

DISCARDING IN BEAM TRAWL FISHERIES: OPTIMISATION OF DISCARD SAMPLING, EVALUATION OF REDUCING TECHNICAL MEASURES AND SENSIBILISATION OF THE SECTOR

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Beam trawling for flatfish is the dominant activity in the Belgian fisheries fleet. This activity is characterised by a considerable environmental impact and a high discard rate of bottom-dwelling fish and benthic invertebrates. Consequently, there is an increasing international pressure on beam trawl fisheries leading to future European measures to reduce or potentially even ban discards.

Research on discard practices is currently conducted in the framework of the National Data Gathering Program, but is mainly focussed on commercial fishes. Data on non-commercial species are mostly lacking. Such data are indispensable to assess the impact of beam trawling on the marine ecosystem, and to develop and maintain an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. The extension of discard research towards non-commercial species requires substantial adaptations of the existing sampling protocols and analysis methods.

Future implementation of discard reducing measures or even a discard ban will have a severe impact on the fisheries sector. Therefore, such measures should be anticipated by the sector by the development of more selective fishing gear or alternative fishing techniques. Either way, research on discards should be conducted in close cooperation with Belgian fleet members and the results should be communicated to all interested parties.

TOETS is an interdisciplinary project which aims to meet the needs in discard research by:

- (1) developing a suitable sampling protocol to monitor discards of commercial and non-commercial species;
- (2) assessing the bycatch reducing effect of beam trawls rigged with different types of technical adaptations;
- (3) informing the sector concerning bycatch reducing measures and cooperating with the sector during the development of reducing technical adaptations;
- (4) investigating the discard practices in different fishing grounds (Southern Bight and central North Sea, English Channel, Irish Sea, Celtic Sea, Bay of Biscay) concerning driving forces and discard raising procedures.