# Common octopus population booms in Southwest England with profound ecological impact



Along the southwest coast of England, fishers have reported a remarkable surge in the population of the common octopus, altering the dynamics of local marine life and commerce. As Alan Steer, a crab fisher based in Devon, explained, since February this year, there has been a dramatic increase in catches, with fishers now pulling in as much as 1,000 kilograms of octopus daily. Each octopus typically weighs between 2.5 kg and 3.5 kg, which has made this newly abundant species a lucrative catch. However, the rise in octopus numbers is not without its challenges. The octopuses are aggressively consuming local crab, lobster, and scallop stocks, leaving traditional fishers struggling. Steer noted a staggering 70% reduction in their crab and lobster harvests, showcasing the ecological disruption this phenomenon has caused.

These observations echo an earlier 2022 incident along the Cornish coast, where local fishers experienced an unprecedented spike in octopus sightings, with some capturing up to 150 octopuses in a single day, a substantial increase from the typical figures of one or two annually. This surge, classified by conservationists as both a boon for fishers and a cause for concern regarding ecological balance, has raised alarms about the implications for local fisheries. Common octopuses are voracious predators, consuming significant quantities of lobsters and other marine creatures, which underlines the urgent need for effective monitoring and management strategies to safeguard the vibrant marine ecosystems and the livelihood of those dependent on them.

Scientists suggest that climate change could be exacerbating these fluctuations. The recent spike in octopus sightings coincides with temperature anomalies in marine environments, with a marine heatwave in early 2023 recorded to increase sea temperatures by 2.3°C above average. These conditions appear conducive for warmer-water species, prompting an influx of octopus into British waters. Sarah Clark, deputy chief officer of the Devon and Severn Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, voiced concerns about these developments. Clark indicated that monitoring the situation will take precedence in upcoming meetings to determine the sustainability of the octopus fishery in the South West.

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust has emphasised the importance of ongoing research, noting that there haven’t been such large populations of common octopus in the region for over 70 years. Previous boom periods were documented in 1899, 1950, and most recently in 2022, but these events were often followed by disappearances during colder seasons. The robust and rapid nature of this recent boom has led experts to consider whether these octopuses will prove to be a permanent fixture in local ecosystems or whether they are merely transient visitors driven by changes in environmental conditions.

As marine biodiversity continues to face the pressures of climate change, including rising sea temperatures and declining predator populations, the long-term impacts on species such as the common octopus may reshape the landscape of British coastal waters. As the situation evolves, careful observation, data collection, and strategic planning will be essential to balance the economic benefits of octopus fishing with the need to preserve fragile marine ecosystems.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25196103.octopus-boom-british-waters-concern-say-scientists/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/octopus-boom-uk-waters-first-27376204)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/01/population-explosion-octopus-boom-prompts-joy-and-concern-cornwall), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-61987374)
* Paragraph 3 – [[6]](https://pml.ac.uk/news/june-2023-marine-heatwave-caused-by-high-pressure/), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jun/19/marine-heatwave-uk-irish-coasts-threat-oysters-fish-high-temperatures)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/news/octopus-numbers-boom-cornwall)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25196103.octopus-boom-british-waters-concern-say-scientists/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/01/population-explosion-octopus-boom-prompts-joy-and-concern-cornwall> - In July 2022, Cornwall experienced an unprecedented surge in common octopus sightings, marking the highest number in over 70 years. Local fishers reported catching up to 150 octopuses in a single day, a stark contrast to the usual one or two annually. This phenomenon has raised concerns among conservationists and fishers alike, as the octopuses consume significant amounts of lobster and cuttlefish, potentially impacting local fisheries. Experts suggest that favorable conditions, possibly linked to climate change, have contributed to this population boom. The Cornwall Wildlife Trust is monitoring the situation closely to understand its implications for marine ecosystems.
3. <https://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/news/octopus-numbers-boom-cornwall> - In June 2022, Cornwall Wildlife Trust reported a significant increase in common octopus sightings along Cornwall's coastline, particularly around the Lizard peninsula. Divers and snorkellers observed multiple octopuses in a single dive, a rare occurrence for this species in UK waters. Local fishers also noted large numbers in their lobster and cuttlefish traps. This surge is considered a 'bumper year' for octopus sightings, with the last similar event recorded over 70 years ago. The Trust is actively monitoring the situation to assess the impact on local marine life and fisheries.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-61987374> - In June 2022, unusually high numbers of common octopus were observed along the Cornish coast, prompting Cornwall Wildlife Trust to describe it as a 'bumper year' for sightings. Divers and snorkellers reported increased encounters, and one fisherman caught 150 octopuses in a day, compared to his usual total of one or two annually. The last significant population boom for octopus in England's south coast was recorded in 1948. The Trust is monitoring the situation to determine if this marks the first octopus boom in over 70 years.
5. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/octopus-boom-uk-waters-first-27376204> - In July 2022, Cornwall reported a significant increase in common octopus sightings, with one fisherman catching 150 in a single day, compared to the usual one or two annually. This surge is considered a 'bumper year' for octopus sightings, with the last similar event recorded over 70 years ago. The octopuses are consuming large amounts of lobster and cuttlefish, leading to concerns among local fishers. Despite the challenges, there is a strong European market for octopus, especially in Spain and Portugal, where it is a delicacy.
6. <https://pml.ac.uk/news/june-2023-marine-heatwave-caused-by-high-pressure/> - In May 2024, research revealed that a marine heatwave in June 2023, caused by high-pressure weather conditions, led to sea-surface temperatures around the British Isles reaching a peak of 16°C, up from the typical 13.5°C. This heatwave was exacerbated by climate change, making it reach category II (strong) instead of I (moderate). The study highlighted the importance of sustained long-term monitoring to understand the impacts of such events on marine ecosystems and emphasized the need for mitigation efforts to address greenhouse gas emissions.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jun/19/marine-heatwave-uk-irish-coasts-threat-oysters-fish-high-temperatures> - In June 2023, an unprecedented marine heatwave off the coasts of the UK and Ireland posed a serious threat to marine life. Sea temperatures, particularly off the north-east coast of England and the west of Ireland, were several degrees above normal, smashing records for late spring and early summer. The Met Office reported that global sea surface temperatures in April and May reached an all-time high for those months, with June also on course to hit record heat levels. Scientists warned that such high temperatures could lead to mass mortality of fish and oysters.