



Recommendation - Impact of the Action Plan's Bottom Trawling Ban on Shellfish Farming

AAC 2023-6

June 2023



The Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC) kindly thanks the EU for its financial support





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1. Motive and interest

In February 2023, the European Commission introduced an Action Plan for EU fisheries, which includes a call to member states to present plans to minimise bottom trawling, particularly in protected marine areas.

In this memo, it is argued that shellfish bottom culture should not be classified as part of 'bottom trawling', as agreed during the biannual meeting between the Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC) delegation and European Commission's Directorate-General for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs (DG Mare) on April 21, 2023.

2. Description

Shellfish bottom culture, a 150-year tradition of shellfish cultivation, involves spreading very small shellfish (blue mussels, oysters...) at an optimal density (max 10/m²). Over a period of 2–4 years, these shellfish grow into consumable quality while substantially increasing biodiversity in the cultivated parcels.

At the end of a growing period the adult specimens are harvested with a dredge. After harvesting, the parcel is immediately replenished with new juvenile shellfish, compensating the impact of the harvesting process and starting a new harvesting cycle. This extensive and natural production method differs greatly from the intensive use of dredges associated with bottom trawling fisheries throughout the year.

3. Scientific evidence

Scientific studies, such as the comprehensive work by Prof. Dr. A.C. Smaal et al. titled 'Good and Services of Marine Biovalves 2020', highlight the positive impact of bivalves on biodiversity and various other aspects of nature. A summary of its content is presented below:

Shellfish reefs are an important habitat for many other species and are therefore considered to be biodiversity hotspots. They promote an increase in the number of benthic animals, which has an attractive effect on fish and birds. This phenomenon does not only apply to wild shell beds; the biodiversity of associated species is also important to mussel spat collection plots and their rearing on longlines. The beginning of the mussel cycle is mussel spat, which was traditionally caught on wild banks. This fishery is being phased out in the interests of nature restoration and, alternatively, mussel spat are caught with ad hoc facilities (MZI). This publication provides an overview of the biodiversity on and around mussel beds and oyster reefs and describes the influence of spat fishing and mussel farming plots on biodiversity.

4. Scope

Shellfish bottom culture is practiced in several EU countries, including Denmark, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, France and Italy. A significant part of these activities (and up to 100% of bottom culture mussels in the Netherlands) takes place within Nature 2000 areas.



5. Further importance

Shellfish farming and consumption align perfectly with many EU policies regarding the transition to sustainable protein sources. It has the lowest footprint of all animal protein sources. Banning shellfish bottom culture would result in a 25–30% decrease in EU shellfish production, while both the EU and the shellfish sector aim to increase production substantially in the next 5–10 years.

6. Recommendation

The AAC recommends that DG Mare communicates to the EU Member States that shellfish bottom culture is out of the scope of its “bottom trawling ban” provisions included in the EU Action Plan. (Arzul et al., 2021).

7. In addition

The shellfish sector commits to provide DG Mare with an overview of the surface area in each country where shellfish bottom culture occurs. This information will be shared with DG Mare at a later date.



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