with poor quality fish that drives down both prices and sustainability is bad news for everyone”.

For more detailed information on the fisheries for mackerel in the North East Atlantic see www.fishonline.org

Summary Table

Fishery	Jan 2013 Rating	May 2013 Rating	Justification
South West Handline (UK)	3	2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previously MSC Certified 2001-2012. Decision made not to renew certification in Feb 2012 for financial reasons. 2. Since 1998 the fishery has been granted special quota allocation under authority of the MMO. Allocation is now set at 1750 t or 0.83% of the UK Quota - whichever is the higher 3. Unique low impact and targeted fishery. 4. Restricted in area to coastal waters of Cornwall and Devon. Most fishing takes place within 6 nm of shore and targets mackerel from the western component of the stock. 5. Restricted capacity. Around 150 boats, most under 10m. Many are 5-8 m single-handed open boats. 6. South West Mackerel Box, created in 1981, and extended in 1989, to protect juvenile mackerel from purse-seining and trawling. Hand-liners are the only fishermen allowed to target mackerel in this sea area.
Mackerel Industry Northern Sustainability Alliance (MINSAs)/ Pelagic trawl//Purse Seine/other hand-line	4	3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previously MSC Certified and remains within the MSC programme with suspended status pending resolution of international quota dispute. 2. MINSAs vessels abide by a code of best practice adhering to quotas and closures that is subject to periodic audits. 3. Compliance with multilateral management plan for sustainable exploitation of entire stock 4. Mackerel targeted from September to February to avoid spawning and when in best condition. 5. Successful development of an action plan means that the fisheries' certificates may remain suspended until the situation is resolved – when they will be re-instated without the need for a full reassessment.
Iceland/ Pelagic trawl/Pair Trawl		4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Iceland has never been in or applied for certification under the MSC programme. 2. Declared catches far in excess of scientific recommendations. 3. Unilaterally drastically increased declared landings

			<p>from historically 0-6% to 23% of the total recommended catch for all nations.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Fishery is operating outside of a recognised ICES science based management plan 5. Following 15 rounds of high level international negotiations Iceland have left the table leaving negotiations in stalemate. 6. Reports of high levels of mixed Herring catches with Mackerel as fishing takes place during feeding season. 7. High volume of reportedly poorer quality fish from this fishery is driving down prices depending on market and product.
<p>Faroese /Pelagic trawl / Pair Trawl</p>		<p>4</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2010 Faroe stepped outside long-term multi lateral fisheries agreement on mackerel and declared intention to secure a greater share of fishery. 2. Fishery is operating outside of a recognised ICES science based management plan 3. Applied for MSC Certification but failed 4. 2010-2013 Faroe Government declare intention for national fishery to catch Mackerel far in excess of previous quota sharing arrangements and excess of scientific recommendations . 5. Unilaterally increasing catches from agreed share of 4.6% to 23% 6. Faroese operate by-catch limit of 10% herring in mackerel fishery – this has reportedly exceeded with high level of mixed Herring catches with Mackerel as fishing takes place during feeding season 7. Faroese stepped outside long-term multilateral agreement on herring (Atlanto Scandian herring). Herring – Faroese Government have declared intention to raise catches from the historical sharing of 33,000 t to approx.105,000 t. Thereby also placing the Herring fishery at risk. 8. High volume of reportedly poorer quality fish from this fishery is driving down prices depending on market and product. 9. Faroese fishing fleet short of vessels and processing capacity achieve intended catch – actively flag in new vessels along with swapping unilateral mackerel “quota” to Russia in return for whitefish quotas.