

Article 5: Scottish Squids are In

There has been a mysterious influx of squid in northeastern Scottish waters over the last few years, a migration which scientists have not been able to adequately explain. But it may be the key to revitalizing the Scottish fishing industry, struggling since severe fishing quotas were imposed by the EU in 2003.

A new squid fishery has generated excitement amongst policymakers and marine ecologists, in response to an unexpected surge in squid availability in the North Sea. “There’s a lot more squid on the go now,” said Mike Montgomery, the Project Manager for the fishery.

Fishermen have caught escalating numbers of the mollusc, which have sold for high prices at local markets. At Peterburgh Market on the Moray Firth, a box of squid – roughly 1 kilogram – could sell up to £9 a box, depending on its freshness. In Northeast Scotland, where most of the squid are found, more boats can be seen trawling for squid than for the traditional fish, such as haddock or cod. In the last peak year of squid fishing – 2005 – sales reached £4,182,000.

Squid-fishing brings other advantages for fishermen and environmentalists alike. Squid nets do not catch other types of fish, which dramatically reduces the number of fish that must be thrown away, in accordance with current quotas. And as the British palate becomes more amenable to squid – sales have increased 49% over the past year – fishermen stand to benefit from a healthy stock of squid in the North Sea.

Scientists are still unsure why squid have migrated northward in the past few years. Previously, they were found in abundance in the Irish Sea and the Atlantic. “It might be changes in ocean temperature,” said Dr. Martin Collins, a marine ecologist from Cambridge. “It’s more likely an effect from the surface current,” moving the food that the squid depends on to other waters. Squid then have no choice but to move with the current.

But these particular species of squid – *Loligo forbesi* – are relatively unknown to scientists. Although other species of squid have been extensively analysed and studied in other regions of the world, little scientific data has been collected of the Scottish stock. This means that the squid’s biological functions, its responses to changes in the environment, and its migratory patterns are still a mystery to fisheries experts. Explaining why there was so little information on this species, a spokesman from the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations said, “More people have stood on the moon than on the bottom of sea.”

Understanding the movement of squid is especially important, due to its extreme variability from year to year. In 2005, 1898 tonnes of squid were caught by Scottish fishermen – the highest amount on record. But in 2006, those numbers drastically fell to 871 tonnes.

That’s one of the reasons why the fishery has been set up – “to make sure the squid fishery has sustainability,” said Montgomery. To ensure the squid population continues, it may just be necessary to make sure that enough of them escape, to lay eggs and continue the cycle. Or it may take more than that. The fishery still has to find that out.

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