

home ranges. So when wrasse are removed from an area, they do not readily recolonise it.

Scotland's wrasse are in danger of being fished out. And this matters – a lot. Wrasse are 'keystone' species which feed on the parasites that harm the wild fish and the flora that ensure healthy marine habitats – including the kelp forests that the Scottish Parliament recently voted to protect. When the wrasse are gone the ecosystem is damaged, potentially beyond repair.

But it's not just an ecological problem: wrasse are highly valued by our recreational diving and sea angling businesses, and their loss hurts these otherwise sustainable activities. As the absence of wrasse leads to the degradation of the inshore ecosystem, that affects commercial fishermen too.

Given wrasse's importance, you might assume that concerted efforts are being made to ensure their careful management. But you would be wrong. In fact the wrasse fishery is abysmally managed.

The relevant regulations are 'voluntary measures' developed by Marine Scotland after consultation with the salmon farming industry. Community groups, inshore fishery representatives and environmental NGOs were excluded, not that it would have mattered anyway because the measures are voluntary, so

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fishermen don't have to stick to them.

But it gets worse still. The Scottish Government has given responsibility for maintaining data on wrasse fishing vessels to the salmon farming industry's trade body,

while responsibility for 'auditing' how the wrasse have been caught lies with salmon farming companies themselves. Given that the salmon farming industry is promoting the fishery, it is baffling that it has also been given these roles in overseeing it (although, to its credit, Loch Duart, the Scottish-owned salmon farming company, is working hard to minimise the number of wrasse it needs to use).

Even if fishermen stick to the voluntary measures, the system is riddled with shortcomings. Most fundamentally, no stock assessments have been undertaken of Scottish wrasse populations, so no one knows how many can be sustainably caught. This means Scotland's public commitments to adopt a precautionary approach to fisheries and limit catches to the 'maximum sustainable yield' are impossible to comply with.

The whole fiasco is made even more ecologically damaging (as if that were possible) by the fact that under the voluntary measures the Scottish wrasse fishing season coincides with the species' breeding season. Because it is convenient for the salmon farming industry to have their wrasse delivered in the



PAULO OLIVEIRA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

summer when they are not hibernating, they are caught at the most damaging time of year.

So what should be done?

In an ideal world there would be a moratorium on all commercial wrasse fishing until we know how many there are and how to run the fishery sustainably. But if that is too much to expect of the Scottish Government then at least we should be putting in place the sort of sensible mandatory measures that are now in place in England.

The English have had to bring in legally-enforceable rules because, with the Scottish wrasse population dwindling and no longer able to meet demand, Scottish salmon farm operators have been paying for wild-caught English wrasse to be juggernauted up the M6 to be released in their farms (where many die not long after being released).

In England, there are now strict legal limits upon how many wrasse traps can be used, the design of these traps, where they can be used and when they can be used. We in Scotland need to catch up and do the same. If we don't, a keystone species may disappear, with who-knows-what consequences, including another reputational disaster for Scotland's environmental management and for its aquaculture industry.

Charles Millar is executive director of SIFT, the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust

Above: Wrasse are used to control sea lice that can wipe out populations of Scottish salmon.

58,000

The number of captive bred wrasse produced in Scotland in 2017

20 years

The potential lifespan of wrasse

£190k

The salary wrasse fishers can earn per annum

Five

The number of species of wrasse found in Scottish waters