

Natural Environment White Paper – The Natural Choice: Securing the value of nature case study

Protecting fish stocks – ‘Project 50%’ – working with the fishing industry to reduce fish discards

The UK is committed to taking action domestically on discards (where dead and unwanted fish are thrown overboard), as this is a terrible waste of natural resources. A wide range of work has been conducted in the UK to improve the selectivity of fishing gear, so that fishermen catch less unwanted catches.

During 2009-10 Defra commissioned an innovative project nicknamed ‘Project 50%’ which aimed to protect fish stocks by reducing the amount of juvenile fish discarded by 50%. Government and fishermen drew on their experience, to find out the reasons why fish were being discarded and come up with solutions.



Volunteer fishermen in South West England worked with fisheries scientists to design more selective fishing gears which allow immature and unmarketable fish to escape. These nets were designed around the fishermen’s individual fishing patterns and were trialled alongside traditional nets to allow comparison of catches. Overall the selective fishing gear reduced discards by 52% and fishermen continue to use their improved nets. Other benefits included better quality of fish being landed to market and improved communication between scientists and fishermen.

Sean Irvine, skipper of one of the participating fishing vessels, says:

“We’ve had massive savings in terms of the work we do. It’s not hard to sort the catch and there’s less maintenance of the nets needed. The amount of discards that used to be in the cod-ends compared to what’s there now with the new net was clear for us all to see. I’m very happy with the results.”

A similar approach is now being adopted to reduce discards in the North West of England prawn (*Nephrops*) fishery.