

Environment

# Create protective 'blue belt' zone around UK coast to rebuild depleted fish stocks, scientists urge

Study says huge reduction in fishing due to Brexit negotiations and Coronavirus pandemic gives government unique window of opportunity to improve sustainability and profitability of industry

**Harry Cockburn** | 22 hours ago |

Fishing boats out of the water in Hastings - the town is home to Europe's largest beach-launched fishing fleet ( Getty )

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The **Brexit** negotiations and the **Coronavirus** pandemic have together caused a major slowdown in commercial **fishing** in the UK.

As the fishing industry explores its options for how to rebuild and reopen functioning supply lines to markets once the UK leaves the **European Union** and also once the impacts of the pandemic have reduced, researchers have suggested the current hiatus is an opportunity to rebuild **fish stocks**.

A study by the **University of Southampton**, the GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research and the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia has set out how the UK government could take “a new approach” to managing its fishing waters, which researchers claim would not only see fish populations recover, but would increase the economic returns for fishers.

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The plans include the creation of a 'blue belt' of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) around the UK coast to protect stocks by preventing fishing in these areas.

“Several stocks targeted by UK fishers are in a degraded and precarious state, with around 40 per cent that will continue to be overfished when normal activity resumes,” said Professor Paul Kemp, lead author of the study and a researcher at the University of Southampton.

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“One of the reasons for this is that fishing quotas, or how much of each species can be caught in a certain area by each country, are set by the EU at levels higher than those that would enable the recovery of the populations.”

The researchers note that after Brexit the UK will no longer be bound by the EU's Common Fisheries Policy and therefore has the chance to develop a new policy

“focused on sustainability and preserving the livelihoods of fishing communities”.

They said at the same time the massive reduction in fishing activity caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has seen pressure on some threatened species fall to levels “not seen since World War II”.

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The researchers propose new fishing targets be set to levels in which fishers leave more fish in the water than the minimum required to generate maximum sustainable yields.

“Maximum Sustainable Yield or MSY is defined as the highest catch that can be continuously taken from a stock under existing environmental conditions,” said Rainer Froese, co-author of the study and senior scientist at GEOMAR.



“Smart fisheries management, such as applied in Australia, aims for a little less than MSY. That reduces the risk of unintentional overfishing and ensures close to maximum catches, year after year.”

Daniel Pauly, co-author of the study and principal investigator of the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia said adopting such a policy would “allow fish populations to recover to levels that are higher than those that can produce MSY to ensure large and diverse populations that will be better prepared for climate change, stabilise ecosystems, and at the same time maximize fishers’ profits.”

He added: “The opportunity to do this is now because of the slowdown caused by Covid-19 and because after Brexit, the UK will be in a position to insist in its negotiations with the EU that fishing quotas advised by scientists not be exceeded.”

The creation of a “blue belt” around the UK coast, together with enforcement of their protected status, would create an additional

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safeguard for fish populations and aim to maintain sustainability and profitable fishing.

“The establishment of MPAs is one of the most cost-effective ways to restore overexploited stocks and habitats on which fish depend, to the mutual benefit of the fishing industry who experience increased catches in grounds immediately outside of MPAs,” Professor Pauly said.

The researchers warn “strong conviction will be required” to ensure these areas are suitably protected as there are likely to be disputes with EU members who may regard this as a challenge to their perceived historic fishing rights.

“Brexit divided the UK and the whole world has been challenged by the global health pandemic” added Professor Kemp.

“However, regardless of how people voted, UK politicians have the chance to bring people together over a common goal that supports fishing communities, wider society and environmental sustainability. The opportunity is there but it will require political vision. With the necessary strength of character the negotiators can deliver a positive outcome from the combined systemic shocks of Brexit and Covid-19.”

Chris Thorne, an oceans campaigner at Greenpeace UK, told *PA*: “Our departure from the Common Fisheries Policy provides our government with a unique opportunity to fix the broken system of marine paper parks, most of which are protected on a map but not in reality.

“A blue belt of properly protected marine areas would give marine life a chance to recover and ensure that the UK’s oceans can thrive, which will help support our struggling coastal communities by boosting fish populations.

“Our government could start by stopping industrial supertrawlers from fishing for thousands of hours every year in allegedly protected marine areas.”

The paper “Covid-19 provides an opportunity to advance a sustainable UK Fisheries Policy in a post-Brexit brave new world” has been published in *Marine Policy*.

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