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The EU landing obligation and its impact on discard data

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Introduction

The recent reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) of the European Union (EU) introduced a Landing Obligation (LO) for all EU fishing vessels for certain species and fisheries starting from 2015. Its introduction is one of the most significant reform elements in the new CFP, and represents a fundamental shift in the management approach to EU fisheries. Its primary objective is to reduce unwanted catch (European Union, 2013), while at the same time to promote sustainable fisheries by reducing fishing mortality of animals of low commercial value sizes and species.

The LO is only applicable to total allowable catch (TAC)-regulated species in the Atlantic and to species that have a minimum landing size (MLS) in the Mediterranean Sea, caught in European waters or by European fishing vessels. It is being implemented progressively by species and fisheries, starting with pelagic fisheries and fisheries in the Baltic Sea in 2015, to be completed by 2019 (European Union, 2013).

if the LO is fully implemented (i.e., is monitored at sea at significantly high levels) it will reduce unwanted catch in the first place since fishing operations will change to maximize the use of the space on board vessels and quota available for high value species and sizes. At the same time it will drive improvements in gear selectivity to reduce the catch of undesirable species and sizes. It will increase discard knowledge as monitoring of fishing operations will be increased from present low levels. And finally, it will safeguard stock recovery by protecting strong year classes of stocks under severe fishing pressure, by improving selectivity and/or closing the fishery when the quota has been reached (Borges, 2015).

Results & Discussion

But one year on what has changed? In 2015 the EU landing obligation was only applicable to TAC regulated species caught by pelagic fisheries and fisheries in the Baltic Sea. Most importantly, enforcement of the LO was postponed to 2017 in order to give fishers time to adjust their operations (European Union, 2015). Three possible exemptions were also granted: species for which fishing is prohibited, species that have high survival rates after being discarded, and catches falling under the *de minimis* exemption (difficulties in increasing selectivity or disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches).

It seems that fishing operations in the European Union have not changed significantly after one year of the LO. In some fisheries unwanted catch was simply reduced by setting the Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) below the previous MLS (Borges, 2016). But more importantly there was a refusal

to let observers on board fishing vessels that lead to discard sampling only being resumed in the last quarter of the year. Furthermore, there is a clear discrepancy between discard rates reported by scientific agencies and national administrations, while there are indications that the catch profiles between observed and unobserved vessels are different. But more worryingly there seems to be decrease of selectivity, where more small fish are being caught (ICES, 2016).

So after one year of the LO discard sampling is likely biased, not only in time but also to the vessels that did allowed observer on board. Considering that discarding is changing trough the LO exemptions granted, there is a clear decrease of knowledge on the discarding behavior by European fleets. This will undoubtedly compromise scientific advice on catch opportunities, that have now a strong component on discards. So while landings advice in Europe is based on long term systematic port sampling schemes, discard advice is based on limited sampling programmes that are currently likely to be biased. So how reliable is scientific advice now in Europe? These issues need to be urgently addressed by scientists to ensure the quality of future advice and, of course, of the management measures that depend on this advice (Borges, 2016).

In the future, since at-sea monitoring programmes have from now on in Europe an enforcement/surveillance role, scientist need to work very hard to make sure their data is meaningful. Control and enforcement agencies need to work in collaboration with scientist to establish goals, and carry out risk assessment, of existing and future monitoring programs, in close collaboration with data users.

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