Fish Are a Public Resource – Why Permanent Fishing Rights Would Be a Mistake

Bass Angling Conservation

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Introduction

A recent report published by the Adam Smith Institute (ASI) proposes replacing the UK's existing quota system with permanent, tradeable property rights, giving each commercial fisherman a fixed share of the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) in perpetuity.

Commercial fishermen undoubtedly need certainty to invest in vessels, equipment and businesses. But certainty does not require granting perpetual fishing rights over a public resource.

The proposal would make permanent a historical allocation of quota that was originally granted free of charge. That allocation was based largely on recorded landings, a system that disadvantaged many small-scale fishers whose catches were not fully captured in official records. Making these allocations permanent would not correct historical inequalities; it would preserve them indefinitely.

The report also places a strong emphasis on improving economic efficiency within the commercial catching sector. However, fisheries management is not simply an exercise in maximising the economic efficiency of one group of resource users.

Fish are a public resource

Wild fish stocks are a public natural resource to be managed on behalf of society as a whole. Governments have a responsibility to allocate access to those stocks in the public interest.

This requires balancing many legitimate objectives, including conservation, recreational fishing, sustainable commercial fishing, coastal communities, and the interests of future generations, while also ensuring fairness between sectors.

The key question is not simply who can extract the greatest economic value from fish stocks today. It is how access to a shared resource should be allocated in a way that is sustainable, adaptable and delivers the greatest overall benefit to society over time.

Fish populations shift, climate change alters marine ecosystems, scientific understanding develops and public priorities evolve. Any system of fishing rights must therefore preserve the ability of future governments to respond to changing circumstances rather than permanently fixing today's allocation of fishing opportunities.

Recreational fishing cannot simply be ignored

Perhaps the most striking omission from the ASI paper is its failure to consider recreational fishing as a legitimate user of the UK's fish stocks. Commercial fishermen are not the only people with an interest in how those stocks are managed.

Millions of people participate in recreational sea angling. This supports significant economic activity through charter boats, tackle shops, accommodation providers and hospitality businesses and contributes to the economies of coastal communities. Recreational anglers are not merely pursuing a leisure activity; they are important users of a shared public resource.

For some species this matters enormously. For the Northern bass stock, scientific assessments estimate that recreational anglers catch more bass than the commercial sector. Yet the report offers no explanation of how permanent commercial fishing rights would protect the interests of recreational fishers, or how future governments could adjust access arrangements if doing so produced greater economic, social or environmental benefits.

A proposal that permanently allocates access to one user group without addressing how the interests of other users of the resource would be protected is fundamentally incomplete.

Certainty does not require perpetual fishing rights

None of this means commercial fishermen should lack certainty. Fishing is a capital-intensive industry and businesses need confidence to invest. But there is a significant difference between long-term certainty and permanent fishing rights. The current quota system already provides considerable stability while retaining some ability to reform allocations in the public interest, where justified and with appropriate notice. The case for certainty does not require access to a public resource to be converted into permanent private entitlements.

A more balanced approach would retain public stewardship of fishing opportunities over time. Rather than allowing access rights to become permanent assets that can be bought and sold indefinitely, fishing opportunities should remain subject to public management and the ability to reallocate them when circumstances change.

This principle has already been recognised in UK fisheries discussions. The Bass Management Group's 2025 Authorisation Review considered proposals to prevent newly issued bass authorisations from becoming transferable assets when vessels are sold. One of the stated benefits was that this would help maintain flexibility in managing fishing effort, enable opportunities for new entrants and prevent fishing authorisations becoming primarily valuable because of their commodity value.

The principle is important: fishing opportunities should exist to support sustainable fisheries and public objectives, not become financial assets whose ownership is divorced from active participation in the fishery.

Don't compound yesterday's mistake

The UK introduced fixed quota allocations in 1999, based largely on historical catches, with quota shares allocated free of charge. Over time, these allocations became valuable commercial assets, creating significant private wealth from access to a public resource.

However, historical catch records did not provide a complete or fair picture of participation in the fishery. Larger vessels with more complete catch records were often better placed to secure quota allocations, while many small-scale fishers with less complete records received a smaller share of future fishing opportunities than their actual contribution might have justified.

Making these allocations permanent would lock in the inequalities created by the original allocation. Existing quota holders would receive a major windfall, while future generations of fishermen would have to purchase access from those who already hold the rights, rather than obtain opportunities through public allocation. This would create additional barriers for young fishermen and small-scale operators seeking to enter the industry.

If reform of fishing rights is considered necessary, a wider question should also be asked: where governments allocate valuable access to a scarce public resource, should the public receive some benefit in return?

Many countries charge resource rents or licence fees for access to valuable natural resources. However, any such approach would need to be carefully designed. It should not undermine the viability of fishing businesses that may operate on narrow profit margins, particularly small-scale fishers.

The principle is that access to public fish stocks should be managed to deliver the greatest benefit to society as a whole, balancing economic viability, environmental sustainability, coastal communities and the interests of future generations — rather than permanently transferring valuable rights away from public stewardship without the public receiving a return.

Economic efficiency is not the only objective

Tradeable quota allows, in theory, the market to determine where fishing opportunities can be used most efficiently within the commercial catching sector. But economic efficiency within commercial fishing cannot be the only measure of a successful fisheries system.

The allocation of fishing opportunities is not simply a question of allowing the most efficient operators to acquire them. It is a decision about who benefits from a shared natural resource, and it affects not only commercial businesses, but also recreational fishers, coastal communities, new entrants, the marine environment and future generations.

A market-based approach can create unintended consequences. Experience from transferable quota systems shows that fishing rights can become concentrated among fewer, larger operators and financial investors. This can increase the cost of entering the sector, reduce opportunities for young fishers and small-scale operators, and weaken the connection between fishing rights and the communities that have traditionally depended on fishing.

A successful fisheries management system must recognise both the potential benefits of markets and their limitations. The purpose of fishing rights should not be to maximise the commercial value of those rights, but to ensure that access to a shared public resource delivers the greatest overall benefit to society.

Keep fish stocks under public stewardship

Commercial fishers need a stable and predictable framework. They need confidence to invest, plan for the future and run viable enterprises. The existing quota system already provides considerable certainty for quota holders. Supporters of permanent fishing rights argue that they would provide additional benefits, including stronger incentives for stewardship by giving rights holders a long-term interest in healthy fish stocks.

However, the extent to which making existing quota rights permanent would deliver additional improvements in fisheries outcomes remains uncertain. The long-term health of fish stocks depends on many other aspects of fisheries management, including ambitious stock recovery targets, transparent and robust scientific advice, effective monitoring and enforcement, and improved data collection. Improvements in these areas may offer greater opportunities to improve the sustainability of fisheries, while avoiding the risks associated with permanently transferring control of a public resource into private hands.

Fish stocks are a shared public resource. Decisions about access to those stocks must balance the many legitimate interests involved, including recreational fishing, conservation, sustainable commercial fishing, coastal communities and future generations. The value of fish stocks extends beyond the income generated by commercial catches, and the allocation of access may need to change over time as ecosystems, economies and society evolve.

Permanent fishing rights would make such changes more difficult, limiting the ability of fisheries managers to respond to changing stock distributions, improved scientific understanding and changing public priorities.

The UK's fish stocks should remain under public stewardship, with access granted on terms that can adapt over time to deliver sustainable fisheries and the greatest overall benefit to society.