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Mackerel no longer sustainable choice says environmental charity

- **Charity reviews 186 environmental ratings for seafood, with 20 seafood ratings moving to 'Fish to Avoid'**
- **Only 15 seafood ratings have joined the green-rated, 'Best Choice' list with this seasons ratings update**

The [Marine Conservation Society](#), the UK's leading ocean charity, has updated its [Good Fish Guide](#) in line with the latest scientific advice.

The Good Fish Guide is the charity's flagship tool for identifying sustainable seafood. The Guide uses a simple traffic light system to help consumers and businesses make sustainable seafood choices depending on where and how a species is caught or farmed.

Covering seafood sold or produced in the UK, green are the 'Best Choice' most sustainable options, amber is an 'OK Choice', but improvements are needed, and red indicates unsustainable 'Fish to Avoid'.

This spring's update to the Good Fish Guide moves Northeast Atlantic mackerel onto the amber list, having been on the charity's green list since before 2011. Populations of mackerel over this period have been large enough to withstand the pressure of fishing. However, in recent years, the population has been in steady decline. An amber rating means that improvements are needed – in this case, better management to end overfishing of the stock.

Mackerel is caught by various states, including Norway, Iceland, the UK, and the EU. Currently, these countries are not working together to tackle overfishing of the species. The countries generally agree that scientific limits should not be exceeded, however, they don't agree on how to divide the catches between themselves. Consequently, quotas have been higher than scientifically recommended limits since 2009, exceeding them by between 5% and 80%.

In October 2021, the main fishing states again agreed that total mackerel catches in 2022 should not exceed the scientific advice (794,920 tonnes), but not how the catches should be divided. The combined catch limits set by all countries for 2022 totalled 1,131,416 tonnes, exceeding the advice by 42%.

During March 2023, countries met to decide how to divide the next set of quotas. Frustratingly, whilst they agreed that 'good progress had been made' they have not yet been able to agree a way forward. Talks are ongoing with the hope of reaching an agreement, but in the meantime this important species continues to be threatened by overfishing.

The UK takes about 17% of the total mackerel catch, mostly caught by Scottish boats. It's an important fishery for the UK - with fishing vessels catching more mackerel than any other species. In 2021, over 220,000 tonnes of mackerel were caught - 32% of the total UK catch - worth around £240 million.

It's not just important for fishers. Mackerel is important prey for whales, dolphins, and tuna. Removing too much of this key species could have wider environmental impacts. In a warming climate, our ocean is already facing significant challenges. These kinds of changes to delicate food webs are an unwanted additional pressure.

Charlotte Coombes, Good Fish Guide Manager, at the Marine Conservation Society, said, "The northeast Atlantic mackerel population has been declining since 2015, which is concerning. Fishing communities and wildlife depend on this species, but continued overfishing is putting both at risk.

"International cooperation is the only way to fix this problem, and UK governments must lead by example. We need to see countries agree on quotas, and extra management measures being put in place to protect stocks."

Despite the bad news for international fishing, one small mackerel fishery in the UK is paving the way. Mackerel caught by handline in the southwest UK remains green rated. This is a low-impact way of fishing, and catches are very strictly controlled. There are also protections in place for juvenile mackerel to make sure they can reproduce before they are caught.

The Marine Conservation Society reviewed 186 ratings on the Good Fish Guide this spring. Amongst those ratings that did not change were European eel and Celtic cod, which stay on the red-rated, 'Fish to Avoid' list.

Jack Clarke, Sustainable Seafood Advocate at the Marine Conservation Society said, "Eel is still appearing on menus across the country, despite being more endangered than the Bengal tiger. Populations have declined by as much as 95% in the past decade and recent scientific advice couldn't be clearer- it's time to stop eating eel. It's the most trafficked animal on the planet, with an illegal eel trade estimated to be worth £2.5 billion every year."

Celtic cod, also staying red-rated, is often caught by boats catching haddock and whiting, as they are often found together in the marine environment.

The charity is calling on all governments across the UK for better management of fish stocks with a whole ecosystem approach taken, and more data collected on boats at sea. Cameras on boats, or Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM), would monitor what's being caught and provide the data needed to allow scientists and governments to make informed decisions about how much seafood to catch. This would help to reduce overfishing and put better management measures in place such as reducing bycatch.

To learn more about the Marine Conservation Society's work, please visit the charity's website: www.mcsuk.org.

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Images

Please find the selection of high-resolution imagery [linked here](#).

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Notes to Editors

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is the UK's leading ocean charity, fighting for cleaner, better-protected, healthier seas. The charity works to highlight the importance of our ocean, and the life within it, through working with government, industry and education, to take action to restore and protect the marine environment.

The Marine Conservation Society's **Good Fish Guide** is the charity's flagship tool for identifying sustainable seafood. The Guide uses a simple traffic light system to help consumers and businesses make sustainable seafood choices depending on where and how it's caught or farmed. Covering seafood sold or produced in the UK, green are the 'Best Choice' most sustainable options, amber shows improvements are needed, and red indicates unsustainable 'Fish to Avoid'. Updated biannually, ratings are carefully researched and rigorously reviewed by scientists using a transparent methodology. See all the latest ratings and download the Guide at www.goodfishguide.org.