

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on PE2110: Protect wild wrasse stocks

Background

Wrasse are a family of fish species which feed upon crustacea and molluscs and play an important role in the wild in controlling parasites which predate upon other fish (including commercial species) or on habitat-forming flora such as kelp.

They are used as 'cleaner fish' in the Scottish finfish aquaculture industry to control parasitic sea lice which predate on farmed finfish, often to reduce or eliminate the need for anti-parasitic chemical treatments which can have adverse impacts on the marine environment.

The petitioner expresses concern regarding the vulnerability of wild wrasse stocks to over-catching due to their biological and reproductive characteristics. The petition calls for the introduction of a statutory Fisheries Management Plan focussed on protecting wild wrasse stocks in Scottish waters.

Wild wrasse fisheries

Wrasse are largely wild caught in fisheries. [A 2021/22 report on the Scottish wild wrasse fishery](#) (published in July 2024) explains that the fishery for wrasse has developed since the late 1980's.

Total landings were 68.0 tonnes in 2021 and 78.6 tonnes in 2022. Ballan wrasse is typically the most common species of wrasse landed and accounted for 73.0% of the reported landings (by weight) in 2021 and 80.6% in 2022.

The wrasse fishery season runs from 1st May - 30th November each year. There is currently no Total Allowable Catch (TAC) applied to commercial wrasse fishing which means that there is no limit to the number of wrasse above a certain size limit (see section below on Scottish Government Action) which can be fished during the fishing season.

Vulnerability of wrasse to over-exploitation

[A briefing on the petitioner's organisation's website](#) provides the following reasons why wild wrasse are vulnerable to over-exploitation which can cause localised depletion ('extirpation').

- Their limited home range can lead to localised extirpation because, when wrasse are removed from an area, other individuals do not readily recolonise it;
- Wrasse are long-lived and slow growing, so the removal of mature specimens can adversely affect the reproductive potential of localised populations;
- Wrasse have unusual reproductive biology, with the males of several species behaving territorially to protect their eggs. The loss of adult males from a population may therefore adversely impact on stock recruitment; and
- Some wrasse are hermaphroditic with smaller individuals starting life female but becoming male on reaching a larger size. As a result, fisheries which remove larger sized fish may pose a risk to the sex ratio, which presents a further risk to reproductive success.

Scottish Government Action

In 2018 the Scottish Government and Salmon Scotland introduced voluntary management measures to the previously unregulated fishery. Following consultation in 2020, the measures were made mandatory in 2021 by introduction of a licence condition prohibiting all Scottish vessels from fishing for wrasse unless they successfully apply on an annual basis for a Letter of Derogation from Scottish Ministers.

Mandatory measures include:

- Restrictions on creel (fishing pots and traps) numbers and minimum and maximum landing sizes of caught fish.
- The requirement to submit weekly scientific data return forms to the Marine Directorate

[Further details on the mandatory measures are provided in the Scottish Government's wild wrasse fishery report \(see page 2\).](#)

Scottish Parliament Action

[In November 2018, the Scottish Parliament Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee \(RECC\) published its inquiry report on salmon farming in Scotland.](#) The report included consideration of the use of cleaner fish in the salmon farming industry. The report concluded:

“The Committee acknowledges the benefits that cleaner fish may have for the salmon industry. However, it recognises that these benefits can only be achieved through careful management of the environmental implications and sustainable use of cleaner fish stocks.”

The report made the following recommendations:

- **RECOMMENDATION 26** It endorses the ECCLR [Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee] recommendations on cleaner fish and agrees that there is an urgent need for an assessment of future demand as well as all associated environmental implications of the farming, fishing and use of cleaner fish.
- **RECOMMENDATION 27** The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to "assess whether management measures are appropriate and proportionate to the current and anticipated future levels of sustainable wild wrasse fishing in Scotland" as part of its Fish Health Framework. It would urge the Scottish Government to complete this assessment as a matter of urgency.
- **RECOMMENDATION 28** The Committee strongly recommends that the Scottish Government consider the need for regulation of cleaner fish fishing to preserve wild stocks and avoid negative knock-on impact in local ecosystems.

[The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee are currently taking evidence to inform its follow-up inquiry to the RECC inquiry.](#)

There are numerous Parliamentary questions which have been lodged regarding the management of wrasse fisheries in recent years. These can be viewed in the link below:

[Parliamentary Questions - Wrasse](#)

Damon Davies

Researcher, Environment, Constitution, Rural and International Relations, SPICe

22/08/2024

SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP