

Leaders fail to address overfishing near Europe at 'fraught' international meeting

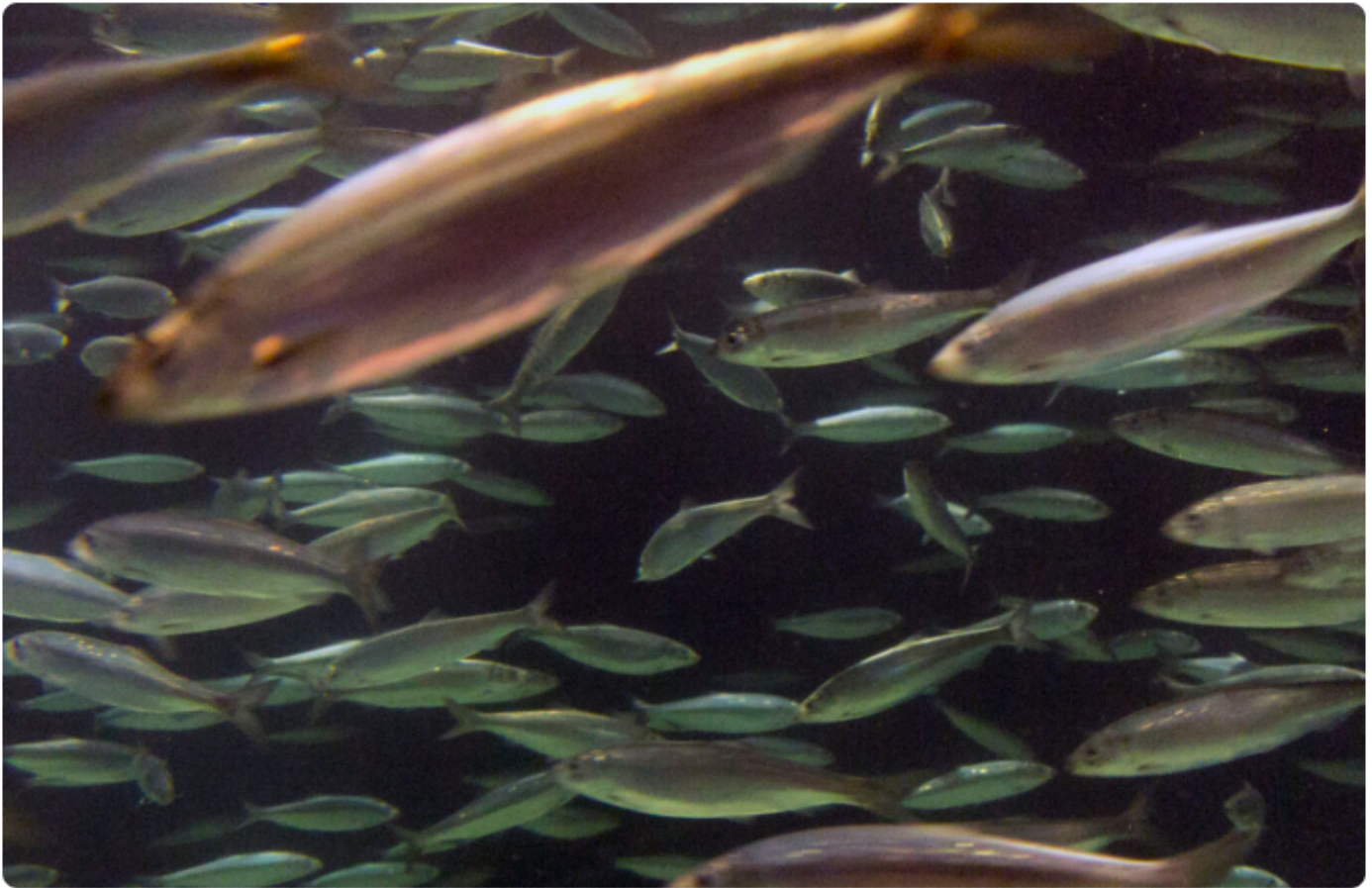


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- *The North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) held its annual meeting in London Nov. 12-15.*
- *NEAFC is a regional fisheries management organization, a multilateral body that controls fishing in international waters; its remit includes certain fish stocks in the Northeast Atlantic, near Europe.*
- *Among these, mackerel and herring have been overfished for years, yet NEAFC member countries*

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Mackerel and herring in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean, near Europe, have been dramatically overfished for many years, endangering the stocks and creating potential knock-on effects for marine mammals and seabirds that eat them. Members of the multilateral body that manages fishing in the region's international waters did little to remedy the situation when they met this month.

The North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), whose members are the European Union, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Russia and the United Kingdom, held its annual meeting in London Nov. 12-15. The body took small steps toward developing an ecosystem-based fisheries management approach and deciding which marine zones to designate as protected in the international "30×30" system.

More notably, the parties continued to leave unaddressed the fundamental governance issues that critics say result in mismanagement of Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) and Atlanto-Scandian herring (*Clupea harengus*): a lack of transparency and a governance structure that "[neuters](#)" NEAFC and allows key management decisions to be made by member states unilaterally or in opaque side meetings.

Disagreements between the parties also bubbled over at the meeting, with the European Union publicly accusing Russian vessels of fishing illegally in NEAFC's regulatory area, and the other parties of failing to hold Russia to account for it in a statement issued Nov. 21.

"This is the most fraught and most problematic RFMO, to my knowledge," Ryan Orgera, global director of Accountability.Fish, a Virginia-based advocacy group, told Mongabay just after the meeting, which he attended. "I've never seen any systematic, structural issues that are this dysfunctional."

Questionable management

In calling NEAFC out, Orgera was referring to the roughly 17 regional fisheries management organizations, multilateral bodies that [control fishing](#) in the world's international waters, which generally begin 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers or 230 miles) from the coast. NEAFC manages a number of [fish stocks](#) in three large swaths of the Northeast Atlantic and handles aspects of broader ecosystem health.

Mackerel and herring populations straddle the boundaries of NEAFC's [regulatory areas](#) and the sovereign waters of European countries, known as exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Ideally, the NEAFC members would come together to manage fish populations in the commission's regulatory areas and to coordinate how they should each manage the same fish in their own waters to ensure region-wide sustainable harvests. In reality, Orgera and other critics say, a complicated and opaque decision-making structure allows most of the fishing to occur outside any coordinated management, leaving the fish open to overexploitation.

In 2022, for example, only a quarter of mackerel were caught in NEAFC waters; the rest were caught in member nations' EEZs, primarily in Norway and the United Kingdom. (These figures account for all catch of "Northeast Atlantic mackerel"; a different stock of the same species, known

account for all catch of Northeast Atlantic mackerel, a different stock of the same species, known as “Northwest Atlantic mackerel,” lives near Canada and the United States.)

NEAFC members make key decisions about managing the fish unilaterally and in a series of side deals among themselves. Much of this takes place in what are called Coastal States meetings. These meetings are outside NEAFC’s remit and don’t include all of its parties. Yet the most consequential ones take place at NEAFC’s headquarters in London in October, ahead of the November annual meeting, and the parties there make decisions on matters critical to NEAFC, said Daniel Steadman, an international fisheries officer at Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia-based think tank. At the October meeting, parties set forth a nominal total catch limit for pelagic species, including mackerel and herring. But they don’t agree on how it will be shared, leaving countries free to decide for themselves.



Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) on sale at a market in the Netherlands in 2015. Mackerel in the northeast Atlantic have been fished above scientifically-advised levels every year since the late 2000s. Image by Vincent van Zeijst via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0).

When NEAFC parties arrive at the annual meeting in November, their main job has been “excised” and they basically “rubber stamp” how much of the catch can come from the regulatory area, Steadman said. NEAFC’s convention, which theoretically allows the body to enact measures governing catch inside EEZs, isn’t in practice strong enough to allow the parties to pressure one

governing catch inside EEZs, isn't in practice strong enough to allow the parties to pressure one another to reduce it to sustainable levels, and so the total catch limit is ultimately exceeded every year.

Mackerel and herring populations in the region have both been overexploited for more than a decade, with total catch above scientific advice each year since the late 2000s for [mackerel](#) and since 2013 for [herring](#). In 2023, for example, mackerel was fished at more than 150% above the amount advised by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), an independent science institution that provides NEAFC's scientific advice, while herring was extracted at more than 130% of the advised amount.

The result is that spawning stock biomass is now [near](#) the "danger zone" for mackerel and [already there](#) for herring, according to Steadman, citing ICES data. And even those assessments may underestimate the risks, he said, because they "just treat each species individually" when in fact mackerel eat herring, and there is a complex set of other factors, including climate change, that need to be accounted for.

The overexploitation not only endangers the fish populations but also affects other species that depend on them. Mackerel and herring are forage fish essential to entire marine food webs. For example, herring constitute a dominant part of killer whales' (*Orcinus orca*) diets and are also eaten by humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) and other marine mammals, according to a [2022 study](#) in *ICES Journal of Marine Science*.

The London meeting

Steadman, who attended the recent NEAFC meeting, expressed hope that "proper multilateralism" and a focus on "compromise and common ground" would develop now that the herring population has crossed a dangerous trigger point. "But I wouldn't say that was particularly in evidence at the meeting," he said.

The London meeting had a certain intensity and a degree of opacity, observers said. Steadman described discussions as "quite fraught." Observers were left out of several heads-of-delegation meetings. RFMOs do this normally, but Orgera said the frequency and length of such closed meetings at NEAFC was "very irregular."

Orgera has repeatedly criticized NEAFC and its member countries for failing to be transparent in how they manage public resources; he wrote a scathing [op-ed](#) in *Euractiv*, a news outlet focused on EU policy, in advance of the annual meeting. The "most developed countries on Earth, most advanced economies on Earth," should be held to a higher standard, he told Mongabay.

Orgera made his views "very plain" at a plenary, according to NEAFC secretary Darius Campbell, who, in emails to Mongabay, strongly disputed Orgera's characterizations of NEAFC as opaque.

"We do publish our annual meeting documents including draft proposals, publicly for all to read after the annual meeting, we do publish who votes for every decision that goes to a vote, so it is transparent who is blocking or objecting, we do allow observers at our most important discussions,"

Campbell wrote, later explaining that the heads-of-delegation meetings, for example, were on matters of process rather than substance.

Campbell didn't dispute there being a problem in the management of mackerel and herring, but he said it was outside of NEAFC's control and a matter for the member states to address.

"As far as ... the lack of agreement on the key fish stocks, then all concerned have clearly acknowledged that this is a huge and longstanding problem," Campbell wrote. "As I have explained many times the Coastal States meetings are not within NEAFC's processes, I do not attend these meetings even as an observer."

The Coastal States meetings don't have any observers, drawing the ire of advocates such as Orgera, who contends that they take place in violation of Article 12 of the [United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement](#), which deals with the transparency of decision-making arrangements.



A killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) in 2021 off the coast of Norway. Herring, which are overfished in the northeast Atlantic, comprise a dominant part of killer whales' diets, research suggests. Image by GRID-Arendal via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).





Atlanto-Scandian herring (*Clupea harengus*) in a fishing vessel in 2008. Image by Marine Stewardship Council via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

Report on illegal fishing withheld

Campbell and others said fisheries management has been complicated by tensions over the war in Ukraine, with, for example, nearly all committee and working group meetings — “the backbone of the organization,” according to Campbell — canceled this year, and urgent work having to be completed via written correspondence.

The geopolitical tensions, most notably between Russia and the European Union, may have contributed to one of the most surprising outcomes of the London NEAFC meeting: a failure to agree on a compliance report that could be publicly released.

NEAFC’s [compliance committee](#) doesn’t generally allow observers at meetings, a fact that observers have lamented. Normally, however, the committee does later publish a report on compliance violations, such as bottom fishing in protected areas, so there’s at least a degree of transparency.

However, this year, for the first time, there will be no such publication, as the parties could not reach consensus on the report’s wording. The European Commission said in a Nov. 21 [statement](#) that “unprecedented disagreements” had emerged at the meeting, citing the compliance report issue as the main example.

The European Union alleges possible illegal fishing by Russian vessels in the regulatory area, but other parties didn’t think there was strong enough evidence to include the cases in the compliance report.

“Russian vessels have been engaging in bottom fishing outside the designated bottom fishing areas, and without notifying NEAFC” in violation of rules “aimed at protecting vulnerable marine ecosystems,” the commission’s statement says. The statement criticizes other parties for not holding Russia to account.

Guri Mæle Breigutu, the deputy director general in Norway’s Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, said in an emailed statement to Mongabay that five parties including Norway agreed on a compliance report draft, but another party — presumably the European Union, though it’s not stated — objected to it and tried to add information that hadn’t been fully reviewed.

Orgera and other NGO observers commended the European Union, which is sometimes [criticized](#) for its actions at other RFMOs, saying the bloc was trying to ensure the compliance report was complete and was the only party to openly call for reform of the Coastal States process.

The European Commission and the United Kingdom’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs didn’t directly respond to questions from Mongabay. A delegation member from Iceland didn’t reply to a request for comment. Mongabay didn’t reach out to Russian representatives.



The Stokke Senior, a Norwegian-flagged fishing vessel, docked in Ålesund, Norway, in 2013. The Norwegian Sea is home to mackerel and herring populations that are subject to overfishing. Image by Harvey Barrison via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Meeting decisions

NEAFC took a small first step toward adopting an ecosystem-based management approach, following recent [advice](#) from ICES. The idea is to move past treating stocks as isolated sources for extraction and instead treat them as components of more holistic ecosystems, an approach several RFMOs have begun to embrace, most [notably](#) the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization. The parties agreed to add extra time to a working group meeting in 2025 to discuss the topic. Steadman commended the move but said he and other observers were hoping for a stronger show of commitment: A working group dedicated to developing an ecosystem-based approach. For now, no such group has been started.

Another key matter at the meeting was determining which zones in the NEAFC regulatory area to list as “other effective area-based conservation measures” (OECMs) internationally. The parties previously agreed to list all of NEAFC’s vulnerable marine ecosystem (VME) closed areas, which have special protections against bottom fishing, and at this meeting confirmed they expect to do so in early 2025. The listings are a way of getting “credit” for conservation that’s already taking place: OECMs are a [key part](#) of the accounting in the effort to protect 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030 as part of the so-called “30×30” initiative [stemming from](#) the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The OECM discussions carried over to this year’s meeting because there was debate about whether to also list restricted bottom fishing areas (RBFAs), which offer less protection and raised concerns about creating “paper OECMs.” Initially, NEAFC considered submitting all of its RBFAs for OECM designation, but this year, decision-makers narrowed it down to 14 in shallower waters that would be more likely to be bottom trawled if no protections existed. Observers urged NEAFC to wait to list the 14 RBFAs as OECMs until it can ensure stronger protections and full compliance with existing rules.

Decision-makers did take a cautious approach, with Campbell telling Mongabay the matter needed “further discussion” on the areas’ protection not just from fishing but from all human activities. Bronwen Golder, a campaign lead at the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC), an umbrella group of NGOs, told Mongabay there’s more work to be done to ensure the RBFAs meet internationally accepted OECM criteria. She said governance issues, including the lack of transparency on compliance, needed to be addressed to confirm the areas were in fact free from fishing threats.

At the meeting, DSCC also called for more VMEs to be designated, including Josephine Seamount, a richly biodiverse underwater mountain area about 470 km (300 mi) west of Portugal, but NEAFC parties didn’t act on the issue.

The parties set the total allowable catch of the spurdog shark (*Squalus acanthias*) at the upper level of the advised ICES catch rather than the lower one. Catarina Abril, a policy officer at Sciaena, a Portuguese marine conservation NGO, said she was hoping for a more “precautionary outcome” for the species, which is sometimes called the spiny dogfish. The fishery had been closed for more than a decade for conservation reasons but was “hastily” reopened in 2023 following preliminary good news about the stock, she said.

Banner image: Atlantic herring (*Clupea harengus*) at an aquarium in Norway in 2015. Herring in the northeast Atlantic have been fished above scientifically-advised levels every year since 2013 and their spawning stock biomass recently crossed a dangerous threshold. Image by GRID-Arendal via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).



Critics push for more transparency at RFMOs that govern high seas fishing

The organization responsible for managing the catch of more than half the world's tuna holds a key section of its annual compliance meeting in secret. For three days, a committee of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) assesses how well member states are following fishing rules, without any outside observers present. The WCPFC says ... [Continue reading](#)



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Citation:

Skern-Mauritzen, M., Lindstrøm, U., Biuw, M., Elvarsson, B., Gunnlaugsson, T., Haug, T., ... Víkingsson, G. (2022). Marine mammal consumption and fisheries removals in the nordic and Barents seas. *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, 79(5), 1583-1603. doi:[10.1093/icesjms/fsac096](https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsac096)

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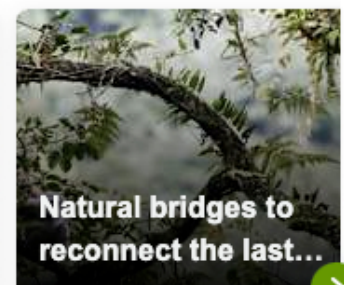


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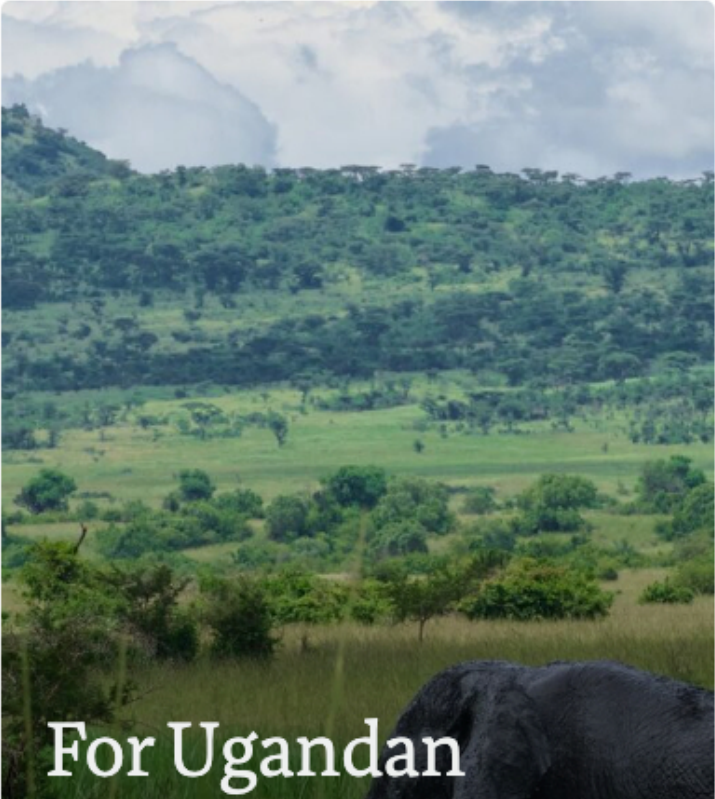
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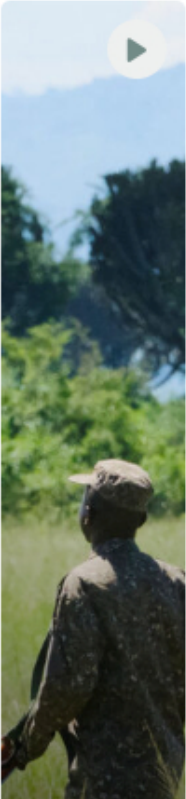
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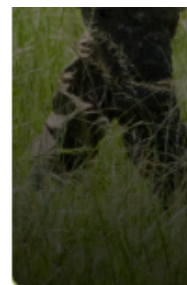
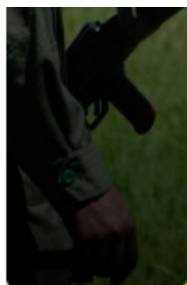
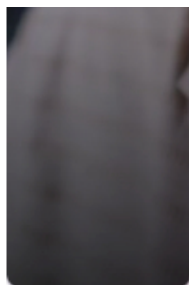








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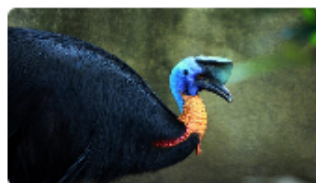
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