

## A conservationist's guide to fishing around the Avon estuary

Many visitors to the area and even some local people seem unaware of the law and the environmental factors which influence fishing and fish stocks around the Avon estuary. Understandably, those who do observe the regulations become very upset when they see others flouting them. This brief guide has been produced in response to enquiries from the public about the legality of some of the fishing activity they have witnessed and we hope that anybody reading it will become more familiar with the laws that protect the river and surrounding coast, and the pressure that the fisheries are under. By fishing responsibly and obeying the laws and regulations ourselves, it is hoped that the existing delights of our local marine resources will be available for the enjoyment of future generations.

On a point of law, there are twelve Sea Fisheries Committees (SFCs) that regulate local sea fisheries around virtually the entire coast of England and Wales out to 6 miles. The South Devon coast is no exception! SFCs were established in the last century and are empowered to make bye-laws for the management and conservation of their districts' fisheries. In 1995 their powers were widened to include the control of fisheries in their districts for environmental reasons.



The quality of local Bass fishing is well known and this is probably what lures many fishing folk to the area although the Bass fishery is under particular pressure from pair trawling in the Southwest Approaches. At present the law states that fish 36cm in total length can be caught legally. However, these fish will not have spawned and if taken in increasing numbers a collapse of the fishery is likely to result. For conservation purposes, it is suggested that people voluntarily only take fish of 42cm or above so that the number of Bass increases. Bass grow slowly and return to the same areas to breed rather like some birds (some tagged fish have been caught in the same area over a number of years). Therefore, your conservation actions will help to sustain the local fish population and will benefit all fishing folk in the

future. Anybody wishing to find out more about this fascinating fish or help in its conservation should visit [WWW.UKBASS.COM](http://WWW.UKBASS.COM). (For only £2 you can buy a durable fish measuring tape with all proceeds going to the Bass Restoration Project). Remember, the Avon Estuary Bass nursery area includes all tidal waters between a line drawn 2060 true from Warren Point at Bigbury on Sea to Burgh Island, and a line drawn 090 true from the southern tip of Burgh Island to the coast (i.e. roughly, to the Lifeguard Station on Bantham beach – see Map 1). Fishing for Bass, or fishing for any other species of sea fish using Sand Eels as bait, by any fishing boat within any part of the area shown is prohibited between 30<sup>th</sup> April and 1<sup>st</sup> January. Furthermore, because the Avon itself is a so-called *several fishery*, there is no public right to fish on the river. No fishing - for any species - is allowed from boats on the tidal part of the river without the express permission of the Duchy of Cornwall or its agent. Strictly, the same is true for fishing from the river banks although local custom and practice would suggest otherwise.

Absolutely no netting of fish is allowed inshore from a line drawn from the seaward extremity of Burgh Island 090 True to the coast (Map 1). Furthermore, no fixed net may be used within one mile of the shore between a point bearing 244 True from Warren Point (east of Thurlestone) and a point bearing 184 True from St Anchorite's Rock (west of the River Erme) unless the headline of the fixed net is set at least 3m

below the surface of the water at any state of the tide AND a permit has been issued by Devon SFC (Map 2).

Spear fishing can also have a big impact on fish stocks which is why it is banned in some parts of the



world. Once again, voluntary spearing of Bass only in the 42cm to 46cm range will add to the sustainability of the fishery. Remember, larger trophy fish may be up to 25 years old. Importantly, these larger fish are normally successful spawning fish and they are best left to add to the bass population.

By the way, Wrasse are not generally regarded as acceptable fish for spear fishing. Although some species of Wrasse can be very colourful and are fearless, they are too easily speared and are considered too bony to be good for eating. Unfortunately, spear fishing competitions slaughter many of these fish with absolutely no point other than satisfying personal quests for trophies. We think they should be left in peace by all.

More and more people seem to have got a few pots for catching crabs and lobsters. Whilst a few less Lobster in the wild may seem acceptable to most people, it's important to remember that a few pots each means a large number of lobsters caught, in total, within quite a small area and we must question whether this level of harvesting is sustainable. Once again don't land undersized lobsters or crabs, please! The limit for Lobster is 90mm from the rear of the eye socket to the far edge of the shell or carapace - basically the length of body to the beginning of the tail. Because lobsters produce relatively few eggs, responsible fishermen are keen to protect hen lobsters by 'V-notching' their tails, indicating that the animal was spawning when caught earlier and had been returned to the sea. It is illegal to remove any lobster which has been V- notched in the tail area or if the tail has been damaged to remove evidence of a V-notch. Similarly, no berried lobster may be removed - this means no female lobster which is carrying spawn/eggs attached to the underside of the tail area or some other exterior part of her body, or which is in such condition that shows it was spawning when caught. For edible crabs the size limit is 140mm across the broadest part of the back for females (small claws) and 160mm across for males (large claws). If in doubt about claw size, check the underside of crabs to distinguish between cocks and hens. You also cannot land any part of an edible crab which has become detached from the body (i.e. you are not allowed to pull the claws off because you have caught an undersized specimen!).

We offer this advice in the interests of conservation and to help fishermen/women avoid flouting the law. Few activities in inshore waters or when landing your catch go unobserved!

If you suspect anybody of breaking the fishing laws, please report the incident to Devon SFC on 01803 854648.

----- 000 -----

Produced (June 2008; modified Oct 2009) by the Aune Conservation Association in consultation with Devon SFC.