



Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing Deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish Charting Progress 2: The State of UK Seas June 2011

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 of the UK's leading voluntary organisations united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

These briefings are supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Shark Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
- WWF - UK

Overview

The Charting Progress 2 Report (CP2) is the result of a structured and co-ordinated approach to the second assessment of the status of UK seas. Published in July 2010, five years after the first assessment, it aims to illustrate the changes since 2005 and the advances made towards the UK vision of “*clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas*”. It consists of the main CP2 Report (which is also available in an online format), and two summary documents; an eight page CP2 Overview and a 16 page Government's Commentary on CP2; and is based on four supporting technical “Feeder Reports” covering:

- Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas
- Clean and Safe Seas
- Ocean Processes
- Productive Seas

CP2 was prepared by the UK Marine Monitoring and Assessment Strategy community, which was established in response to the first Charting Progress Report. The assessment is structured around 11 regional seas covering all UK waters, some of which were subsequently merged to create the eight UK marine regions assessed.



The intention is that CP2 will be used to inform policy decisions on the future management of the UK's seas. It is also expected to form the foundation of the initial assessment required by the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which is due in 2012, and is already informing the evidence base for marine planning in England.

In light of the importance of CP2 for future decision-making on the management of UK seas, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is concerned that the current status of UK seas is accurately recorded, wherever that information is summarised. In a number of specific places, we are aware that the summarised information on CP2 does not accurately reflect the information in the CP2 report or the Feeder Reports.

Consequently, Link has produced this briefing on deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish to compare the findings and messages of the Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas Feeder Report, with those used in the CP2 Report, the Overview and Government commentary.

In addition, Link has produced a further three separate briefings covering:

- Cetaceans
- Marine benthic habitats
- Waterbirds and seabirds

If you would like to receive a copy of any of these briefings, please contact Fiona Llewellyn at Link (fiona@wcl.org.uk or 02079208600).

Wildlife and Countryside Link Briefing: Charting Progress 2 - Deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish

There are over 330 species of fish found in the waters of the British Isles. The marine fish assessment investigates the changing status of species found in shallow coastal and estuarine waters to those in the deep sea and offshore oceanic waters.

The CP2 Report recognises that the prospects of certain vulnerable fish including deepwater fish species, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous species such as European eel and sturgeon, have continued to deteriorate. However, the CP2 Overview does not mention these significant declines. The Government's Commentary makes reference to the sharp declines in sharks, rays and eels, and acknowledges the gaps in knowledge over the cause of declines in salmon and eel populations.

Deepwater fish, sharks, rays and skates

Detailed assessments have been carried out for the eight regions (presented in the Feeder Report), using a range of fish surveys and time series data to assess changes over the past 20 years. There are however, a number of gaps in the assessment, particularly for deep-sea fish and open water pelagic fish, including sharks. The information available for deep-sea communities can be considered patchy at best with the best studied deep-sea communities around the UK found in the Porcupine Seabight and Rockall Trough. Since the first Charting Progress Report a regular monitoring programme has been established for deepwater fish assemblages off the west of Scotland and around Rockall.

Diadromous fish (salmon, eels, shads, sturgeon, lampreys)

Diadromous fish, which migrate between freshwater and the marine environment, such as salmon, eels, shads and lampreys, form one component of the fish assessment of CP2, but again the data available for diadromous fish is considered piecemeal.

Summary

Both the CP2 Report and the Feeder Report agree that vulnerable fish species, including deepwater fish species, sharks, rays, skates, and diadromous species, have continued to deteriorate, as demonstrated by the steady downward trends of many populations. The overarching reason for this deterioration is not clear, but a number of threats could be contributing, including; changes in oceanic conditions, overexploitation, freshwater habitat destruction, contaminants, and parasitic infections.

The CP2 Report fails to make any specific reference to trends in deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish. It does make reference to the inherent vulnerability of species such as deepwater fish, sharks and rays to the pressures of fishing. The Feeder Report also reflects this vulnerability and recognises that climate change impacts are poorly understood and are sensitive to fluctuations.

The CP2 Report recognises a 70% decline in the number of elvers returning to English and Welsh rivers. There is concern that climate change may adversely affect migratory fish, as environmental variables may be used as migratory cues. Both the CP2 and Feeder Reports acknowledge that there are still large gaps in our knowledge concerning the decline in diadromous species and these gaps could

be key in promoting stock recovery. There has however been an increase in returning salmon and sea trout to some rivers in Britain, thought to reflect improvements in water quality in these regions, but populations in many rivers are still in decline.

Deepwater fish, sharks rays and skates are extremely vulnerable to fishing, as reflected by global decreases. The populations of many open water shark species, as well as several large rays and skates, have decreased significantly in the North Atlantic and the common skate has completely disappeared from the continental shelf.

The CP2 Overview consistently fails, and in places the CP2 Report fails, to accurately reflect the findings of the Feeder Report. The CP2 Report, in line with the Feeder Report, does highlight the lack of knowledge of deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish, and where trends are most uncertain, stresses the need for stricter management of these species. However, these data gaps and subsequent management recommendations are absent from the Overview.

There is little reference to the impacts of bycatch on populations of these species. Longline fishing and trawling can catch significant numbers of these species which are vulnerable even to minimal fishing effort. Other issues which appear to be overlooked are entanglement, marine litter, prey availability and pollution. The CP2 Report does state that the improved water conditions of some rivers may be increasing the return of some diadromous species. Whether or not pollution is hindering the return to other rivers is not considered.

Conclusions

Although this is the most comprehensive assessment of fish communities in the UK

ever conducted, it is recognised by both Reports that there are significant gaps in data, which leads to uncertainty in the assessment. The CP2 Report recognises that the prospects of certain vulnerable fish have continued to deteriorate; however, the CP2 Overview does not mention these significant declines.

The upbeat tone of CP2 in respect to its fisheries assessment does not reflect the lack of knowledge or the declines that are being identified in the most vulnerable species assessed. Importantly, many of these species are top predators and/or commercially exploited, whilst also in significant decline.

Link is concerned that the CP2 Report and Overview fail to adequately reflect the findings of the Feeder Report, and are subsequently concerned that the urgent need for further action to provide appropriate protection for sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish, and improve the management of activities which have a direct impact on them, will not be addressed in the future.