



# FISHY

## FALSEHOODS

A series of papers debunking  
myths about our industry

# 02



# "Fish stocks are declining"

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## FACT

It is simply untrue to state that fish stocks in the waters around the UK are declining.

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The total abundance (biomass) of whitefish<sup>1</sup> in the North Sea has more than doubled since the start of the century and is higher now than at almost any time in the last 40+ years.

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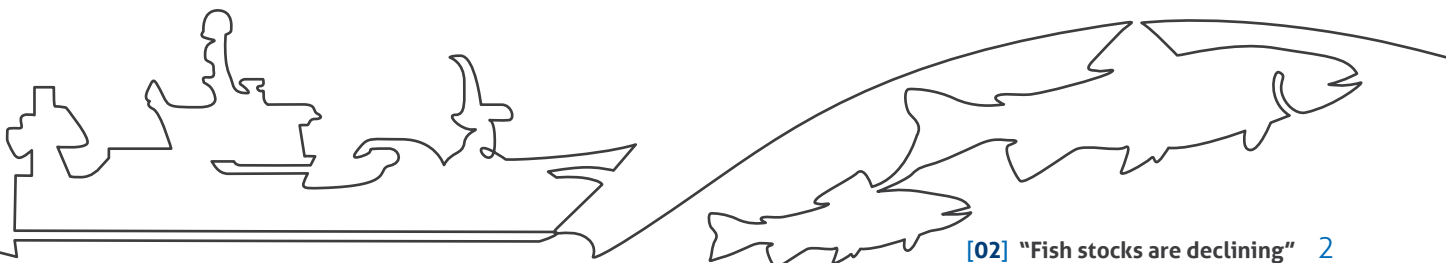
Some individual fish stocks (such as plaice and hake) are 10 times bigger now than they were 20 years ago.

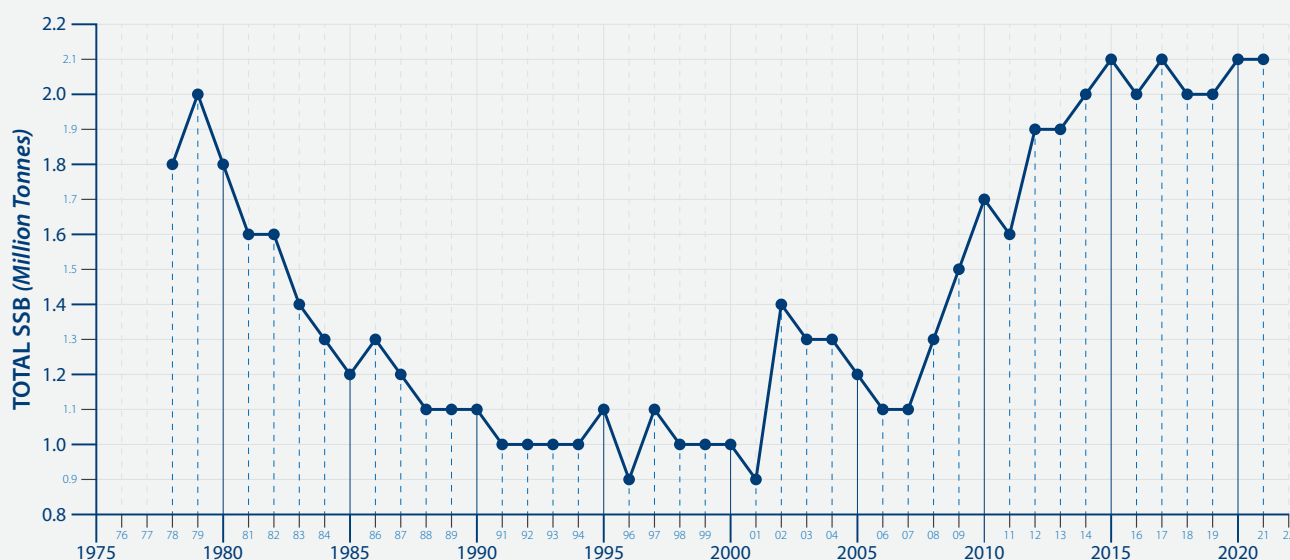
## FACT

Fish populations are healthy or improving globally.

Although the abundance of whitefish in the North Sea and adjacent areas decreased during the 1980s, that decline ended 30 years ago. After 2000 the abundance of fish began a dramatic increase which reached a record high by 2017.

<sup>1</sup> 'Whitefish' includes many of the fish with which we are most familiar, including cod, haddock and plaice. The whitefish stocks included in this analysis are North Sea cod, plaice, sprats, sole and whiting, North Sea & West of Scotland haddock and saithe, and Northern Hake.





The total spawning stock biomass (SSB) of eight fish whitefish stocks in the North Sea and adjacent areas for which long-term time-series are available<sup>1</sup>. (Analysis of ICES data<sup>2</sup>.)

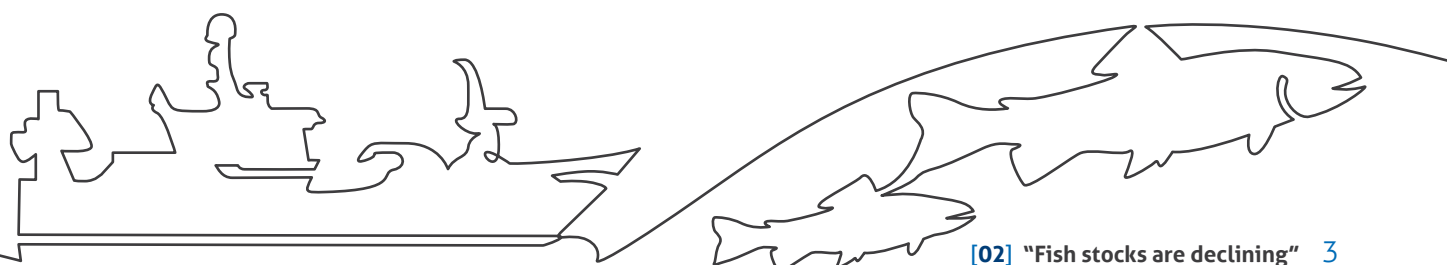
Since 2014 the total weight of the whitefish in the North Sea and adjacent areas whose abundance is known has generally been above two million tonnes, more than at any time since at least the 1970s (see chart above)<sup>2</sup>.

Each individual fish stock has changed in abundance in a different way over the last 40 years. Haddock, for example, has experienced regular very large changes in abundance which reflect the biology of the species. And while the cod stock has declined the abundances of hake and plaice have increased almost 10-fold.

These figures show that fish stocks are in a constant state of change relative to one another. Some stocks may increase in size over time while others decrease and yet others regularly fluctuate in size. There is no single 'right' size for each individual stock.

Rather than focus on the size of one or two fish stocks in isolation, the overall abundance of fish provides a better and more realistic picture of the state of fish stocks. While there may be less cod now than there has been in the past, there is a lot more plaice and hake, for example.

<sup>2</sup> Napier. 2020. *Trends in Scottish Fish Stocks* 2020. NAFC Marine Centre Report: <https://www.shetland.uhi.ac.uk/research/statistics/reports/trends/>



## Fish populations around the world are improving<sup>3</sup>

According to a scientific paper published in 2020<sup>4</sup>, scientifically assessed fish populations around the world are healthy or improving on average. And, for fish populations that are not doing well, there is a clear roadmap to sustainability. Based on an analysis of information on 882 marine fish population the paper found that, on average, fish populations are above target levels. While not every stock is doing well, on average things are much better than they were two decades ago.

## Motivation

Claims about fish stocks being in decline are most often made and promoted by environmental campaigners. These groups rely on keeping up a campaign of misinformation against commercial fishing: using 'doomsday' stories and scenarios to maintain media interest, a high public profile, influence over politicians, and funding from their sponsors.

## What we need now

After a decade of sustained and steady growth in fish stocks, it's time to see a recognition of the fishing industry's efforts by considering sustainable increases to fish catching quotas. We should be proud of the efforts that our fishing fleet have gone to in collaborating with scientists to turn around any depletion of North Sea fish stocks.

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://sustainablefisheries-uw.org/fish-populations-are-improving/>

<sup>4</sup> Hilborn et al. 2020. Effective fisheries management instrumental in improving fish stock status. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117: 2218-2224. <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/4/2218>



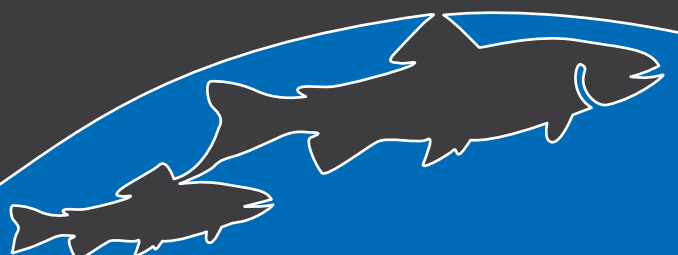
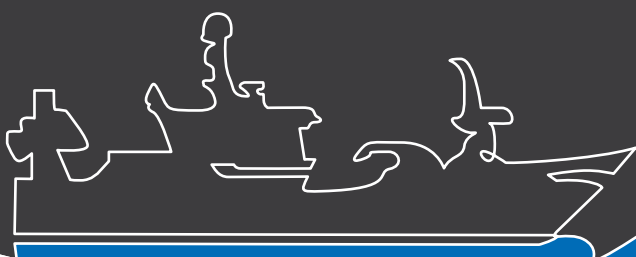


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