It is a pleasure to follow that eloquent contribution from Mr Wright. Like others, I should like to start by paying tribute to all those fishermen who put their lives on the line to put food on the nation’s plate. No one knows more about the ultimate price that fishing families pay than my hon. Friend Sheryll Murray, and I pay tribute to all that she has done in working for safety at sea. I cannot miss this opportunity to pay tribute to all those who worked at the Brixham maritime rescue co-ordination centre in my constituency, which has now sadly closed. I call on the Minister to do everything he can to ensure that response times and safety are maintained following the sad loss of the centre.

I pay tribute to everyone who contributes to helping to keep fishermen safe at sea, including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the National Coastwatch Institution. I also pay tribute to all those who support those organisations, particularly the Fishermen’s Mission, which has played an extraordinarily important role in supporting those in Brixham and other communities who have been affected by the winter storms. Mrs McGuire referred to 14-metre waves. It is worth pausing to consider that 14 metres is higher than the top of the Public Gallery. Our fishermen go out to sea in quite extraordinary conditions, and we need to do everything we can to support them. Who could forget Fishstock in my constituency? I pay tribute to all those who made it happen, including Jim Portus, who led that venture. Who could forget the contribution made at Fishstock by the Fishwives Choir? I urge everyone to go out and buy their album to support the organisations that keep our fishermen safe at sea.

I want to talk briefly about crab fisheries. The Minister will be aware of the many historical injustices that have occurred in the crab fisheries sector, and the effect that they are having. We know, for example, that just under 2 million kilowatt days were allocated to the French, while only 545 were allocated to the UK. On top of that, there have been further sudden and drastic reductions that will have a devastating effect. The ports of Salcombe and Dartmouth in my constituency support 30 fishing families, and we know that every job at sea supports five jobs on land. Just one business in Salcombe, Favis, brings in a £2 million turnover to the local economy. The devastating impact on the local economy of the provision that I have mentioned is profound.

Is it not time, also, to look at the dangerous knock-on effects of the kilowatt days restrictions? Fishermen are dangerously having to cram all their work into short time frames, for example. Regarding the artificial cut-off time of midnight, can we not at least have some flexibility, and a recognition that a 24-hour period at sea is dependent on tides, not on an arbitrary midnight cut-off? I hope that the Minister will be able to address that point. Can we also have more support regarding swaps? Rather than having swaps negotiated by the industry at great expense, could that work be done on the industry’s behalf?

On a brighter note, I would like to thank the Minister for the support provided after last winter’s storms that allowed compensation packages to extend to static fishermen, and for cutting the bureaucracy from a level that I would describe as overwhelming to one that was
merely impenetrable and excessive. That was a great help.

I shall not repeat the many points that have been made today about bass fisheries. That topic was also covered extensively in an earlier debate. I would simply reiterate that imposing a total allowable catch (“TAC”) quota limit involving further restrictions just will not work. We have already seen the historical injustices that resulted from a unilateral decision by the UK to ban pair-trawling, even though no such ban was extended to French pair-trawling. The irony is that French pair-trawling has continued in British waters, even though UK fishermen are banned from doing it here.

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall, Conservative)

Does my hon. Friend recall that, when the then Minister under the last regime tried to introduce unilateral restrictions on British bass fishermen, he had to abandon them?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

We are all calling on the Minister not to penalise sport fishermen. Sport fishing is very important to my constituency because it attracts a large number of tourist visitors. Having a one fish-bag limit is illogical when the vast majority of mortality is a result of pair-trawling carried out by the French. I hope that he will hold his ground on that issue and press for a size limit so that the fish can at least spawn. That is a much more sensible way of trying to turn around the bass fishery.

I also want to mention demersal skates and rays. My hon. and learned Friend Mr Cox made an extraordinarily eloquent contribution, and I will simply state my support for everything he said rather than repeating it. I will expand on one point, however. I have spoken to fisheries scientists and I understand that one of the problems is that skates and rays are all lumped together as one. We know that some species might be quite rare, but as we have heard from the hon. Member for Hartlepool and others, some are not rare at all and, in my patch, the fishermen just cannot avoid catching them. The situation is completely illogical. Would it not be better to support fisheries scientists to work on board our fishing vessels to assist in clearly differentiating the species by practical means, so that they can be returned to the sea?

The irony is that a total discard ban will have many unintended consequences if it is not imposed in a nuanced way. We know that many skates and rays will survive if returned to the sea. Paradoxically, we would be changing from a system in which fish were discarded at sea and might have survived to one in which they are discarded on land. That is entirely illogical. Will the Minister address that point and assure the House that he will press for a nuanced application of the ban in relation to skates and rays? The measures will have a profound effect on the fishermen in my constituency.

A constant theme of this afternoon’s debate has been the lack of data and the effect that poor data have on our fishing communities. I urge the Minister to look closely at the effect on our plaice fisheries. Plaice have benefited in many ways from some of the sole restrictions, but we need to examine the way in which the quotas are being applied. For example, he will know that in some fisheries the areas D and E are accounted together but recorded separately. May I urge him to support at least the status quo in this and other areas and not a cut, as we need to increase the limits for sole?
We need to take a scientifically led approach, but we cannot do so if further drastic cuts are made to our science base. In the Minister’s discussions, will he insist that funding for our fisheries scientists comes directly from the EU, rather than from local budgets? That would be a very good use of resources. As we move towards landing everything that is caught, the collection of data will become easier, but there will be a considerable delay—an unnecessary one in the case of demersal species. In the meantime we face even more gaps in the data, and if further missing data results in an automatic 20% cut, that is unacceptable. I hope that the Minister will strongly press that point when he goes to the European Council.

Finally, let me deal with the issue of the MMO, as looking at what has happened there provides a heart-sink moment. I can only reinforce the points made so eloquently by so many Members. It is unacceptable that fishermen are paying the price for the incompetence of others; in other sectors that would result in compensation, but it is not resulting in compensation for our industry. We are talking about bankruptcies and the loss of an industry that will not return. What is the Minister going to do to get a grip of the situation and make sure that that does not happen again? The “Have Your Say” panels were heralded by the MMO on 5 November—five weeks ago—but we are still waiting to hear the details. Perhaps he could also set that out in this answer.

Looking further afield, has the Minister seen the article published in PLOS ONE yesterday by Marcus Eriksen and others, which referred to the 5 trillion pieces of plastic now floating on the surface of our seas? It particularly deals with the effect of microplastics—very small particles that attract organic chemicals to their surface and enter the food chain. It is sobering to remember that the great Pacific garbage patch of swirling eddy current is now larger than Texas, and it is just one of many. We have to deal not only with microplastics but with larger plastics, which are so dangerous to cetaceans and turtles. Is that actually going to register on the agenda at some point? Perhaps it is not for the forthcoming Council meeting, but the article is an important publication and I hope the Minister will read it.

I wish the Minister success in the Council negotiations. I heard his predecessor say that the collective noun for fisheries Ministers is "an exhaustion". It is worth being exhausted and I hope that this Minister will spare no effort in exhaustion on behalf of our fishing communities, many of which I am proud to represent. I wish him well.

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Hansard