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ICES Report advises that Electric Pulse Fishing be made Legal

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The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), in a report requested by the Netherlands, has advised that Electric Pulse Fishing be made legal.

The Netherlands requested the report after the European Union banned Electric Pulse Fishing in 2019, even though there are currently some Dutch vessels continuing to use this fishing method until the ban comes into full-effect in mid-2021.

The Dutch fishing industry had lobbied hard to gain support for the Electric Pulse Fishing method but an overall majority voted against allowing the controversial technique which was designed to mainly target sole.

Another controversy over the method was the licensing and funding of Dutch beam trawlers that converted to the scientific program of experimentation when the Netherlands used a derogation to allow for research and equipped their fishing vessels with pulsors replacing the traditional beam trawl.

In the report requested from the Netherlands regarding the impacts of pulse trawling on the ecosystem and environment from the sole (Solea solea) fishery in the North Sea the ICES, an intergovernmental marine science organisation, advises that

"The change from conventional beam trawling to pulse trawling when exploiting the total allowable catch of North Sea sole contributes to reducing the ecosystem/environmental impacts of the sole fishery.

"ICES advice analyses the ecosystem/environmental effects of the pulse trawl sole fishery on North Sea ecosystems.

"However, the advice does not consider other forms of electrical fishing, such as those for brown shrimp (Crangon crangon) or razorshells (Ensis arcuatus), nor does it consider pulse fisheries in other ecosystems.

"Provided that the sole stock is well-managed, ICES advises that pulse trawling does not impose any increased risk to its sustainable exploitation.

"ICES advises that the direct impact of the electrical pulse on marine organisms does not increase mortality compared to that of conventional beam trawling (other than being caught in a fishery).

"Cod (Gadus morhua) is known to be an exception; however, the increase in overall mortality due to pulse trawling is negligible for the North Sea cod stock, and small (< 2%) for the cod stock components in the southern North Sea.

"Despite the uncertainty regarding the physiological impacts to marine organisms not caught in the fishery, pulse trawling is not expected to affect the reproductive potential of these populations, given the low probability of exposure to pulse stimuli.

"ICES advises that pulse fishing reduces the bycatch of most undersized fish and of benthic invertebrates, and reduces the disturbance of the seafloor and the impact on the benthic ecosystem. It also reduces use of fuel and associated CO2 emissions as compared to conventional beam trawling.

"ICES further advises that the documented effects of pulse trawling on the benthic ecosystem are consequences of mechanical disturbance rather than electrical pulses.

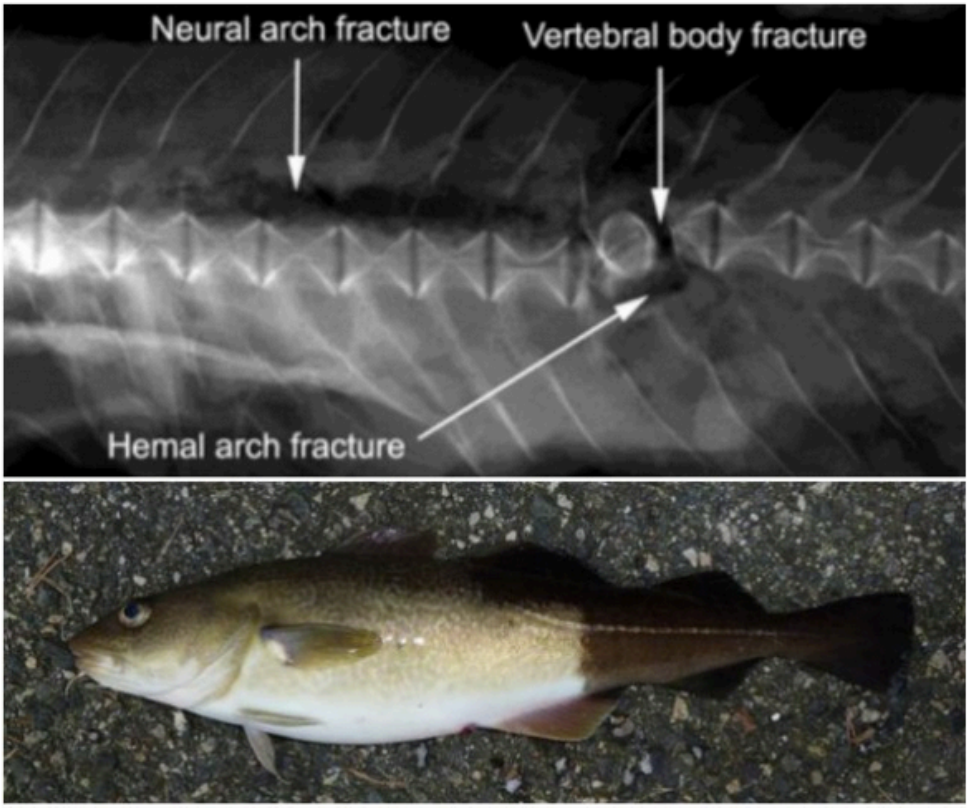
"Furthermore, the effect of mechanical disturbance is less pronounced because of the smaller area that is trawled by the pulse gear, the reduced penetration into the seabed, and the reduced resuspension of sediments as compared to conventional beam trawling.

"ICES advises that the change from conventional beam trawling to pulse trawling does not increase, and in some cases may reduce pressure on Natura 2000 habitats and species."

This report is a complete contradiction to the report issued in 2018 by French based non-governmental organisation Bloom who campaigned against the legalisation of Electric Pulse Fishing in European waters who said in their report:

"Europe prohibited electric fishing in 1998 to protect juvenile fish and the future of fishery resources but in 2006, under pressure from the Dutch fishing industry, the European Commission proposed, out of the blue and against scientific advice, to authorize the use of electric current to catch fish in the North Sea under a derogation regime. As a result, the Dutch trawl industry was able to claim millions of euros in public subsidies to equip vessels with electrodes. These super-efficient electric trawlers are not only jeopardizing the health of marine ecosystems but the livelihoods of thousands of sustainable fishers in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands."

On the issue of damage the Bloom report found:



Top picture: radioscopy showing a cod with a broken spine after an electric shock.
Bottom picture: blacktail pattern indicating vertebral injury.[56]

"Electric trawls remain bottom trawling which uses high-impact fishing gears that are dragged along the bottom and damage marine habitats. Additionally, the electric current used by electric trawlers jeopardizes the integrity and future of marine ecosystems by impacting both the hatching of eggs and survival of larvae. Electric trawls are utterly non-selective: 50 to 70% of the catch are deemed to be discarded. The electric current causes such violent, uncontrolled convulsions in fish and experiments show that 39 to 70% of large cod are left with a fractured spine and internal bleeding after the shock. Survival rates measured for several discarded species were very low, especially for undersized specimens. The impact of electricity on the benthos, far below the usual depth of penetration of a regular beam trawl, is still unknown."

Bloom also claimed that Electric Pulse Fishing was not as fuel-efficient as reports were claiming. They also claimed the Electric Pulse Fishing impacted both eggs and early life stages of fish existing in areas of the southern North Sea.