Bluefin fishery: a way forward?

Broad consensus on need for better regulation – and a more realistic UK TAC – at Newlyn meeting on bluefin management

By **ANDY READ**

▲ **Four speakers gave their views to the meeting on bluefin tuna management chaired by Andrew George in Newlyn. Left to right: scientist Richard Kirby, charter skipper Nigel Hodge, Andrew Pascoe, chair of the South West Handline Fishermen's Association, Andrew George MP, Andy Read from *FN*, and Matt Slater of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust.** *(Photo: Laurence Hartwell)*

CORNISH MP ANDREW George, who chaired a meeting in Newlyn last week to discuss licensing of the bluefin tuna fishery, described it as constructive, saying that it delivered a stronger consensus on a way forward than he'd expected.

"As I was the person in the room with substantially the least knowledge of the subject, I felt I was perhaps best qualified to chair the proceedings, and so that I could ask the naïve questions and ensure that unchallenged 'wisdom' wasn't taken for granted," he told *FN*.

"Though I was aware there had been inevitable disappointment around licensing and the method of allocating the very small quotas for this fishery, I was grateful to the four excellent speakers and the many points made by our equally well-informed audience, for providing the best of crash courses for learning about the fishery.

"It was good to hear such a constructive approach, with broad agreement to maximise the benefit of the growing bluefin tuna stock, whilst minimising avoidable mortalities and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the population."

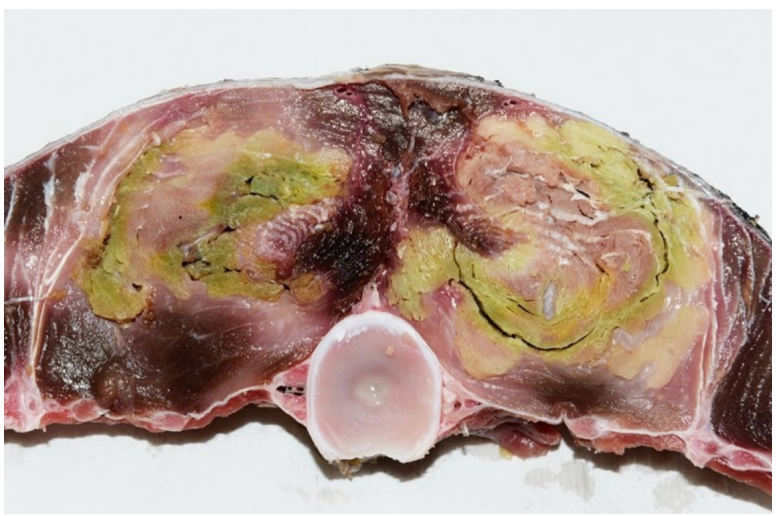
With anglers' representatives from the UK Bluefin Tuna Association and the Angling Trust declining to attend the meeting due, they said, to the 'biased' reporting of the issue by *FN*, the four speakers provided their viewpoints before detailed discussions that heard views from a variety of charter and commercial fishermen.

Opening proceedings, marine scientist Richard Kirby outlined his best take on the science of bluefin tuna, and the reasons they are so at risk of post-release mortality.

"The technical term is exertional rhabdomyolisus," he said. "Basically, when the fight or flight response kicks in in bluefin, they build up calcium ions in their cells, which will then destroy them. This is what causes what fishermen called 'burned' tuna. Research elsewhere has found that up to 20% of tuna caught in the commercial fishery are impacted by this, with the flesh damage reducing prices paid.

"This is one reason that bluefin taken in catch and release fisheries can have high mortality rates – work elsewhere in the world suggests post-release mortality of between 5.6% and 19.5%.

"Tagging studies have shown that released bluefin rapidly descend to below 50m, where there is cooler water, higher oxygen levels and darkness. Mortality of fish unable to reach this water will undoubtedly be higher. Even six hours after release, fish will be swimming at twice their normal cruising speed, to force more oxygenated water across their gills and help their recovery."



▲ **'Burnt tuna': lack of oxygen can cause tuna to die rapidly after release if handled incorrectly, and can also ruin the flesh of commercially caught tuna if they are played for too long, and not correctly cleaned and iced immediately after capture.**

> **"The argument for stronger regulation, with more effective restrictions on private access to the fishery, and for more effective measures to significantly lower post-release mortality, was compelling**

Speaking for the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Matt Slater also expressed his concern about the mortality of released fish. "We rate bluefin tuna as a 'recommended buy' due to the healthy nature of the stock, the fact that it is well managed, with a TAC, and because the fish are caught on selective fishing gear.

"Our concerns about the mortality of released fish could see us downgrade this recommendation. We are very concerned about Defra's proposals to increase catch and release licence numbers this season. Many of our members are also concerned about the ethics of risking fish of this nature, simply for fun."

The Wildlife Trusts also suggested that changing water temperatures could make the UK EEZ ever more important for bluefin, providing a strong argument for the UK to receive a larger share of the TAC. "The science suggests that the Mediterranean will become too warm for bluefin in the coming years, and that the UK EEZ will become an ever more important feeding ground for the stock – we should start planning for this now," he said.

Nigel Hodge, who operates a charter angling vessel from Falmouth, said that bluefin were providing a real boost to local economies in the South West. "We do need to make clear that charter fishing is a mile away from the free-for-all that we see with private recreational anglers.

"Like many charter skippers, I've been involved since before the original CHART programme was developed. As a sector, we are tightly regulated, as anyone involved in an ICCAT fishery should be.

"ICCAT rules are firm, and there is a genuine risk that if the UK figures are reassessed, to take account of mortality in the 3,539 catch and release fish reported last year, our fishery will be closed. The zero mortality figures reported by the majority of last year's fishery are quite clearly incorrect. One hundred and forty catch and release licences for 2025 is far, far too many.

"Bluefin tuna are not a goldrush – the early restrictions were there for a good reason. Some anglers – not all, but a significant number – are behaving irresponsibly, with zero-touch enforcement from the MMO. I have been inspected just once, in eight years as a professional skipper!"

Andrew Pascoe, chair of the South West Handline Fishermen's Association, expressed his worry that angling mortality could even put the commercial fishery at risk. "Last year we started receiving reports of dead tuna being caught by Cornish beamers and trawlers – I am aware of eight or nine incidents," he said. "Under the CHART programme prior to this, we heard of none.

▲ **Scientist Richard Kirby was the first presenter at the meeting, reviewing the science around the catch and release fishery for bluefin, and taking those in the room through the reasons they are so vulnerable to post-release mortality.**

"We are very supportive of a well-regulated charter fishery, with professional skippers adhering to very strict rules to ensure high survival rates of released fish. Charter angling maximises the economic benefits of our very limited bluefin quota, and sits well with a commercial fishery.

"I can't say the same, though, for the unregulated angling fishery, which has seen zero policing, and risks all the hard work that we have put into developing markets for bluefin.

"ICCAT could re-examine our catch statistics, and there is a real risk that they estimate post-release mortality, and then take this from the UK quota, ultimately tying up the commercial and charter fleets. We've put real efforts into developing the fishery and the market, and are now starting to see the benefits – we can't risk losing this just to expand an angling fishery that does next to nothing for the local economy."

Andrew George, who will be passing on his own thoughts on management of the catch and release fishery to Defra minister Daniel Zeichner, said: "There were more points of general consensus than I expected. I'm sure the minister will be encouraged to receive constructive contributions such as these. Of course, I was disappointed to learn the angling sector apparently chose not to send a representative, but I'm sure they won't be backward in coming forward with their views.

"The clear inequality of quota share for the UK sector has left the MMO with the 'no-win' scenario of having to decide how to disappoint 90% of those who we know have a sound basis for securing a licence.

"It's reassuring that the Wildlife Trusts assesses the fishery as sustainable. This accreditation has been carefully assessed, and is based on the quality and standard of professionalism of those engaged in the line-caught fishery. It's clear that everyone – scientists, wildlife conservationists and catching sector – is determined not to allow the fishery to decline as it did in these waters over 60 years ago.

"A further clear message from everyone at the meeting was that investment in better policing, monitoring and enforcement to properly protect the bluefin fishery is a high priority. Both the MMO and IFCAs need more support.

"The argument for stronger regulation, with more effective restrictions on private access to the fishery, and for more effective measures to significantly lower and then prevent post-release mortality, was compelling. The proposed introduction of stricter controls on gear and catch methods, along with the clear scientific evidence-based proposal to ban catch and release in water shallower than 50m, was soundly based.

"Above all, it was generally agreed by conservationists and fishermen that the current distribution of quota share doesn't come anywhere close to reflecting the growing importance of this fishery to our waters, or a level which would be comfortably sustainable.

"It was an honour to be asked to chair and conduct proceedings. I came to listen and learn, and will now convey the consensus of the participants to the minister and officials."

Low UK TAC share 'holding fishery back'

Disappointed applicants for bluefin licences share frustrations about limitations of fishery

By **ANDY READ**

MORE APPLICANTS who failed to obtain bluefin tuna licences in what amounted to a lottery have spoken out about the process, which they say has prevented the benefits from the growing stock being spread around the UK coastline (*FN*, 22 May, *'Bluefin licences issued – with 117 disappointed applicants'*).

One Yorkshire fisherman, who pointed out that no applicants from the North East of England had received a licence, despite the long history of the Yorkshire coast as a centre of the tuna fishery, told *FN*: "We are being judged unfairly by the MMO as we were never offered early access to the fishery, and haven't the track record or the training to tick their boxes, even though the fish are now starting to arrive on the Yorkshire coastline."

A Whitby fisherman said: "This is typical mismanagement of our industry, pushing everyone towards the same target species. How long before our lobster are overfished? Crab are already few and far between these days. The only sustainable fisheries are ones where we can diversify, but pen-pushers making rules whilst they hide in offices simply don't understand this."

Similar sentiments were expressed at last week's meeting in Newlyn. Matt Cave, one of several Mevagissey fishermen who were unlucky in allocation of 2025 bluefin licences, said that an increase in landings by allowing more fishermen to share the available quota would see prices fall in the short term, 'but the extra volume would ultimately help drive the market for UK-caught tuna'.

Others also called for a widening of the licensing to allow greater numbers of commercial boats within the fishery. One South West handliner said: "I can't catch pollack now, and bass is restricted. Even one bluefin a month for three months over the summer would make a difference to my bottom line.

"We are small boats, on the edge of survival, and restricting access to the fishery to a lottery is punishing us, when more of us could share the benefits."

Many involved in the fishery have pointed out that the low share of the 40,000t TAC that the UK was given in the Brexit settlement is the key issue holding back both the industry, and the effective marketing of bluefin. Chris Gill, who has been involved with bluefin for many years and was instrumental in developing the plans that eventually became the CHART programme, said: "There is a huge potential market for bluefin, but it needs priming, and it needs critical mass.

"Investment is needed in cryogenic freezers that take the tuna down to the ultralow temperatures that then allow the fish to enter the commercial sushi market, as well as scaling up many fish processors that don't have the resources to deal with a fish that may weigh 400kg.

"That investment can't come when there is no certainty for businesses, and such a small quota. We have one top buyer in London interested, but he was clear about the tonnage to make it worthwhile – he needed 20t a year to justify the investment, and we simply can't supply this volume."

Andrew Pascoe, chairman of the South West Handline Fishermen's Association, echoed these thoughts, as did several other speakers from the floor at the Newlyn meeting. "The low UK quota has to see an increase, as we work to develop markets for our catches, from a zero start. We are increasing market demand year on year, but a larger and fairer quota would allow bigger companies to invest for the long-term future."

"Tuna is the fourth most popular fish bought in the UK, and the potential demand for bluefin is huge," said ex-MMO officer and newly appointed Newlyn Harbour Commissioner Becca Jarvis, attending on behalf of several small boat owners who were at sea. "But without investment and training, without policing of the angling fishery, this simply isn't going to happen."

Decades in jail for 'fishing' crew after £100m cocaine haul

Over 1t of Class A drugs seized off Cornish coast

By **NED BIGGS**

FOUR MEN INVOLVED IN a sophisticated plot to smuggle over 1t of high-purity cocaine, with a street value of £100m, into the UK aboard a fishing boat have been handed lengthy prison sentences totalling 90 years. The illicit cargo was intercepted by a Border Force vessel off Newquay last September on the fishing boat Lily Lola BM 91.

Jon Williams (46) and Patrick Godfrey (31), both from Swansea, were found guilty after a trial and sentenced to 26 and 25 years respectively. Jon Williams, the skipper, had purchased the Lily Lola from a Ramsgate owner three months earlier. Michael Kelly (45) of Manchester and Jake Marchant (27) of no fixed abode, who had previously pleaded guilty, received 21- and 18-year sentences.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) investigation revealed 1,076kg of cocaine, divided into blocks and bales, stashed throughout the vessel. A device onboard showed instructions and co-ordinates from a third party, while a tracker in the drugs was linked to a user in South America.

While Michael Kelly initially claimed to be on a fishing trip, the court heard compelling evidence of a well-organised drug smuggling operation. Judge James Adkin highlighted the immense harm such a quantity of drugs could inflict. NCA branch commander Derek Evans affirmed the agency's commitment to disrupting drug supply chains and depriving organised criminals of their profits.