

Salmon Watch Ireland

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Atlantic Salmon Bycatch and Pelagic Fisheries – Emerging Evidence and Monitoring Priorities



Recent ecosystem surveys and international policy developments highlight growing attention to Atlantic salmon bycatch in pelagic fisheries of the Nordic Seas.

The International Ecosystem Summer Survey in the Nordic Seas (IESSNS), which primarily targets Northeast Atlantic mackerel using standardized surface trawling, has consistently recorded salmon as incidental catch during summer surveys:

- 2023: 62 salmon at 38 stations (62–74°N)
- 2024: 48 salmon at 25 stations (62–72.6°N)
- 2025: 126 salmon in 17 hauls (64–74°N), concentrated along the North Atlantic Current

All salmon were caught in surface trawls (upper 30 m), primarily post-smolt and one-sea-winter fish, demonstrating clear spatial overlap between salmon during their marine feeding migration and pelagic fisheries operating in offshore waters.

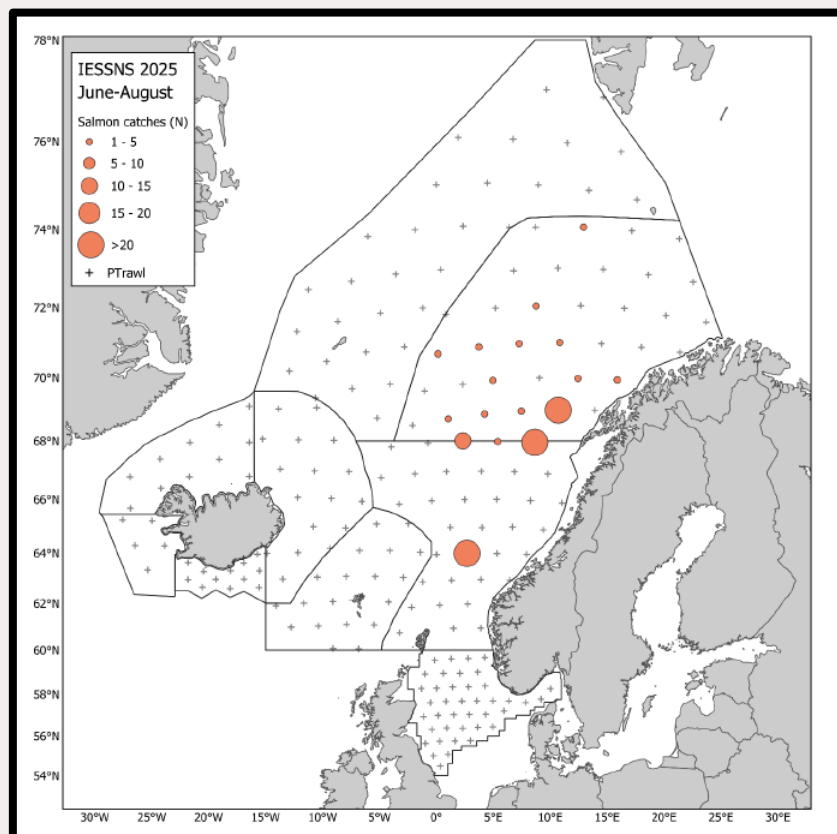
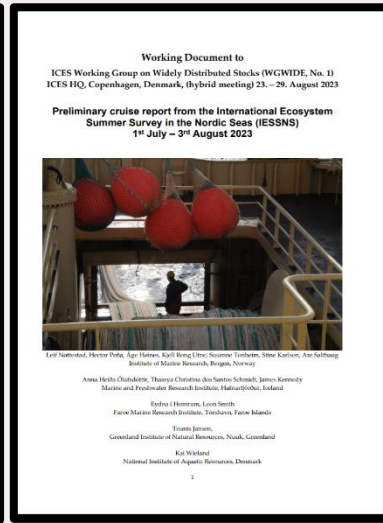
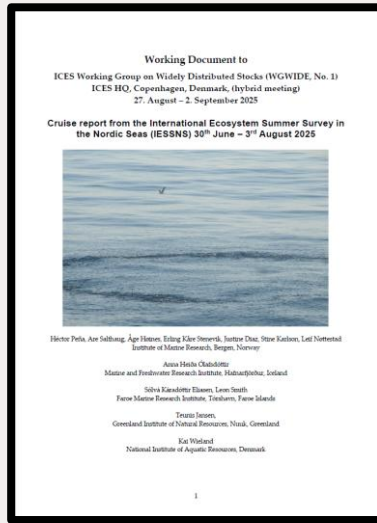
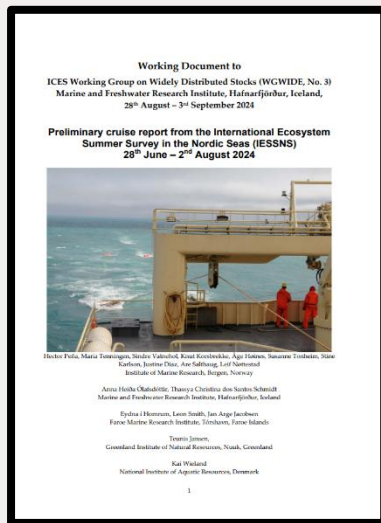
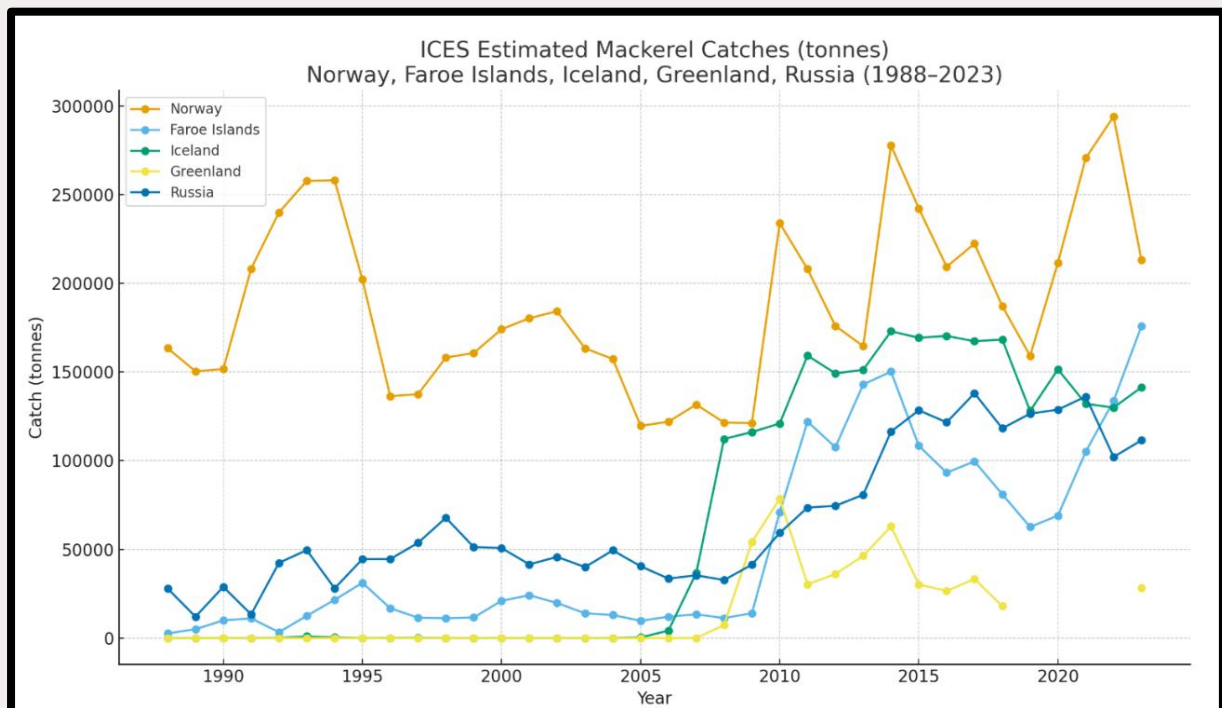


Figure 1. Catches shown as number of salmon caught at surface trawl stations during IESSNS 2025. The survey strata are shown in the map.

The IESSNS surveys are available here:



At the policy level, the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) has renewed focus on bycatch. In 2025, Atlantic salmon was formally added to the ICES list of *species of bycatch relevance*, meaning salmon will now be included in systematic reporting under the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) bycatch data call framework.



From the late 1980s through the early 2000s, catches were dominated primarily by Norway and Russia, with relatively limited participation from Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. However, after around 2005–2007 there is a clear increase in catches by multiple countries across the Nordic seas, particularly Iceland, the

Faroe Islands and Greenland. Iceland's catches rise sharply from near zero before 2006 to substantial levels thereafter; Greenland also records notable catches after 2009; and Faroese catches increase markedly in the 2010s.

This broad expansion of catches across western and northwestern jurisdictions reflects a westward and northward shift in mackerel distribution, consistent with documented changes in summer feeding migration into Icelandic and Greenlandic waters. In other words, mackerel were increasingly available throughout the wider Nordic seas, rather than being concentrated in traditional eastern areas.

In more recent years, however, there are indications of variability and possible retraction toward more traditional core areas. Some western catches fluctuate or decline relative to peak expansion years, while Norwegian catches remain substantial, suggesting that the spatial extent of the expanded distribution may be contracting compared to the period of maximum westward spread.

However, despite increasing recognition:

- **There is no comprehensive North Atlantic bycatch estimate for salmon.**
- **Data remain fragmented and largely dependent on research surveys and limited national reporting.**
- **Offshore mortality sources, including potential bycatch, remain insufficiently quantified.**

Policy Implications

1. **Salmon demonstrably overlaps with pelagic fisheries in offshore feeding areas.**
2. **Systematic bycatch reporting is only now being formalized.**
3. **Improved monitoring, standardised reporting, and integration of survey and fisheries data are urgently needed.**

Strengthening coordinated bycatch data collection across NASCO's Convention Area will be essential to assess risk, inform mitigation strategies, and support evidence-based salmon conservation.

Policy Statement: Salmon Bycatch Risk in Expanding Pelagic Fisheries

Recent shifts in mackerel distribution and sustained blue whiting fisheries in the Northeast Atlantic increase the likelihood of interaction with Atlantic salmon during critical marine phases. The post-2005 westward expansion of mackerel has extended pelagic fishing effort across a broader area of the Nordic seas, overlapping with known salmon feeding corridors. In addition, reports of adult salmon caught during the March–April blue whiting fishery around the Faroe

Islands raise concern about potential interception during pre-spawning or migratory periods, when mortality has disproportionate stock-level impact.

Given continued low marine survival for many salmon stocks, even limited incidental capture may be biologically significant. We therefore call for enhanced observer coverage in high-risk fisheries, mandatory standardised reporting of salmon bycatch, genetic stock identification of any captured fish, and integration of fishery effort data with ecosystem survey information. Strengthened monitoring and transparency are essential to ensure that pelagic fisheries do not contribute to avoidable additional mortality of vulnerable salmon populations.

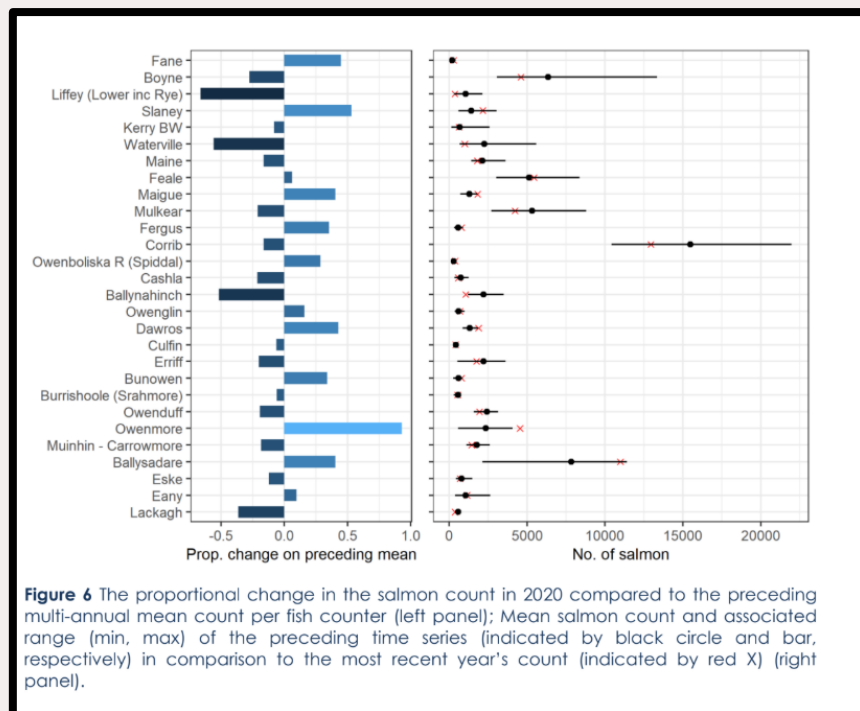
2020 – Covid: Improved Catches of salmon and general condition improved

The improved size and condition of returning salmon in 2020 raises the possibility that feeding conditions during their marine phase were favourable. While reduced pelagic fishing effort during early 2020 may have contributed to localized prey availability and a lesser bycatch, there is currently insufficient evidence to attribute improved growth and survival directly to reduced fishing pressure. Oceanographic and ecosystem variability remain likely primary drivers.

However, the anecdotal evidence suggests that salmon appeared in better numbers in Ireland, but this was not universal as some rivers demonstrated lower mean returns when viewed against fish counters.

The following demonstrates this:

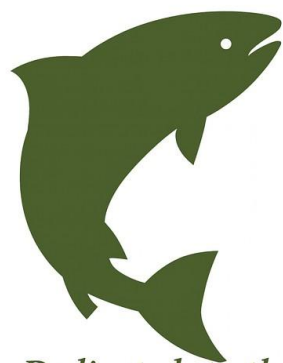
Report of the Technical Expert Group on Salmon to the North-South Standing Scientific Committee for Inland Fisheries the Status of Irish Salmon Stocks in 2020 with Catch Advice for 2021



The apparent cause of the increase in salmon stocks may have connections to migration in 2019 where generally weather patterns in March / April were good with rainfall and temperatures conducive to smolt migration.

It would be interesting to study growth patterns for salmon returning in 2020, but this may not have been possible during covid. We will try and ascertain if this can be undertaken if scale samples are readily available.

Next week we will take a look at freshwater conditions which help to improve survival and reduce predation pressure during critical migration of both smolts and adults.



SALMON WATCH IRELAND

Dedicated to the restoration of salmon abundance in Ireland"

SAVING THE IRISH SALMON

Our aim is to keep all interested parties informed about Atlantic salmon so that responsible, evidence-based conservation can take place. This is not a forum for contention, but a space for constructive contribution and shared understanding. All perspectives are welcome when offered in a spirit of collaboration. Above all, our collective objective is clear: more salmon reaching their spawning grounds — not fewer.