

## Q&amp;A

# Cod decline imminent

## SAYS ICELANDIC INDEPENDENT SCIENTIST

Quentin Bates

**FNI:** Iceland's cod quota has been lifted to 177,000t. How does that strike you?

**JK:** In spite of what the Marine Research Institute (MRI) claims, cod is set for a decline. According to the cod stock index over the last 26 years, the stock never grows five years in a row. It's always four years and then a downturn – and we can expect to see evidence of this later this winter or next spring. The figures that back this up are all available to the Institute – it's as if they can't interpret their own data."

**FNI:** So what went wrong?

**JK:** The stock contains a lot of older larger individuals, which the establishment tells us is because they have had time to grow. In reality there's an underfished stock – not enough is fished and selective fishing protects the smaller fish which are undernourished.

Large cod are cannibals, preying on smaller cod. Now the haddock stock is in the process of collapsing as it does not have enough to eat. None of the ICES crew are interested in the growth and condition of the individual fish but that's what tells you if they have enough to eat. Predator/prey interactions and competition with other fish stocks does not interest them; they just try to count fish.

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**FNI:** What alternatives are there to the accepted principles?

**JK:** Quota management always leads to wastage, discards of non-target species and small

**INDEPENDENT:** scientist Jón Kristjánsson predicts that a decline in Iceland's cod stock will be seen this coming winter or next spring

Independent scientist Jón Kristjánsson has been consistently critical of modern fisheries management, both in his own country of Iceland and in other parts of the world. He has been involved in providing independent advice to a number of fishermen's organisations as well as to governments

fish, and fishermen complaining that quotas are low.

The solution is effort control, such as days at sea in the Faroes, with boats are

control is hardly needed.

The twin ideas underpinning fisheries management, that small fish should be protected and that less fish should be

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allocated fishing days without species or catch limits. The fishery reflects the relative stock size in real time, so there is no need to assess stocks and fisheries

caught, are both wrong. The only stock in Icelandic waters that supports a steady, healthy fishery without any apparent problems is the one that is not subject to quotas or management other than a days at sea limit.

**FNI:** Which fishery is that?

**JK:** This is the lumpfish roe fishery, managed by the industry itself to keep prices steady. The boats have 50 days at sea that they can take whenever they like and the industry across Iceland, Norway, Newfoundland and Greenland manages this jointly to regulate the volumes of roe on the market.

Some years there is good (lumpfish) fishing in Iceland and poor fishing elsewhere, other years the situation is reversed, but the fishery remains pretty steady – and this is a fishery that targets the spawning females when half of their bodyweight is eggs!

This year there are nets everywhere, but the problem is that the cod stock spawning time overlaps with the beginning of the lumpfish season, starting in April/May and the areas also overlap.

Cod are recharging their batteries after spawning by feeding on lumpfish eggs in shallow water. Cod bycatch is not allowed in the lumpfish fishery and the fishermen have to throw them back, which is also banned.

**FNI:** Is this a problem of science, or government, or both?

**JK:** The problems stem from the interests of quota holders and politicians. The owners fund the political parties, so both have financial interests at stake. The vessel owners' federation has seats on the MRI board and gave the MRI its big research vessel, so they want to keep a finger on the pulse of research activity.

It's in their interests to keep quotas low to keep quota values high. So scaremongering about overfishing helps justify the small quotas, maintaining a seller's market for them.

There are also deep links between the management of the MRI and former Minister Halldór Ásgrímsson, the 'father of the quota system', who in turn has close links with a quota-owning company.

**FNI:** Should others, such as the EU, be able to learn from the problems Iceland's fisheries face?

**JK:** They should do if they were able to examine the issues in an objective manner. But this is difficult as any criticism is brushed aside and the system is energetically promoted overseas.

**FNI:** Why do you feel that the theory of protecting small fish so that they can grow and breed is wrong?

**JK:** Because it doesn't add up. Catching fewer small fish leaves the stock less feed for each individual. This reduces growth and the natural mortality rate increases so that the fish appear to disappear. After Iceland's 25-year experiment, the results are zero.

Promising year classes appear to vanish and recruitment of three-year fish has been consistently low, even though they are strong as one- and two-year fish. They simply die off or become feed for the larger cod that are also hungry.

Research by Jeppe Kolding and Paul van Zwieten ('The tragedy of our legacy: how do global management discourses affect small-scale fisheries in the South?') Also supports the theory that over-protecting small fish and curtailing fishing activity are counter-productive.

**FNI:** At what level do you feel a sensible Minister of Fisheries would set this year's Iceland's cod and haddock quotas?

**JK:** The minister promised before elections to take all restrictions off jig fishing. But he has not done this – as he appears to be scared of the quota holders and the Greens.

The Green movement has the policy of following precautionary approaches in exploiting resources, while this constant talk of overfishing from the scientific community continually gives the Green lobby more ammunition to fire at the fishing industry.

