



Conservation and Fisheries Directorate, Ascension Island Government

Policy on Inshore Fisheries (Stock Assessment and Management Measures) in Ascension

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Background

The fishing pressure on Ascension is constrained by the small size of the island population and limited routes for export, but that doesn't prevent all risk of damage to inshore fish stocks. The isolation of Ascension and limited area of shallow water habitat means that exploited species such as rockhind grouper, moray eel, glasseye snapper and spiny lobster that are tied to shallow water may have very limited distribution and little capacity for replenishment if stocks are severely depleted.

Highly-migratory pelagic species such as yellowfin tuna and wahoo are much less likely to be impacted by recreational or sports fishing around Ascension. Individuals of these species caught in inshore waters around Ascension are part of the wider Atlantic population and the Ascension catch is negligible compared to quotas for the commercial fleet exploiting the same stocks.

Context

This policy is one of two (alongside the Inshore Fisheries: Registration and Licensing Policy) that implement the Ascension Inshore Fisheries Management Strategy. The Strategy sets out how the inshore fisheries around Ascension will be managed to secure social, economic and environmental objectives.

The Inshore Fisheries Management Strategy aims to bring about:

- A sustainable, thriving recreational fishery that balances current needs with the long-term health of fish stocks and inshore marine ecosystems for future generations to enjoy
- A well-managed sports fishing sector that follows the best environmental practices and generates financial benefit for everyone living on Ascension
- A management system with Ascension's fishing community at the heart of decision making, leading to a sense of ownership and high levels of compliance and cooperation
- Full compliance with all of Ascension's international obligations relating to coastal fisheries

Issue

Ascension's inshore fish stocks have not been subject to the same level of pressures seen in many parts of the world, and the presence of top predators suggests that past exploitation has been sustainable. However, the small absolute size of Ascension's shallow water habitat and the island's isolation from other similar habitats make Ascension's fish stocks inherently vulnerable, and factors such as climate change may mean past experience isn't a reliable guide for the future. There are many examples from around the world where the assumption that the sea will be ever-bountiful has been shown to be incorrect.

There is currently no system for managing the inshore fisheries around Ascension. Without such a system, the Ascension Island Government (AIG) is not meeting its responsibility to protect a natural resource that has high socio-economic and biodiversity value for the island.

Powers to impose restrictions on the inshore fishery are present in Ascension legislation, but they have not been used because they are ill-defined and do not form part of a coherent strategy or policy for implementation. To ensure confidence in the system and high levels of compliance, management measures must be based on sound evidence and applied in a consistent and transparent manner. The involvement of members of the fishing community in data collection and decision making will help to overcome issues of trust and disempowerment.

Principles and Objectives

The overarching principles of the Inshore Fisheries Management Strategy are:

- Inshore fishing will be sustainable in the long-term and not have a negative impact on Ascension's marine environment, so that future generations have the same fishing and recreational opportunities we enjoy today.
- The current state of fish stocks is accepted as a healthy baseline from which to monitor trends. This cannot be supported by evidence, but is a reasonable and pragmatic assumption.
- The ocean around Ascension is a precious resource that should be used wisely and shared fairly for the benefit of the whole island.
- The people who know and use Ascension's waters will be its best stewards and should play an important and active role in its management.
- Management decisions will be based on evidence, but a lack of full scientific certainty should not be an excuse for inaction.
- The way the fishery is managed should be transparent and accountable to the people living on Ascension.

The principles guiding stock assessment and management measures are:

- Fishing methods such as trawling and gill netting that are destructive and indiscriminate have no place in a sustainable fishery and will be prohibited.
- Management decisions should be based on the best available evidence. Good data are needed so that any problems with the health of a fish stock are identified early and the right management measures can be introduced to protect and restore the stock as quickly as possible.
- Both the fishing community and the Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD) have information that can contribute to a well-managed fishery. Combining data from the fishing community and those collected by AIGCFD will allow much more robust stock assessments.
- Everyone who registers will be asked to provide catch data. This will be on a voluntary basis and incentives will be used to improve return rates.
- In the absence of good historical data for comparison, the assumption has been made that stocks are currently healthy and management interventions should only be considered if they decline from where they are now.
- Stock assessments will focus on shallow water species such as grouper, eel and crayfish, because these are part of isolated populations around Ascension that we have the ability to assess and manage. Pelagic species such as tuna are part of populations that range across the tropical Atlantic. Ascension is not in a position to assess or manage these stocks alone and will instead share data with International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna who can.
- If the data do show a decline in a fish species, it does not necessarily mean overfishing is to blame. There are other factors such as climate change and pollution that could be affecting fish stocks. Solving the actual problem will always be the first aim, but adjusting the fishing pressure through management measures may still be necessary to maintain good fish stocks in the face of factors such as climate change that we can do little about.
- It is the fishing community that will be most affected by any management of the fishery and so they will be invited to be part of the decision making to find the right balance between the needs of today and tomorrow. It is an important objective of this strategy that marine users are involved in decision making and a core principle that they should play an important and active role in its management.
- Management measures will only be introduced if they are necessary to protect a fish stock or the marine environment. If such measures are required, they should be applied to everyone living on Ascension who fishes to ensure they are effective and fair.

- If fish stocks are in trouble and only able to support limited exploitation, then individuals living on Ascension should have privileged access to what fishing is possible and visitors and businesses will face tighter restrictions.
- Good evidence can take a long time to collect and, in some instances, it may be better to be over-cautious and act now to protect a stock. This may mean restrictions are more severe than they need to be, but avoids the risk that no action is taken and the stock declines before evidence can be gathered. Such instances are expected to be rare and will only occur where there is broad agreement that a precautionary approach is justified.
- An adaptive management approach will be followed whereby the outcome of management measures are assessed and used to refine future action. The marine environment is very dynamic and climate change will only increase the speed and scale at which changes occur. Management decisions will initially need to be made based on imperfect information so it is vital that we monitor how successful they are and react quickly to learn from experience and continually improve.

Application of Policy

Prohibited fishing methods

The following fishing methods are not compatible with sustainable fishing and will not be allowed in Ascension's waters:

- Bottom and mid-water trawling
- Tangle/gill netting
- Drift netting
- Longlining
- Purse seine netting
- Unconventional fishing methods (dynamite, poison, electricity)

Data collection

Collecting data from the fishing community is an important part of the fish stock assessment process.

People living on Ascension will be offered a logbook when they register. Logbooks will also be available from the Conservation Office at other times. AIGCFD will request that logbooks are brought into the Conservation Office on 1st December and 1st June each year so that the data can be transcribed and the logbook returned to the owner. This will be a voluntary process for people eligible to register.

Individuals and businesses that require a licence to fish will be required to provide catch data to AIGCFD as a condition of their licences. A catch data form will be provided to licence holders to facilitate this.

Stock assessment mechanism

The status of individual fish stocks and need for the introduction of any management measures will be assessed every six months. This assessment will be carried out jointly by AIGCFD and a group representing the fishing community. To be included in the decision-making process, the group representing the fishing community must meet the following criteria:

- (i) It is a properly constituted group (has a constitution or terms of reference, elected officials and a transparent and open membership policy)
- (ii) It has mechanisms in place to canvas and represent the views of the fishing community on Ascension;
- (iii) It is willing to meet every six months and engage in the stock assessment process;
- (iv) It agrees with the objectives of the Ascension Inshore Fisheries Strategy, which are to achieve:
 - A sustainable, thriving recreational fishery that balances current needs with the long-term health of fish stocks and inshore marine ecosystems for future generations to enjoy
 - A well-managed sports fishing sector that follows the best environmental practices and generates financial benefit for everyone living on Ascension
 - A management system with Ascension's fishing community at the heart of decision making, leading to a sense of ownership and high levels of compliance and cooperation
 - Full compliance with all of Ascension's international obligations relating to coastal fisheries

The results of the stock assessments and any recommendations for management measures will be provided to the Ascension Island Council. Efforts will be made to reach a joint decision agreed by AIGCFD and the group representing the fishing community. Where agreement cannot be reached, separate reports and recommendations will be provided to the Ascension Island Council.

All efforts will be made to encourage participation of the fishing community in the stock assessment process. However, in the absence of any group representing the fishing community that meets the criteria described above, AIGCFD will make recommendations for consideration by the Ascension Island Council.

The Ascension Island Council will consider the information provided and make recommendations to the Administrator about the need for any management measures to be introduced or repealed. To aid this decision, the Ascension Island Council may request further information from AIGCFD or the group representing the fishing community, or ask that a public consultation is undertaken. At their discretion, the Ascension Island Council can make recommendations to the Administrator to introduce or repeal management measures in the absence of any recommendation from AIGCFD or the group representing the fishing community.

Procedure for introducing management measures

The Administrator may introduce certain fishery management measures. When deciding whether there is a need to introduce or repeal management measures, the Administrator will consider:

- (i) recommendations from the Ascension Island Council
- (ii) the stock assessments and recommendations from AIGCFD and the group representing the fishing community
- (iii) any relevant international treaties or agreements to which Ascension is party
- (iv) the health of Ascension's marine environment
- (v) the objectives of the Ascension Island Inshore Fisheries Strategy and Marine Protected Area

Where the Island Council disagrees with the decision made by the Administrator, this decision will be appealable to the Governor.

Publication of management measures

The decision of the Administrator to introduce or repeal management measures will be publicised to increase compliance. This will include a summary of the data on which the decision was based. The introduction of measures will be publicised through the following methods:

- (i) public notice
- (ii) article in the local press
- (iii) posters displayed at the Pierhead and public noticeboards
- (iv) leaflets and presentation at annual registration event
- (v) leaflet given out with fishing licences
- (vi) AIG website

Appeal mechanism

Any person living on Ascension who is unhappy with the introduction or repeal of a management measure may appeal to the Governor for a review.

Enforcement of management measures

Enforcement of management measures will follow the Inshore Fisheries Enforcement Guidelines and be carried out by Fishery Protection Officers warranted under the Fisheries (Management and Conservation) Ordinance, 2015 and police officers. If management measures are introduced that result in closed areas or seasons for fishing, then warranted

Fishery Protection Officers and Police Officers may undertake patrols to ensure compliance with the measures.

Enforcement action is always carried out with proportionality, consistency and accountability to ensure it is fair and seen to be fair. Not breaching management measures will also be a term of licence conditions.

For less serious breaches, enforcement action will escalate if there are repeated breaches:

- 1st breach – provide information and a deadline to remedy the situation;
- 2nd breach or failure to remedy 1st breach within deadline – issue a formal warning;
- 3rd breach – Fixed penalty notice of £100;
- 4th breach – Fixed penalty notice of £250;
- 5th breach - prosecution with the potential for a fine or imprisonment.

For the most serious breaches prosecution will be considered in the first instance. Serious breaches would include the breaching of multiple management measures or actions that pose a significant threat to Ascension’s marine environment.

Review of management measures

The continued need for management measures will be reviewed every six months by AIGCFD and the group representing the fishing community. Their recommendations will be passed to the Ascension Island Council and the Administrator and decisions made through the mechanism described above.

In exceptional circumstances AIGCFD and the group representing the fishing community could meet more frequently to review management measures and make recommendations at a greater frequency than the normal six-month period. The decision-making process described above would still be followed to introduce or repeal management measures.

Amendments to this policy

AIG will consult both the Island Council and representatives of the fishing community on any proposed changes to the implementation policies. All major proposed changes to the policy will be circulated to registered fishers so they have the opportunity to provide feedback via their Councillors.