

Ribble Cockle Fishery

Strategy and Management Plan development

Purpose: To propose a strategy to develop the Ribble into a modern and environmentally sustainable cockle fishery.

Situation March 2011.

1. A substantial cockle spatfall was observed by NWSFC staff along the southern edge of the Penfold Channel during the latter months of 2010. Following an exceptionally harsh winter the area was surveyed during February 2011 and extensive stocks were found to have survived. There are five main beds some of considerable size, which differ in character and will mature at different times. At this stage we can only estimate how fast each bed will develop but the NWIFCA expects there to be a major fishery lasting two or three years from September 2011 and longer if successful spatfalls occur in subsequent years.
2. Due to a dearth of cockles in the estuary over the last few years the shellfish hygiene classification has lapsed so the area needs to be re-classified. As required under current regulations, CEFAS have undertaken a shoreline sanitary survey. Sampling will commence as soon as possible.
3. The NWIFCA considers a management plan should be agreed by all bodies with regulatory responsibilities, prior to the commencement of the fishery.

The Cockle Beds.

4. **Penfold Channel.** The Penfold Channel bed extends from new areas off Southport east along the gently sloping southern edge of the channel towards Marshside then turning northward towards St. Annes. For historical reasons the NWSFC staff refer to the area off Southport as Penfold West, the bed in the channel off Marshside as Penfold South and the upper part of the bed as Penfold North. The entire bed is about 10 miles in circumference and varies in character along its length.
5. Cockle density in Penfold West is estimated to be 250/m². They are of uniform size 10 - 12 mm in length. The ground is fairly stable and accessible throughout the year. Unlike other areas there are no background levels of mature cockle to use as a base for MSH sampling so it will be a month or so before the cockles reach sufficient size for sample gathering to begin. Harvesting may commence as early as September 2011.
6. Penfold South holds patches of smaller 8mm cockles and a few mature specimens. MSH sample gathering is scheduled to start in March 2011. Classification must be completed quickly as the area usually becomes soft and inaccessible by late summer.
7. Penfold North is the traditional bed harvested most often. It contains high numbers of 5 - 8 mm cockle and small numbers of large cockle. MSH sample gathering is scheduled to start in March 2011. This area also becomes very soft during the summer months.
8. A peripheral area of cockle extends over the high bank that flanks the beds eastern extremity towards the Crossens Sluice.

9. **The South Gut.** This is a new area where cockles have settled following the shift of the main Ribble channel to the west. The area is only accessible by ATV with extreme care during favourable conditions. The ground tends to be unstable and the route ashore is indirect. The area holds a large stock of 100-200/m². Cockles are 10 - 12mm in length. These may reach landing size in Autumn 2011.
10. **Georges Brow.** We know little of the condition of this bed other than that it definitely exists. This bed sits on the southern bank of the Ribble to the south of the White Church at Lytham. It is flanked to the west by the Crossens Sluice and to the south and east by marsh. It is only accessible by boat across the Ribble. Reliable reports from the Lytham fishermen suggest that it holds stocks of 5mm cockle and is not likely to mature until next year.
11. **North Run St. Annes.** This area follows the old pier channel to the south of St. Annes. It holds modest quantities of 5mm cockle and a few mature specimens. The area is fairly high and traditionally slow growing. The ground is good and access is easy from very high profile public car parks.
12. **Granny's Bay.** This bed extends from the Fairhaven Lake towards the stones of Church Scar. It holds high numbers of very small cockle and a few mature specimens. The ground can be soft but access is easy from again very high profile public car parks. This area has historically produced poor MSH results.

The MSH Sampling Programme.

13. Responsibility for MSH sampling falls on to three local authorities: Fylde are responsible for the cockle beds on the northern bank of the Ribble (but not incidentally the mussel beds, they fall into West Lancs). Fylde EHOs have their own sampling officer and they have been informed that they will need to make arrangements to collect samples for the MSH sampling regime.
14. West Lancs have taken the lead role in setting up a sampling regime for the Penfold Channel. Responsibility is split between West Lancs and Mersey Port Health for these beds. NWSFC staff gather the samples on a subcontract basis. Sample gathering is programmed from the northern and southern sites for mid March. Samples will be collected from the western site as soon as sufficient mature specimens can be located.
15. Collecting regular samples from Georges Brow and the South Gut is impractical. Therefore we hope Cefas will propose monitoring stations from on the peripheral sites to enable classification of the entire estuary.

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16. The fishing industry is already aware that extensive beds of cockles exist in the Ribble. Scouting parties have been observed. It is fair to say that the financial input (at final product values) from this fishery into the European fishing economy could be several tens of millions of pounds. The fishery will undoubtedly attract a large amount of attention and could be much greater than on the Wirral in 2010.
17. In some parts of the Ribble and at certain times of year, hand gathering is dangerous. Hand gathering has a place in some areas but should be considered as part of a structured plan to harvest the Ribble by various methods appropriate to the sediment and season. The Ribble fishery after an initial surge in September 2011 will probably build up through Autumn and Winter and may last for some years in various areas of the estuary, so a long term plan is required.
18. Hand gathering at night should be discouraged particularly on the remote and difficult to access northern and southern beds. In practice legislation would be difficult to enforce, but

by managing the fishery so that such practice is not worth the effort we can bring about the desired result while promoting responsible fishing effort.

19. A managed mechanical fishery would be appropriate at certain times and in certain areas. We have operated experimental mechanical harvesting of cockles in the Ribble with considerable success in the past and learnt many valuable lessons in the process.

Use of a wet dredge

20. A wet dredge can separate sizes of cockles. Stock grows on well when thinned out by wet dredge. It is therefore suitable for mixed size stock which cannot easily be separated by hand riddling. The wet dredge can only be worked on an ebbing tide so harvesting can only take place during quite short periods per day. Disturbance of feeding birds is reduced: indeed birds rapidly adopt the practice of feeding in dredge tracks.
21. By introducing 4 simple specifications - blade width, adjustment of blade, sorting grid maximum length and bar spacing - we can restrict the efficiency of the dredge very effectively. Wet dredges are cheap, simple to produce and within the means of fishermen. Hand gathering can take place alongside wet dredging but normally does not.

September 2011

22. It is thought that cockle harvesting will begin on the western part of the Penfold Channel in September 2011. This is an ideal site for the use of wet dredges. The area will contain mixed size/undersized shellfish in a 60/40 proportion which cannot be adequately separated with conventional hand riddles. The cockles will not be of a high value at this stage. Wet dredges will produce modest but consistent supplies to the market thus helping to prevent a mad rush situation as happened on the N. Wirral.
23. Following exploitation of the western beds, harvesting is expected to spread to the southern and northern beds as the cockle grow on and the ground hardens up in autumn and winter.
24. The South Gut could have sized cockles by 1 September. Wet dredging would be possible in this area but undesirable on safety grounds. Hand gathering should be discouraged in such a remote location and cockle densities are not particularly high. The area is ideal for the boat dredgers. Boat dredging could be monitored by the mobile radar unit and would thin out this very tempting bed of cockles in a safe and relatively traceable manner. We would prefer this area to be safely and openly harvested by boat dredge than promote the very risky hand gathering method.
25. The Georges Brow bed will probably mature some time in 2012. The bed has traditionally been harvested by hand gatherers working from small boats based in Lytham. Clearly we would wish that our colleagues in the MMO and MCA would ensure that the vessels used are both registered fishing vessels and suitable for purpose. While a few incomers can be expected I hope that this fishery will produce a much needed boost for the Lytham fishermen who are to say the least having a hard time at present.
26. The North Run will probably be targeted by small bands of hand gatherers from September 2012 onwards. The area is not suitable for wet dredging and has been dry dredged in the past, (and I suspect will be again by the dead of night). The cockles are slow growing, unlikely to have a high meat yield or be of any great value. The area is suitable for an experiment with the small dry dredges that we know exist. They should rapidly remove a stock which would be a major source of public concern and complaint.
27. Granny's Bay will be a problem. The cockles could be of dubious quality (C classification or worse) and size. The area is high profile and the ground unstable. In the past stock has been taken direct to Chinese restaurants. Use of EHO's powers to regulate this back door trade may be required.

Access to the Fishery.

28. The problems of access to the fishery and placing the associated shoreside operations is difficult. The aim must be to limit disturbance to the public and damage to conservation interests to a minimum. Powers exist that can be used to minimise access problems.

Use of slipways and car parks.

29. Following consultations Councils can designate car parks, parts of car parks or areas of beach for the exclusive use of the fishermen (guidance no 6). Councils certainly can impose vehicle weight limits on car parks and charge for the use of the car park. Councils certainly have and should demand substantial bonds from the industry to guarantee that the car parks used are returned to their original conditions when the fishery is over.

Vehicles

30. Vehicles should be fit for purpose under HSE guidelines. Four wheel drive may be required. Tractors and trailers used for carrying passengers must have roll bars and safety rails fitted.
31. Land owners can and should require any vehicle passing over their land either in pursuit of an authorised activity such as fishery or when permitted (as required by law on the foreshore for most other purposes) to be properly insured. In practice suitable public liability insurance is normally deemed acceptable.

Beach accesses Sefton.

32. There are two accesses normally used by fishermen on the Sefton Coast and two major public car parks from which access to the Penfold Channel is practical.
33. Clearly the use of the two public car parks at Southport beach and Ainsdale beach must be discouraged. Fishermen do have undisputed access along the old Rainfords Sandworks road out to the Penfold Channel and access is both practical and desirable from the local fishermen's compound at Weld Road, Southport.
34. Sefton officers have suggested that the old sandworks site at Marshside could be made available to the industry for a suitable fee with appropriate terms and conditions applied. Local fishermen will wish to continue using the Weld Road compound or commuting the mile or so from their home bases as they have since time immemorial. Providing we can avoid a gold rush situation by the timely introduction of mechanical harvesting such arrangements should be more than adequate.

Beach Access Fylde.

35. Fylde access is more problematic. Access to the North Run and Granny's Bay beds is best obtained from the Fairhaven Road car park which will be unpopular.
36. Local fishermen have historically used the slipway at Seafield Slip and have an undoubted right of access through long usage at the Sand Yacht Club at St. Annes. Neither of these points are suitable for the loading of large vehicles. Since it is desirable that we actively discourage mass hand gathering in these areas we could propose that fishermen transport the catch to the merchants or a suitable "tonning up" point such as the Marshside sandworks site.
37. Past operations to gather cockles from Georges Brow by boat have been relatively small scale. Fishermen transport the catches of generally less than 1 ton per boat by trailer to the merchant. On occasions merchants have sent small wagons to Seafield Slip to collect cockles.

38. Gathering on the north side of the Ribble should be kept as small scale, hence the proposal for a limited dry dredge experiment in the North Run. Fylde Council should be consulted on the details.

Liaison with other Enforcement bodies.

39. Liaison with other enforcement bodies is key to making all this work. On the N. Wirral, Mersey Port Health and NWSFC Officers worked together. EHO powers can exert pressure on merchants to comply with regulations. The maximum enforcement of shellfish movement documentation would certainly be a major assistance.
40. NWSFC Officers are liaising with Council Officers to maximise the use of legislation regarding vehicles on the foreshore. Sefton have a working non-statutory vehicle permit scheme and access points can be designated to reduce impact on other area users. Work on this matter is ongoing with Sefton Officers. Fylde have an embryonic scheme requiring development.
41. Assistance from the MMO and MCA will be needed to deal with the use of boats particularly when the Georges Brow fishery starts off.

S. Brown
10 March 2011.