# Marine heatwave triggers unprecedented octopus surge in English waters threatening shellfish fisheries



Octopuses have long fascinated humanity with their otherworldly characteristics and intricate behaviours, and this spring, they have become a focal point of both intrigue and concern for fishers in English waters. An unprecedented marine heatwave has led to a dramatic surge in octopus populations, creating both lucrative opportunities and unexpected challenges for the fishing industry, particularly in Cornwall and Devon.

Starting in March, as sea temperatures climbed between 2°C and 4°C above average, fishers began reporting exceptional catches of octopus. This new phenomenon has turned Brixham market into a hub of octopus activity, where tens of tonnes are traded every day—a startling increase from previous years. Barry Young, managing director of Brixham Trawler Agents, noted that on some days as much as 36 tonnes of octopus are brought in, a sharp rise from just 200 kilograms at the same time a year earlier. “It’s a financial bonus for the fishermen,” he commented, indicating that these catches are making a significant impact on local livelihoods.

This boom has not only provided financial relief; it has also sparked a cultural celebration in Brixham, where local landmarks are embracing the influx. Octavia, a festive octopus-shaped light typically reserved for the holiday season, has been illuminating streets nightly, while cafes don colourful murals featuring these cephalopods. However, this ecstasy is tempered by tension among fishers who specialise in shellfish, as the octopuses have been entering crab and lobster pots, significantly reducing catches of these lucrative species. Ian Perkes, a fish merchant with nearly five decades of experience, explained that he has never encountered octopuses in these waters before this year. He attributed the change directly to climate impacts, noting that previously these creatures were common off Morocco’s coast but have migrated north due to warmer waters.

Adding complexity to the narrative, marine biologists have noted that while this increase in octopus numbers has been beneficial for English fishers—who face no quotas and can sell octopus for approximately £8 per kilogram—its repercussions on the broader fishing ecosystem are concerning. Dr Marta Marcos from the Mediterranean Institute for Advanced Studies pointed out that half of the sea warming since 2000 is attributable to human-induced climate change, resulting in more frequent marine heatwaves. The current spike in temperatures began in early March and has continued unabated through late May, making this event unprecedented in its severity.

The situation is exacerbated in other regions, such as Guernsey, where fishers report alarming declines in shellfish populations as a result of the octopus proliferation. These fishermen fear for their livelihoods, with one veteran expressing his determination to “do his best to survive” amid the upheaval. Such sentiments highlight the discord within the fishing community, with some fisherfolk benefitting from the octopus boom while others grapple with diminishing returns from their traditional catches.

Despite the economic windfall for some, the Devon and Severn Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority has begun to explore long-term management strategies to mitigate the impacts of octopuses on other fisheries. They are considering potential modifications to existing regulations that might enhance sustainability if octopuses were to become a permanent feature in local waters.

As marine ecosystems continue to respond to climate change, Carli Cocciardi from the Devon Wildlife Trust remarked on the implications of these shifts. She noted historical surges in octopus populations but emphasised that the current increase due to warmer waters presents unprecedented questions about sustainability. As this phenomenon unfolds, the fishing community and environmental authorities will need to work collaboratively to balance economic benefits with ecological integrity.

This episode serves as a stark reminder of the evolving relationships between humans and nature, with warming seas reshaping not just fisheries but the very fabric of coastal communities reliant on these waters. Ensuring the sustainability of both octopus and shellfish populations will be crucial as the fishing industry navigates this complex new landscape.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c15zxe18q8ko), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/01/population-explosion-octopus-boom-prompts-joy-and-concern-cornwall)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/feb/28/weatherwatch-marine-hot-spot-could-change-makeup-of-british-fish-species), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/23/catastrophic-marine-heatwaves-are-killing-sealife-and-causing-mass-disruption-to-uk-fisheries)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/04/240405130454.htm)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c15zxe18q8ko), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/01/population-explosion-octopus-boom-prompts-joy-and-concern-cornwall)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/feb/28/weatherwatch-marine-hot-spot-could-change-makeup-of-british-fish-species)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/23/catastrophic-marine-heatwaves-are-killing-sealife-and-causing-mass-disruption-to-uk-fisheries)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/26/the-seabed-is-full-of-them-english-fishers-enjoy-surprise-octopus-boom> - An unprecedented marine heatwave has led to a surge in octopus numbers in English waters, particularly in Cornwall and Devon. Sea temperatures have risen by 2°C to 4°C above average, resulting in tens of tonnes of octopus being traded daily at Brixham market. This phenomenon has been beneficial for fishers, with no quotas and high demand, especially in Spain, where octopus fetches £8 per kilogram at auction. However, the influx has also caused tensions among fishers specialising in crab and lobster, as octopuses enter pots and consume shellfish, leading to a decline in catches.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c15zxe18q8ko> - A Guernsey fisherman reports that a significant increase in the island's octopus population is threatening the local fishing industry. Over the past seven months, there has been a massive decline in shellfish catches, attributed to the rising number of octopuses. The fisherman, with over 30 years of experience, expressed concerns about the future of his livelihood, stating he would be doing his 'best to survive' in the coming year and hopes to continue fishing despite the challenges posed by the octopus boom.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/01/population-explosion-octopus-boom-prompts-joy-and-concern-cornwall> - In Cornwall, unprecedented numbers of octopuses have been reported, leading to both celebration and concern. Fishers have been finding multiple octopuses in their pots, with some days yielding up to 100kg. The Cornwall Wildlife Trust notes a rare population boom, with sightings not only by fishers but also divers and snorkellers. While the increase is seen as a positive sign, there are worries about potential competition for resources and the impact on local fisheries.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/feb/28/weatherwatch-marine-hot-spot-could-change-makeup-of-british-fish-species> - UK waters, particularly the southern North Sea, are warming rapidly, making the North Atlantic one of the world's marine 'hot spots'. This warming has led to fishers travelling further north to catch traditional species like cod and haddock, while new arrivals such as anchovy, bluefin tuna, sardines, squid, and red mullet are becoming more common. Scientists warn that these changes could alter the makeup of British fish species and affect the fishing industry.
6. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/04/240405130454.htm> - A study from the University of Adelaide indicates that while climate change has increased octopus abundance, projected ocean warming could impair their vision. The research found that thermal stress affects proteins crucial for vision, suggesting that octopus vision may be compromised under warmer ocean conditions, potentially impacting their survival.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/23/catastrophic-marine-heatwaves-are-killing-sealife-and-causing-mass-disruption-to-uk-fisheries> - Britain is facing increasingly catastrophic marine heatwaves that could destroy shellfish colonies and fisheries, severely impacting coastal communities. A report by the National Oceanography Centre highlights the urgent need for research into how sudden temperature rises in coastal seawater affect marine habitats and seafood production in the UK. The report emphasizes the necessity to prepare for these events to protect marine life and the fishing industry.