



“ There’s a strong incentive to encourage scientists to get more information ”



Bay of Biscay case study

Species: Blackspot seabream, thornback ray, spotted ray, blonde ray

Research: Spatial structure, environmental drivers



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In terms of the Bay of Biscay what do you see is the most pressing issue?

The area is very diverse, so for the Pandora project, we just selected a few species to study. The pressing issues with respect to sustainable fisheries is knowing more about all these species where we don't know the stock status, or don't have enough data for fitting models, or both.

I think one major issue is that a diversity of species is exploited. And from the fishermen's point of view, because of the management system that is in place right now, as there is not have enough information the quota gets reduced regularly.

So there's a strong incentive to encourage scientists to get more information and then be able to know more. Perhaps you have to reduce quotas as well, but still you do it based on information.

I get the sense that even with the species that we study in Pandora, there's still much more that is still unknown.

It's a small step because we are working primarily on two species. One is blackspot seabream, which is I think, quite iconic in the sense it was it was very important until the 80s when the stock crashed completely and it has never really recovered.

It also has a special biology because it changes sex, it's first male and then becomes female, which makes it a very vulnerable species. Individuals need to live long enough to become female for the population to reproduce.

And that becomes a problem if it doesn't survive long. It's recovering very slowly now. So that's why also we thought the project was at the right moment to study this species.

We are not pretending we're going to solve all questions that there are. But all of the research we have done will be put into the advice system and will really change how ICES provides advice.

In your experience, do you think that the common fisheries policy is working for the region? Or are there any glaring errors at the moment?

I think the approach of evidence-based management is working. It's forcing people to have data. That was a problem for ray species. It's now more than ten years that there's an obligation to register landings by species. Before it was simply 'ray' - there are quite a few of them!

It was impossible to know the landings for any given ray species. I think the common fisheries policy that applies coherent methods and evidence, has pushed things a lot and has allowed a lot of progress.

In Pandora we are taking a single species approach, which is in line with what's being done at the moment. And I think if we get that right, we'll have made big progress.

Are there any obvious changes you would like to see maybe in the next 10 years, either from the policymaking side or from industry or fishers?

There is an obligation today to collect data on recreational fisheries, but it hasn't been really done enough. When you have a stock that's very low, even not so intense recreational fishery can be quite important in terms of mortality.

For example, when we started the project, recreational fisheries were allowed to catch smaller individuals than the commercial fishery; this was changed later. This didn't make any sense whatsoever. We know that they're all around the rocky coast and thus accessible to recreational fishing.

One thing I would like to see is a move away from ray species all being part of a common quota. There's quite a difference within the different ray species. We have smaller rays that are very productive and very big rays, but they're all lumped together.

Since the bigger ones are more valuable, economic incentives comes into play and makes it very hard to actually have proper management that allows sustainability for all ray species.

What have you learned in PANDORA?

Pandora is showing that to make progress it takes a lot of small steps. The devil is in the details. In a way, if you want to make progress, you have to do things incrementally, and you have to make sure you do all the steps. So that your results get to the end and are used within the system. And it's I think that's something also I've learned from this, it's really essential.

Otherwise, we've just produced another few papers and it won't be used at all. And [project lead] Stefan Neuenfeldt had this vision also that Pandora should create this toolbox that can feed into the system. But in order to be relevant information and results we need to go until the end.

(Interview has been edited for length and clarity)



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