

How the government can use quotas to build a sustainable future for UK fishing



*As the government attempts to determine a vision for national, ‘world leading’ fisheries after Brexit, the big challenge is about the use of quota, writes **Erin Priddle**. She outlines three basic principles that can be used to frame a fishing future with well-balanced goals for jobs, seafood supply, and the marine environment.*

As the media, environmentalists, and industry examine UK fisheries from every angle, the Q word keeps cropping up. Quota: what to do with it? Who deserves more – or less? And how can we ensure future UK fisheries are a vibrant patchwork of sustainable industrial and small-scale fishing operations, providing a secure backbone to coastal economies? As the UK decides on how to handle quota post-Brexit, it must try to deliver on the hopes for greater prosperity of fishermen working on big boats and small.

It is important to acknowledge that while quota management in the UK is not perfect, it has delivered an upwards-trend on profits and sustainability. Iconic and once in-decline species are now rebounding – with [North Sea cod recently achieving MSC certification](#) after years of careful management. Across the pond, the use of science-driven quotas has helped the US build some of the most sustainable fisheries in the world: of all the assessed fish stocks across the US, [just 9% are considered over-fished](#), which compares to [40% in the EU](#). The region with the worst track record for fishing sustainably here in Europe is the Mediterranean. The health of the marine environment in the Med is of critical concern: it’s one of the only areas where quotas are not the typical form of management, and [93% of fish stocks are over-fished](#).

So, in short: quotas work for sustainable fishing. And they can keep working post-Brexit in the UK. But it’s not as simple as picking ‘quotas’ over other methods – we need a national conversation about *how* they are handed out – to whom, for how long, and with what aims in mind?



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The UK Government is faced with a big, complex ask in determining a new vision for national, ‘world leading’ fisheries. When it comes to quota, here are some basic principles that can be used to frame a fishing future with well-balanced goals for jobs, seafood supply, and the marine environment.

- 1. Fishing opportunities (quota) should be handed out based on clear social and environmental criteria.**

This is something else the US is getting right – the [California Fisheries Fund](#), working with The Nature Conservancy, has supported West Coast fisheries by investing in quota and handing it out to local, sustainable fishing operations. The UK Government could learn from these efforts and set aside a portion of the national

quota to support a 'reward scheme' for boats that fish with a lower impact on the environment. Bigger rewards could be handed out for the most ambitious performance targets, such as for vessels taking up full electronic monitoring of their catch. Incentives could also be tailored to ensure diversity in the fleet (keeping a healthy balance of inshore and offshore fishing).

2. **Boost the profile of fishing as a career for young people by creating a scheme for new entrants.** Similarly, a national 'pot' of quota could be set aside to support newcomers to fishing – giving them the opportunity to fish without needing to buy a boat and quota from other fishermen at huge expense. Denmark has been doing exactly this, through a ring-fenced share of quota known as 'Fishfund'; helping new entrants to join the sector. We need to stimulate growth at the younger-end of the fishing industry, diversify the sector and recruit new talent with an open, inquiring approach to fishing methods. Getting millennials on board could also help seed and spread new, tech-savvy approaches to fishing.
3. **Put the necessary safeguards in place to protect social goals.** To get technical, it's time to break up 'FQAs'. FQAs are 'Fixed Quota Allocation' units – groupings of fishing opportunities that are so large they are just too expensive for smaller operators to purchase. Like a household trying to buy more bread, but the supermarket only stocking it by the tonne. If we could break FQAs into small, affordable 'bundles' of quota (get the supermarket to sell bread by the loaf), small boat owners could get on the quota 'ladder' through this more affordable access to the quota market. These bundles would also represent accessible 'starter quota packages' – another way to attract new, young entrants: the future of the industry.

It's also important to limit the total amount of quota any one fishing business can acquire, so it isn't able to 'consolidate' exclusively into the hands of big business. Sweden operates local 'quota pools' exclusively designated for small-scale fishers – protecting employment in coastal communities whilst allowing bigger boats to trade freely outside of the pool. In Norway a one-way 'valve' system means that small boats can purchase quota from larger operators, but the reverse can't take place.

With fishermen some of the most vocal advocates for Brexit, and fishing communities [some of the most vulnerable to economic uncertainty](#) in the country, now is the time to step forward with ambitious policies to deliver on a more prosperous future for fishing businesses, both big and small. Using incentives, safeguards, and carefully tailored approaches like those above, the UK Government can use quota – the right tool for the job – to realise a truly world-leading vision for UK fisheries.

The above was [first published](#) on the Environmental Defence Fund's blog and [LSE British Politics and Policy](#). This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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