NSAC/BSAC Workshop on Cormorants and Seals' interaction with fisheries across the North and Baltic Seas
Luleå (Sweden), 20 March 2025

Background

In recent years, the NSAC and BSAC members have observed increasing predation of seals and cormorants on juvenile cod and other demersal fish, significantly affecting their recruitment and productivity. Despite it being a major mortality factor, this predation is currently not incorporated in stock assessments and advice for various demersal species. NSAC Industry members believe it is also important to establish geographical distribution of seal and cormorant populations to develop targeted measures for managing populations' impact on sensitive and commercial species.

To follow up on the interest expressed by NSAC industry members and past BSAC conferences on cormorant and seals, the Chair of the NSAC Demersal Working Group, Peter Ronelöv Olsson, proposed a joint NSAC/BSAC event on management perspectives regarding cormorants and seals in the North Sea. The proposal reflects concerns from industry representatives in the North Sea, Skagerrak, and Kattegat and Baltic Sea regions regarding the impact of predators, specifically the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*), and great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) and lesser great cormorant (), on fish stock mortality.

Cormorants

Cormorant predation on fish represents one of the most widespread human-wildlife conflicts[1][2] affecting both commercial and recreational fisheries. As seals are known flatfish consumers, this suggests that there is competition between mammalian and avian predators on demersal fish stocks in the coastal zone.[3]

Cormorants are protected under Article 5 of the European Bird Directive 2009/147/EC. Following a population decline in the 1970s, numbers rebounded to over one million in Northwest Europe. However, simultaneously, the QSR 2023 assessment shows that most water column feeders, including cormorants, remain in poor conservation status, with less

[1] https://bioone.org/journals/ardea/volume-109/issue-3/arde.v109i2.a31/There-must-be-Some-Kind-of-Way-Out-of-Here/10.5253/arde.v109i2.a31.short
[2] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165783624002984
[3] https://bioone.org/journals/ardea/volume-109/issue-3/arde.v109i2.a20/Food-Choice-and-Prey-Selection-by-Great-Cormorants-Phalacrocorax-carbo/10.5253/arde.v109i2.a20.short

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than 75% of their populations assessed as being in good condition[4], pointing to a discrepancy in perception.

Member States can derogate under Article 9 of the Birds Directive to implement measures, including lethal control, to prevent serious damage to fisheries and aquaculture, provided specific criteria are met. Despite local and regional measures, conflicts persist due to cormorant's mobility and a lack of coordinated actions[5]. The European Commission acknowledges the need for coordinated action but opposes a pan-European plan, citing a lack of Member State consensus on needed actions. Instead, it recommends better use of Article 9's derogation system to mitigate cormorant impacts on fisheries[6].

Seals

The Greater North Sea is home to two main seal species: the grey seal, whose population has significantly increased after historical declines due to hunting, and the harbour seal, which shows mixed abundance trends. The OSPAR QSR assessment reports that harbour seals are declining in northeast Scotland and southeast England but are stable or increasing elsewhere[7]. Grey seals abundance has increased across the Greater North Sea since 1992, recovering after past declines from hunting[7]. Both species are classified as "Least Concern" by the IUCN.

Since 1987, the EU Habitats Directive remains unchanged and no comprehensive seal management plans exist, even as predator-related challenges intensify in the North Sea. Thus, the debate about seals and fisheries interaction is being reawakened[8].

Related work in the NSAC and BSAC

Although the NSAC has not previously addressed human-wildlife interactions directly, it has contributed to related topics, including multiple papers, some jointly with the North Western Waters AC, on the EU Prohibited Species List: NSAC Advice from 2017, 2018 and 2020, and NWWAC/NSAC joint advice from 2021 and 2023. The NSAC has also followed the BSAC's work on this issue and has considered the outcomes of their two workshops (27 October 2023 and 30 October 2024) when planning its upcoming conference. We are also aware of the work being done by OSPAR on monitoring the status of seals and cormorants across the

[4] https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/synthesis-report/regional-summaries/
[5] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569124003041
[6] https://www.eaa-europe.org/positions/cormorants-2020.html
[7] https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/indicator-assessments/seal-abundance-and-distribution/
[8] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1385110106000876

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Greater North Sea, as well as the ICES' work within the Working Group on Marine Mammal Ecology (WGMME). Additionally, ongoing FAO efforts within the European Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Advisory Commission (EIFAAC) have been taken into account. These include the development of sustainable management actions on cormorant populations (2012) and the creation of an European-wide management advice to protect vulnerable fish species from unsustainable cormorants predation (2024)[9].

The NSAC and BSAC are committed to addressing topics of importance to its members. Establishing a common understanding of the best available science on the status of cormorants and seals in the North Sea is essential, particularly given certain discrepancies between scientific data and fishers' perceptions of predator populations. Furthermore, clarity is needed on the management measures implemented across North Sea Member States and the potential for a coordinated EU-wide plan to address such issues. These aspects and more will be explored at the symposium scheduled in March 2025, in Luleå, Sweden. The outcomes will inform joint NSAC-BSAC advice on the matter and contribute to broader discussions on predator management in the North Sea.

Subject-matter

The conference titled **'Workshop on Cormorants and Seals in relation to fisheries across the North and Baltic seas'** aims to examine the issue fishers experience in interactions with seals and cormorants, thecurrent state of best available knowledge regarding seal and cormorant populations in the North Sea, Skagerrak, and Kattegat, their and other impacts on fish natural mortality, and how this is reflected in scientific advice for and management of commercial stocks. It will also explore the legal background and existing national management measures to address these challenges.

The workshop will be prepared in collaboration with NSAC and BSAC members, including industry representatives and other interest groups, to ensure that all stakeholders are engaged and aligned in addressing the issue.

Core questions address by the workshop

- What is the issue fishers experience? Where, when, in which fisheries? For how long has it been a problem?
- What can be the causes for those issues? What is the evidence that it's predation by seals and cormorants and could there be underlying causes?
- How do seals and cormorants impact fisheries?

[9] https://www.fao.org/eifaac/projects/ongoing-projects/en

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- Are there significant other sources of fish mortality ?
- How does ecosystem imbalance affect predator-fisheries interactions? How can we address ecosystem imbalances holistically and with a long-term perspective and avoid short-sighted solutions?
- What is the status of the populations of seals and cormorants across the North Sea?
- Is there consensus on the status of the populations?
- Are local insights adequately reflected in recent scientific publications?
- How does ICES account for different sources of natural mortality in ICES models on stock assessments?
- Is fish predation adequately taken into account in EU management?
- What management measures exist and are implemented locally, nationally and regionally in relation to seals and cormorants across the North and Baltic Seas?
- How can co-existence between predators and fisheries be achieved taking into account the three pillars of sustainability?
- What are ways forward in terms of regulatory management of predators?
- How is the Protected Species List updated and what are the possible implications?
- Would there be a value in the Nordic-Baltic area management plan or cooperation scheme?

Time and place

- 20 March 2025, 10:00-17.00 CET (arrival on 19 March with planned afternoon/evening activity)
- Luleå, Sweden
- In person participation with possible exception for speakers

PROGRAM

Draft

Moderated by: Sonny Soewarta
Presentation slots include a brief Q&A (5-10min)

09.00 - 09.05 Opening address by NSAC Chair

09.05 – 09.20 Anecdotes and observations by North Sea and Baltic fishers

09.20 – 09.50 Commission DG ENV/MARE on the role of the EU in addressing predators management (Birds and Habitat directives, the Prohibited Species list)

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09.50 - 10.20 Presentation by OSPAR on the conservation status of predator populations in the North Sea

10.20 - 10.50 Presentation by ICES on the impact of predators on natural mortality of demersal stocks and implications for stock advice (Sophie Brasseur)

10.50 - 11.10 *Coffee break*

11.10 – 11.30 Niels Jepsen/Mardik Leopold/Martin Poot for cormorants

11.30 – 11.50 Petri Suuronen for seals

11.50 – 12.20 Scheveningen group/BALTFISH overview of national management measures concerning predators (Estonia, Sweden, Denmark, Finland)

12.20 – 12.40 Update from FAO EIFAAC workshop on management advice for reducing the impact of cormorant predation on fish and fisheries

12.40 - 13.00 BSAC Chair & OIG Vice Chair presentation on identified issues, conclusions, and ways forward from the Baltic perspective and takeaways for NSAC.

13.00 – 14.00 *Lunch break*

14.00 – 15.15 Breakout session: two groups, one works on cormorants and one on seals.

1st part: establishing a common understanding on the status of predator mortality in science/policy/management
2nd part: mapping out different management/policy/science options;

After 45 min the groups exchange.

15.15 – 15.30 Reporting from the Breakout Session and identification of common recommendations

15.30 – 15.45 Wrap up and close

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