

**BSAC Pelagic Working Group
Monday 7th December 2020
Report**

Virtual by Zoom

1. Welcome by the Pelagic WG chair Mart Undrest

Mart Undrest, the Pelagic Working Group Chair welcomed all the participants. He noted that this meeting was the first meeting of the Pelagic Working Group since a long time. He referred to the main item of the agenda - how to approach a stickleback fishery in a controlled and responsible manner and how to develop a pilot fishery. Under AOB the meeting planned to discuss the management of western spring spawning herring.

2. Formalities for the start of the meeting:

Apologies and adoption of the agenda

The list of participants is on the web site¹.

The agenda was adopted without changes.

3. Stickleback

The Pelagic WG Chair referred to the discussions on stickleback held in the framework of the Joint Working Group (9th–10th June 2020), BSAC Ecosystem Based Management Working Group (21st-22nd September 2020) and the ExCom on 27th October 2020. Following the decision of the EBM Working Group, the ExCom recommended that that further work on stickleback should be done in the Pelagic Working Group or in a dedicated Focus Group. The Chair referred to the background paper prepared by the Secretariat before the meeting, including additional input from some BSAC members.

The task of the Working Group meeting was to clarify outstanding issues and for the BSAC to develop guidelines for a trial fishery for stickleback as a first step. Guidelines can describe the background to the problem, and include the implications of this fishery in terms of bycatch, relevant changes needed to the technical measures, and criteria for data collection and handling of the catch.

A representative of Swedish fishermen noted that it is essential to initiate a stickleback fishery to help the disturbed ecosystem. A mesh size of 9-10 mm as used for sandeel should be first used in the trials.

A representative of Polish fishermen stated that Polish fishermen do not report any bycatch of stickleback in the logbooks.

¹ <http://www.bsac.dk/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Pelagic-Working-Group>

Speaking on behalf of Estonian fishermen, **the Chair** noted that the quantities of stickleback, reported as bycatch in Estonia are very small. Fishermen try to avoid these bycatches as much as possible.

A representative of Lithuanian fishermen stated that bycatches of stickleback occur during each fishing trip targeting pelagic species, and sometimes amount to a few hundred kilogrammes; these are registered.

An OIG representative praised the background paper on stickleback prepared by the Secretariat. He asked whether the use of a sandeel trawl will require a change in the fishing pattern and trawling speed when targeting stickleback.

A representative of Swedish fishermen informed that large amounts of stickleback are caught as bycatch in the pelagic fishery.² In the first quarter of 2020, one fisherman had reported several hundred tonnes of stickleback caught in only two trips targeting pelagic species. In the fourth quarter of 2020, reports from fishermen also show very high numbers of stickleback in the pelagic fishery, despite the fact that 70-90% of stickleback escape through the regular meshes of 16 or 32 mm. A smaller mesh size should be used in a fishery targeting stickleback. Referring to the trawling speed, experience from the directed pelagic fishery shows that the same speed could be used when targeting stickleback. She also noted that stickleback occur densely, especially during daytime. There are several technical issues to be resolved in a targeted fishery due to their spines. Mixing of stickleback with sprat makes pumping ashore easier.

A representative of Finnish fishermen referred to the research on stickleback carried out in Finland³, under the national fisheries development programme. Researchers made an annual trip in the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia, as well as the northern parts of the Main Basin. The results include data on bycatches of stickleback in the herring fishery. He informed that it is possible to conduct a targeted fishery for stickleback, provided it is done at the right depth and time of the day, and using a 10 mm mesh size. The Gulf of Bothnia seemed to be the best fishing grounds for a targeted stickleback fishery.

The BSAC Chair noted that a small stickleback fishery conducted by the Danish fleet had stopped due to difficulties in handling the catch. Due to the spines, the catch of sticklebacks will probably require more vacuum to pump it. The possibility of developing a stickleback fishery had emerged in the framework of discussions on future Baltic fisheries. He hoped that the Danish administration would support a trial fishery for stickleback in 2021, conducted by 6 vessels.

² According to the data provided by the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management, the stickleback bycatches in the Swedish pelagic trawl fishery amounted to 564 tonnes in 2019 and 806 tonnes (so far) in 2020.

³ <https://www.luke.fi/sv/nyheter/bestand-tillstand-och-tathet-nya-forskningsron-om-stromming-och-vassbuk-i-ostersjon/>

The process was slowed down by the changes in the Danish administration. He stated that a trial fishery conducted with scientific support should also investigate how to handle the fish on landing. He expressed the hope that the BSAC can agree on encouraging such trials in other Member States.

An OIG representative noted the comments made by fisheries representatives with regard to the fishing pattern which could be used when fishing for stickleback. He referred to the fact that in general, the non-governmental organisations are not opposed to stickleback fishery, but the risks imposed by a targeted stickleback fishery on the ecosystem, such as the bycatch of other species and the effect on the stickleback population should be assessed. In his view, the trial fishery conducted with scientific observers on board could help to clarify many existing uncertainties.

A representative of Danish fishermen underlined the importance of initiating a precautionary, monitored trial fishery for stickleback to collect and evaluate data and elaborate the optimal mesh size. If possible, scientific observers should participate in the trials. All impacts of the stickleback fishery on the ecosystem should be taken into consideration. The targeted stickleback fishery could be further developed together with scientific advice.

A representative of Swedish fishermen underlined the importance of initiating the trial fishery, together with the observer programmes, to get as much data as possible. She informed that a pilot project on herring/sprat species combination combined with stickleback planned for 2020 had been delayed due to COVID 19 and is planned to start in the first quarter of 2021 with observers from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. The project hoped to receive a derogation from the Technical Measures Regulation, to allow the use of a sandeel trawl. Other gears could also be used in a pilot fishery, such as the gear used in Norway pout fishery, or the Danish tunnel-shaped gear used in fisheries, in which the target species is smaller than the bycaught species.

A representative of anglers presented the problem of stickleback from the perspective of the anglers. He noted that the growing population of stickleback is a consequence of several factors: climate change, habitat destruction, eutrophication, the growing populations of seals and cormorants and overfishing of predator fish stocks. Stickleback could have a negative impact on the ecosystem and other species such as pike and pikeperch, by feeding on their larvae. Remedial measures should be taken to 1) restore the habitats along the Baltic coasts; 2) tackle the predators seals and cormorants; 3) be aware of post-smolt salmon when they leave the rivers predate on stickleback. He also underlined the risk of bycatch of post-smolt salmon in the fishing operations along the coast, because salmon migrates along these areas. Before initiating a stickleback fishery, detailed studies are needed to estimate the risk of bycatch of salmon depending on the area, to establish depth and time of year when the stickleback occur, to determine proper methods of reporting the catch composition, and to establish monitoring of landings.

An OIG representative drew attention to the fact that post-smolt salmon bycatch in SD 30 was also noted in the Finnish study⁴. He noted that different gears could be tested in the trials before starting any commercial fishery for stickleback. In his view, scientists should be engaged in the trials from the start. Monitoring of the pilot fishery is necessary to provide the right scientific input on the ecosystem effects of the fishery, as well as the fishing pattern.

Another OIG representative questioned the view that a stickleback fishery can be carried out to benefit the environment. She underlined the importance of involving scientists in the trials, and carrying out a scientific evaluation of the outcome of a trial fishery.

A representative of Danish fishermen noted that a feasibility study of the gears should be the first step before starting the pilot fishery. In his view, fishermen should be responsible for selecting the right gear for stickleback. The areas of particular risk of bycatch of other species should be specified and avoided in the trial fishery. The scientific evaluation to determine the impact of stickleback fishery should follow the trials. He stated that the engagement of science in the stickleback pilot fishery does not necessarily imply the presence of observers onboard. He noted that there might be difficulties in finding scientific observers for the trial fishery due to COVID-19, and underlined that this should not prevent the trials from starting. All data needed for the scientific evaluation will be provided by fishermen. He underlined that the trials should be planned to the widest possible extent in co-operation with fishermen. The guidelines should specify which data needs to be collected during the trials, among others the catch composition, the gear, the trawling speed and the position of vessel.

A representative of Lithuanian fishermen expressed concern about the obligation for scientific observers to participate in the stickleback pilot fishery due to a limited number of scientists willing to take part in the fishing trips. In his view, all the fish caught during the fishing operations for purposes of scientific investigation should be counted on the shore by scientists. This would make the procedure easier.

An OIG representative underlined that the guidelines should flag that the BSAC is also aware of the potential risks of a fishery targeting a species so far not explored in a commercial fishery, and for which there is no stock assessment and no bycatch data. In his view, ICES should be asked to deliver scientific advice on this fishery.

The Executive Secretary informed that the BSAC will report from this meeting and the outputs from the BSAC on stickleback to the MIACO meeting (annual meeting of ICES and the Advisory Councils) in January 2021, and will invite ICES to comment.

The Pelagic Working Group Chair praised some Member States for taking a proactive approach in solving the problem with stickleback. He welcomed the fact that observer programmes are planned in 2021, and the results of these trials are expected to provide more knowledge on the risks connected to the stickleback fishery.

⁴ <https://www.luke.fi/sv/nyheter/bestand-tillstand-och-tathet-nya-forskningsron-om-stromming-och-vassbuk-i-ostersjon/>

He thanked the participants for presenting the problem from different perspectives. He proposed to ask the BSAC Secretariat to prepare a final version of the background paper, including guidelines for a trial fishery and present it to the ExCom for adoption.

The Working Group decided to recommend to the ExCom to encourage the trial fishery for stickleback and look forward to the results.

The Working Group decided to ask the BSAC Secretariat to prepare the background paper, including the guidelines for a trial fishery and present it to the ExCom for adoption.

4. Technical measures

The Pelagic Working Group Chair referred to the fact that the Technical Measures Regulation⁵ includes the requirement for the Commission to carry out an evaluation of the regulation by 31st December 2020. The Commission had informed it will provide an update.

An OIG representative referred to possible delays caused by COVID-19, as well as urgent matters connected with Brexit. According to his knowledge, the evaluation of the Technical Measures Regulation will take place in the 2nd quarter of 2021. He drew attention to the fact that it is important for the BSAC to comment on some issues such as for example the fact that some provisions concerning the closures are only addressed in the TACs and quota Regulation and should also be included in the Technical Measures Regulation. He noted that the BSAC should hold a dedicated meeting to discuss the issues related to the Regulation. The date for such meeting could be set once the new timeline for the evaluation is known.

The Working Group decided to ask the Secretariat to continue investigating the new timeline for the evaluation by the Commission and to plan a dedicated meeting once the timeline is known.

The Executive Secretary asked members to join this dedicated meeting.

5. AOB

Western Baltic herring

The Pelagic Working Group Chair noted that the BSAC ExCom had decided that the Pelagic Working Group would discuss how the BSAC could contribute to an improved assessment, rebuilding and better management of western spring spawning herring. The ExCom also decided to give a mandate to the BSAC Secretariat to open up a dialogue with the Member States and Norway, so any remedial measures can be introduced without delay.

⁵ See Article 31 of Regulation

The ExCom Chair referred to the fact that that western spring spawning herring is a very special and difficult case and this needs to be communicated to the Commission and the Member States. In his view, the Member States as well as the Commission should engage in the preparation of the management plan for the western herring, not only for the Baltic but also for neighbouring waters. The stock cannot be recovered just by managing the Baltic fisheries. He noted that the ICES advice is related to the Baltic stock, whereas the fishery is also carried out outside the Baltic. There is no framework to draft a management plan at the moment. He reminded all that the December Council will deal with the matter, and there is not enough time for the BSAC to deliver a recommendation before the Council in December. He encouraged individual members to take this up with the Member States and push forward the agenda. The BSAC will report on western spring spawning herring to the MIACO meeting in January 2021, and will invite ICES to comment. The BSAC could further discuss the management of this complex stock with a multitude of components in the next meeting of the Working Group.

A representative of Danish fisheries noted that setting timelines for stock recovery becomes an issue for the western spring spawning herring stock, because the stock is complex and covers three different management areas. He referred to constant negligence by the decision-makers of the impact of other herring stocks on the Rügen herring, as well as the inter-relations between the species. The western spring spawning herring stock is composed of multiple sub-populations. Different sub-populations should be recognised, but not split for management purposes. They should be managed as one area. It is very difficult to manage a mixture of healthy and unhealthy stocks, but the most abundant stock will deliver the most. In his view, fishermen should not be prevented from fishing abundant populations. There is a need for a more flexible approach to reference points, and a more dynamic perception of what is good and what is wrong for nature. Fishermen do not harm the environment, and any impact of fisheries on nature can be limited. The management plan should be prepared in co-operation with ICES. He referred to the fact that the BSAC recommendation should be clear in that the present state of the Rügen herring sub-population calls for remedial measures and restoration of the spawning grounds.

The OIG representative noted that the Council of Ministers in December will show what the Member States have taken on board in relation to western spring spawning herring. The Baltic fishermen should not be the only ones to pay the price for managing the western herring stock. The current state of this stock should be seen in terms of ecosystem considerations, and ICES should make a clear overview of the impact for the species that feed on herring.

In his view, pelagic species are viewed in the same way as cod or salmon. He drew attention to the recent discussions in Sweden on herring as an important source of food. It is a question to the experts as to whether there is room to accommodate new measures to recover the stock. He agreed that a more targeted approach to the management of different sub-populations of herring is not really possible. However, managers should take into account the fact that the major sub-population is in dire straits.

One of the problems for western herring stock is degradation of spawning grounds caused by dredging, gravel extraction and a pipeline crossing the spawning area. A signal should be sent to the relevant Member State to restore these spawning grounds.

A representative of Polish fishermen stated that temporary bans on herring fishery in Poland have not proved effective for the stock, and have a negative impact on the economic situation of fishermen.

An OIG representative proposed to invite scientists to present possible management options and measures for spawning ground restoration to the next meeting of the Working Group.

The Working Group decided to recommend to the ExCom that the BSAC further discusses how to contribute to an improved assessment, rebuilding and better management of western spring spawning herring in a Joint EBM/Pelagic Working Group, after receiving an updated scientific advice on the stock.

The Working Group decided to ask the BSAC members to assist the BSAC Secretariat in opening up a dialogue on remedial measures for the western spring spawning herring stock with the Member States and Norway.

The Pelagic Working Group Chair thanked all the participants for good discussions, and the Secretariat and the interpreters for their work.