GOLDEN MILES

ROBUST MANAGEMENT FOR COASTAL FISHING

TO MAKE NOUVELLE-AQUITAINE A PIONEERING LABORATORY FOR THE FUTURE OF COASTAL FISHING IN EUROPE.

Golden Miles aims to establish a research project supporting coastal fishing across the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region. The goal is to halt the sector's decline, exacerbated by climate change, by reserving the 3-nautical-mile[1] coastal zone for small-scale, highly selective fishing methods (such as hook-and-line, pots/traps, and diving) that generate significant employment. This management approach will provide these small-scale fisheries with a dedicated space to operate and create conditions conducive to their prosperity. The initiative also represents a final opportunity to facilitate the return of salmon and will lead to a significant reduction in the bycatch of protected species.

The Association seeks to persuade the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region to spearhead this pilot project over a five-year period deemed sufficient to demonstrate its relevance and its socio-economic and environmental effectiveness. Nouvelle-Aquitaine would become a testing ground for the European Union and, ultimately, a model to emulate, given that the win-win nature of this coastal fishing management strategy has been proven over decades in several benchmark countries, notably the United States.

1- A nautical mile represents 1 852 meters.

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"Maximum Sustainable Yield" Dooms Fisheries to Decline

Fisheries are managed according to the principle of "Maximum Sustainable Yield" (MSY), which involves harvesting the highest possible tonnage of fish each year without compromising reproduction.

While preserving reproductive capacity is certainly necessary, it is not enough.

Sustainable fishing requires that fish also have time to grow and reach a size that is both economically and ecologically profitable. The fishing intensity driven by MSY does not allow for this. When caught too early, the fish are too small. Scientific analysis identifies this as "growth overfishing."

Forced to catch more fish to meet quotas, fishermen deploy more nets. A vicious cycle sets in: fish become even smaller, dolphin bycatch rises, and operating costs increase. The result is declining profitability.



The meagre (Argyrosomus regius) is one of the largest bony fish found along our Atlantic coasts. It can reach impressive sizes, but its survival depends on strictly respecting its growth stages. The reality is that a meagre sold at the legal minimum size of 35 cm is still a juvenile; it has not yet had the chance to reproduce and ensure the species' renewal. To reach sexual maturity, it needs to grow another 25 cm (taking 2 years) if it is a male, or 50 cm (taking 4 years) if it is a female.



At one year of age, the young turbot—measuring 15 cm and weighing a few tens of grams—is already at risk from net mesh due to its diamond shape.

In France, the fishing sector is thus in a "major crisis"[2] and has been shrinking for two generations. Year after year, landings, the number of vessels, and the workforce are in decline. The profession no longer attracts young people. Reliance on food imports keeps growing. Subsidies are skyrocketing. Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) is proving to be a counterproductive oxymoron.

The driving force behind this decline is the depletion of fish populations. The disappearance of cod, turbot, angel shark, and sturgeon are just a few examples. Marine mammals and seabirds are increasingly falling victim to fishing gear, either directly or due to the scarcity of their prey.

2 Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) - The 2024 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 24-03/07), Prelezo, R. et al. (eds.), OPUE, 2024. DOI : 10.2760/5037826.

However, the decline of the fishing industry is not inevitable.

The principle of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) was adopted in 1955 following intense lobbying by the United States[3]. Historian Carmel Finley[4] explains how this mysterious principle served merely as an instrument for a policy of deliberate overexploitation, advancing U.S. geostrategic and military interests during the Cold War era of the 1950s. It also enabled the North American fishing industry to lay claim to Pacific tuna, salmon, and anchovy stocks at a time when Exclusive Economic Zones did not yet exist. Yet, as Professor Larkin[5] had predicted as early as 1977, the overexploitation driven by MSY led to socio-economic decline. The United States eventually recognized this and responded with two major reforms in 1996[6] and 2007[7].

Today, the fisheries of North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Norway are in a healthy state. The USA has effectively renamed MSY, calling it what it truly is: level of overexploitation, while estimating lower biologically allowable catch levels and setting even stricter quotas[8]. Australia now operates based on the concept of Maximum Economic Yield rather than MSY. All these countries have neutralized the negative consequences of MSY by effectively protecting the essential biological functions of marine ecosystems. This involves banning fishing techniques incompatible with these functions in specific areas and during specific periods.

3-nautical-mile coastal zone : preserving nursery areas and putting an end to the waste of discarded catches

Central to these spatial and temporal management issues, coastal waters harbor nursery grounds for numerous commercial species. It is here that the small fish develop, fish that will sustain future fisheries.

These waters also serve as a vital passageway for salmon and sturgeon migrating along the coast to return to their native estuaries.

Finally, the abundance of resources makes these areas regular feeding grounds for marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds.

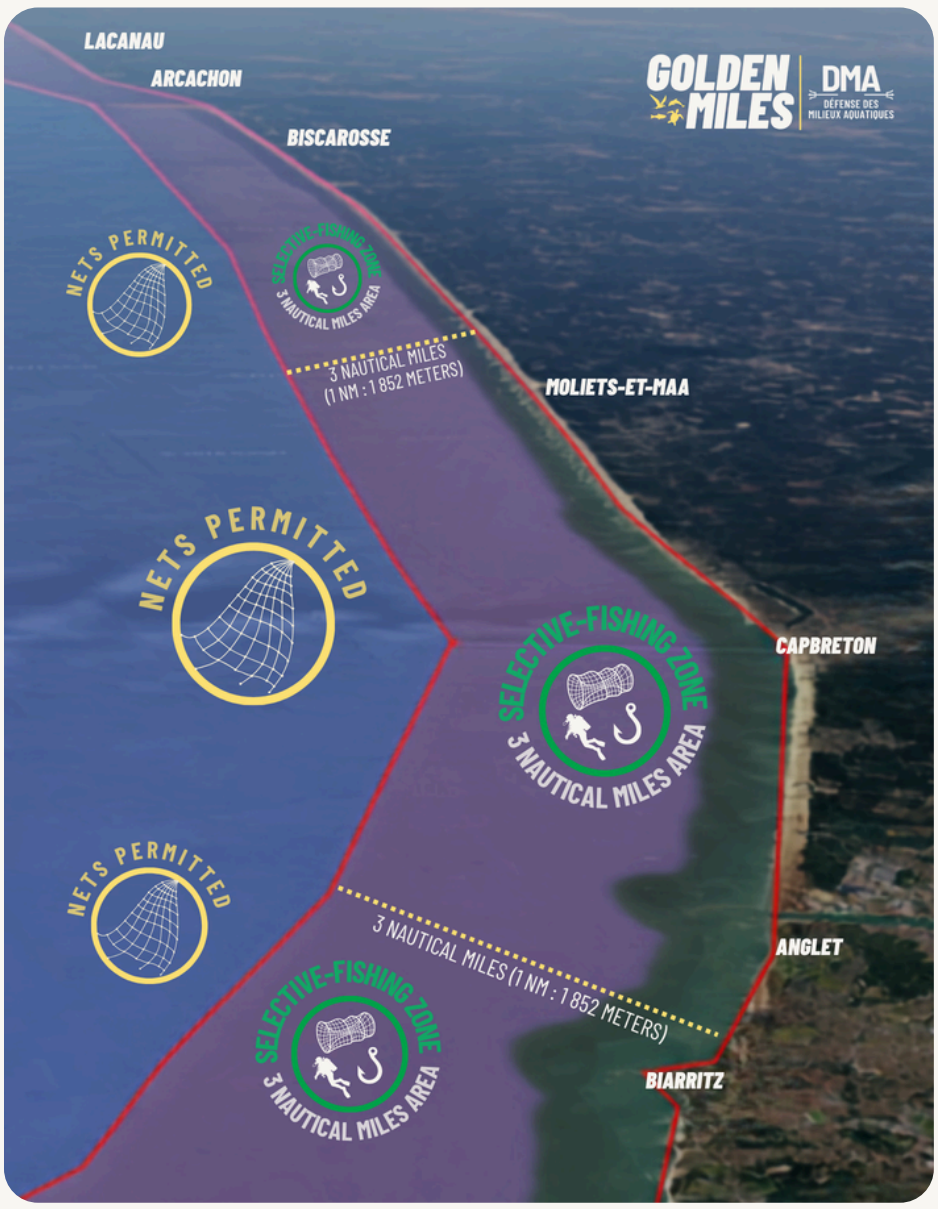
However, fishing nets are non-selective, meaning they are liable to catch all these organisms, which are subsequently discarded dead at sea. The scale of these discards is a significant factor in the decline of these populations. In the absence of reliable data, scientists are forced to rely on estimates.

3 at the 1955 Rome conference (see *Pour une révolution dans la mer* by Didier Gascuel, pp. 243 et seq.)
4 Finley C., Al the fish in the sea, Univ. Chicago Press, 2011 ; Finley & Oreskes, ICES J. Mar. Sci., 70, 2013, p. 245-250. **5** Larkin P.A., An Epitaph for MSY, Trans. Am. Fish. Soc., 106:1, 1977, p. 1-11. 5 SSustainable Fisheries Act (1996). **6** Sustainable Fisheries Act (1996). **7** MSA Reauthorization Act. **8** In the US, MSY is becoming the OFL (Overfishing Limit). Allowable Biological Catch (ABC) levels are dropping for 2025 (-18% for Alaska pollock, -24% for rockfish), as are Total Allowable Catch (TAC) quotas, with a 53.5% reduction for Alaska pollock. Source: Federal Register (NOAA Fisheries, 2025/2026)

The discard landing obligation, introduced to address this issue, could not be effectively implemented in practice. The European Commission, which had intended to take legal action against non-compliant member states, was forced to abandon the plan in 2024.

As for onboard cameras, a solution that would provide the necessary data, they continue to face strong opposition from the industry.

This impasse necessitates moving nets away from coastal waters to prevent the mass capture of unintended species, thereby relieving pressure on nursery grounds, migratory corridors, and protected species.



Simulation of the net exclusion zone within the 3-nautical-mile strip (approximately 5.5 km) along the Nouvelle-Aquitaine coast. Map data: © Google, Airbus, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO.

The crucial measure : moving all nets away from the first three miles.

Initiated in Texas in 1981 due to the socio-economic potential associated with banning nets[9], this measure triggered a spectacular recovery in fish abundance and size. It proved so successful that it spread to all US states bordering the Gulf of Mexico[10] and other North American coastal states, and was adopted in Norway (1979 and 1989) and Canada (1984).

Eliminating the waste associated with discarding bycatch proved to be a powerful economic driver by boosting fish stocks.

Since 1994, the constitutional ban on nets within nine nautical miles of the coast has helped make Florida the US leader in both commercial fishing jobs and recreational fishing revenue.

In Texas, catches increased by 60%, and the average weight of red drum catches rose 2.5-fold. Florida saw a spectacular comeback of large fish species such as snook. Speckled trout populations reached their highest levels since the 1970s. Black drum abundance surged by 250%, and tarpon numbers by 300%[11]. Porpoise and seabird populations also recovered in California.
Today, the North American fishing industry, which runs a trade surplus, continues to create jobs and maintain high landing volumes[12].

Nets are banned across three-quarters of New Zealand's coastal waters, extending 4 to 12 miles offshore. Since late 2022, nearly 33,000 square kilometers of coastal waters have been closed to set nets and reserved for selective fishing methods (hook-and-line, pots, and diving), the methods that generate the most jobs[13].

The Golden Miles project: the only project offering real hope

At a time when the French fishing industry is in steady decline and coastal waters are suffering, more than elsewhere, from global warming and uncontrolled land-based pollution, these international successes validate the strategy of moving nets further offshore. This is a win-win approach that fosters a transition toward selective fishing, spares juvenile fish and anadromous species, and reduces the bycatch of protected species.

This is the Golden Miles project, the first marine area designed to counter the negative effects of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by giving nature time to heal and offering selective fishing a chance to thrive.

What better alternative is there?

In the interest of its fishermen, marine resources, and all of us, the European Union should draw lessons from the history of fisheries and abandon the cult of performance in favor of a path towards resilience.

9 How a Battle Between Recreational and Commercial Fishermen Spawned a Conservation Movement– Texas Monthly **10** The Law, Policy, and Politics of Gillnet Restrictions in State Waters of the Gulf of Mexico **11** Coastal Fisheries Division – Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

12 https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/sustainable-fisheries/fisheries-economics-united-states
13 https://www.mpi.govt.nz/fishing-aquaculture

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DÉFENSE DES MILIEUX AQUATIQUES

PROTECTING RIVERS, ESTUARIES, AND OCEANS THROUGH THE LAW

Founded in 2017, Défense des Milieux Aquatiques is an officially recognized environmental protection association; it has challenged numerous administrative decisions, particularly regarding fishing, and spearheads the "Golden Miles" project, an initiative that has been observed and validated abroad.

The association has focused its efforts on limiting the fishing of migratory species (such as salmon, shad, and lamprey), a practice now banned almost everywhere in France, as well as bottom trawling (excluded from coastal Natura 2000 sites in the Gironde region) and dolphin mortality caused by fishing in the Bay of Biscay, ultimately leading to a one-month ban on maritime fishing during the winters of 2024, 2025, and 2026.

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