

2025.06.24

3.2 Deputy J. Renouf of St. Brelade of the Minister for the Environment regarding tuna fishing activity in Jersey waters and related international agreements (OQ.152/2025):

Further to the publication of R.80/2025 and the proposed extension to Jersey of the International Convention on the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, will the Minister provide an update on the extension to, and the nature and extent of, tuna fishing that he anticipates will take place in Jersey waters?

Deputy S.G. Luce of Grouville and St. Martin (The Minister for the Environment):

I am grateful to the Deputy for the question because it allows me to tell the Assembly a few small details not covered in R.80 and that is that for the last 4 years - over 4 years now - the Marine Resources Department have been researching this area alongside and in conjunction with Exeter University and with the U.K. (United Kingdom) Government via Defra to understand more about tuna. The extension that the Deputy refers to in the question, the extension of I.C.C.A.T. (International Convention on the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) to Jersey is in its final stages. Government House has written to the Ministry of Justice for kindly progressing this issue as a priority, I am told. My intention is to establish a catch-and-release charter fishery for this 2025 summer season. That would run from August to October, if all the signatories can be put in place. That will follow the principles of the U.K. and the Jersey rules on charter vessels. This would be for a maximum of 5 commercial operations and would run under a strict scientific exemption to the wildlife law.

[10:00]

3.2.1 Deputy J. Renouf:

I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. Can he just clarify, for the avoidance of doubt, within the charter catch-and-release programme, how many licences will be issued each year and therefore how many fish will potentially be caught under this scheme?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

As I have already said, my intention is to issue 5 licences for the summer under catch and release, which would be exactly what it says on the tin. The authorisation would be to catch fish and to return them to the water alive. There will be some strict rules about how this can be done. It is going to be really important that these fish are caught quickly, returned to the boat and released under a very strict regime to ensure that the vast majority of them, as many as possible, will still be alive. They are a big strong fish and they are very capable of doing that. Into the future, I would just like to say to the Assembly, for the avoidance of doubt, now that we know that there are many hundreds if not thousands of these fish swimming around in our waters, it would be my intention next year to remove the species from the Wildlife Law and to manage it specifically with other fish under the Fisheries Regulations in the future. I hope that sometime in the future we may be granted a small quota, which may allow us to land a very small number of very high-grade fish for consumption in the local market, knowing of course that tuna is a very popular fish and bought in great quantities in supermarkets. If we can do that locally, I look forward to being able to do that. But that would be my intention for this summer; 5 commercial licences.

The Deputy Bailiff:

We have time for questions from Deputy Jeune, Deputy Alex Curtis and Deputy Tadier, I hope.

3.2.2 Deputy H.L. Jeune of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity:

Given that up to 30 per cent of tuna do not survive after being released due to stress of being hooked, handled and exhausted during capture, what measures specifically, though you mentioned some, but what specific measures will the department take to ensure fishing practices meet the conditions necessary to reduce post-release mortality, and what sanctions will be put in place if the rules are broken?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I have to say to the Deputy that is not my information, but I take on board that with any catch-and-release fishery there is always a very small chance that some fish may not survive being caught and returned to the wild. Which is why I say 2 things: the first one, the North Atlantic bluefin tuna is a very, very strong fish and capable of withstanding being caught and released. But more importantly I say to the Deputy, that is why I said there will be some very strict rules about how this fishery will happen, and people will only receive a licence when they have the facilities on board the vessels to land these fish very quickly without a long fight, which would exhaust them and make them very tired and less likely to survive. So land them quickly, treat them properly on the boat so that they can be dehooked and returned to the water in a very short period of time. That is the way we make sure that the very vast majority of them stay alive. But those rules will be strictly enforced. I cannot say to the Deputy how they will be enforced, but certainly boats will have to have all that equipment on board before they receive a licence.

3.2.3 Deputy H.L. Jeune:

That 30 per cent comes from the I.C.C.A.T., the Commission for Atlantic Tuna for Post-Release Mortality. But I guess my follow-up question would be that the Minister talks about for the moment to be charter catch and release only and then potentially going on to commercial fishing. How would this happen? Through Ministerial Order or through coming to the Assembly? How would this change happen? How would we know?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I cannot tell the Deputy exactly how that would be done, Ministerial Order or by coming back to this Assembly, but I will find out and let her know.

3.2.4 Deputy A.F. Curtis of St. Clement:

Is the Minister just able to firm up a bit on the timetable he shared just for clarity, both on when the strict guidance he knows anyone applying for a licence would be able to get, when the licence application period he expects would be open, and therefore how long he sees the catch and release season for 2025 would be for those operators?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

These fish are only in our waters for quite a short period of time during the late summer, early autumn. It would be my intention to operate this catch-and-release fishery in August, September and October. Those would be quite strictly controlled times, but to be honest I am not sure we would need to put a time because the fish will disappear. They will only arrive at a particular time and then disappear. I cannot remember the other part of the Deputy's question, I apologise.

Deputy A.F. Curtis:

It was when licensing would open for those who would want one of the 5 licences.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Yes, thank you, Deputy. I apologise. Until I get the final signatory for the Ministry of Justice in the U.K., I am not in a position to open for applications, but I know that the word is out there and I know that we have currently 2 vessels that are showing interest. Hopefully, there will be a couple more, but there is no opening or closing of licence applications. As we receive that I will deal with them, and I am prepared to issue up to 5 of those licences.

3.2.5 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

The Channel Islands is already under scrutiny from bodies like P.E.T.A. (People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals), the animal cruelty watchdog so to speak, and they say that catch-and-release fishing is cruelty disguised as sport, and that studies show that fish who are caught and then returned to the water suffer severe physiological stress and often die of shock. Does the Minister think that the potential negative publicity for Jersey, in addition to the potential cruelty, is worth the bother and the commercial input that it might have? Would it not be better to focus our energy and marketing on conservation and the blue marine status that we aspire to have in Jersey?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

The acronym I.C.C.A.T. refers to an International Convention on the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, and I think that is really important. This is a body that has been around for over 10 years now, an international body that regulates tuna fishing all over the world where it can and is, like I am, committed to management. But I have to say to the Assembly, these fish are arriving in very great numbers around our coast, not only our own coast, Western Channel, around the Celtic deeps, the west coast of Ireland and the western isles in Scotland. In this part of the world they are proliferating and surviving and coping; breeding really well. If we are going to get into a debate about commerciality and animals we are going to be here a very long time. We catch an enormous amount of species out of the sea. We eat meat, we eat various types of all sorts of food which involves animals, and catch and release has worked very well for us in the past. I refer the Deputy to the bass species in Jersey 10 years ago. We introduced catch and release, it did wonders for the population of bass around our Island, which has proved to be a great success. I think a small number of animals being caught and released is not a problem for me.

3.2.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister recognise that the number of these animals that are around is completely irrelevant? There are lots of seagulls that exist in Jersey, we are not suggesting that their protected status should be removed. Will the Minister give a clear indication, because he is the Minister for the Environment after all, that there is an element of cruelty that exists in this and it is simply being put forward for people's leisure and for sport and that he is comfortable with that as the Minister for the Environment for a small amount of potential economic gain for some people in Jersey?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Yes, I am happy to do that, and I am happy to go further and say next year I am hoping that we will allow a very small number of fish not just to be caught and released but actually be caught and landed. So that if the meat is treated in the proper way, it can fulfil the needs of Islanders who, as I said in my initial answer, at the moment are going to supermarkets and buying large amounts of tuna. I consider it much more beneficial to us if we could catch a few fish every year and put that on to the Jersey market rather than go to supermarkets.

3.2.7 Deputy J. Renouf:

The risk is that having just seen the species move into our water, our instinct is to hunt it for commercial purposes. Does the Minister accept that abundance may be due to fish moving due to warm waters from the south to the north and therefore the appearance of abundance may be an illusion of fish migrating further north than in the past rather than growing stocks? Will he therefore assure the Assembly that any opening to commercial fishing will be justified scientifically?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Absolutely, I am very happy to make that commitment. As I said, we have had to work for over 4 years now with Exeter University and the U.K. Government to make sure that we know there is enough fish in our local waters in order to be able to catch a few. Moving forward, I think that the Deputy is right. We can see that our sea temperatures are rising. We know that the traditional brown crab is moving further north, and now very popular in the North Sea itself. We know we have octopus moving into our waters, which is a result of the waters warming. I am no doubt that tuna appearing in our waters and adjacent coasts over the last 10 years is something to do with waters warming up. It may well be that these fish have moved up from further south where they would have been controlled just in the same way as they will be here under I.C.C.A.T. rules. All the countries around our coast sign up as part of the convention of I.C.C.A.T. and, as far as I am concerned, yes, they maybe well coming into our waters because of warming temperatures but we just want to be treated the same as all the other countries around us.