

Environment: Cockle Beds

Question

11.30 am

Asked by Lord Greaves

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their approach to tackling problems resulting from illegal fishing on the cockle beds of the Ribble estuary.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Taylor of Holbeach): My Lords, the management of local fisheries, including cockling on the Ribble estuary, has been devolved to the North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority and, as such, the conservation authority leads in managing the situation in co-operation with all interested parties, including enforcement agencies. In the light of recent events, North Western IFCA has closed the cockle fisheries

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for safety reasons. It is now a criminal offence to take or remove cockles in the Ribble, and the Government welcome and support this action.

Lord Greaves: My Lords, it is nearly 800 years since Magna Carta gave people the right to pick cockles from the shores of England. However, is it not now time that there was a better regime, in view of the chaos when the cockle beds were recently opened in the Ribble estuary near Lytham St Annes? Hundreds of people converged on the cockle beds, dozens had to be rescued and there was general chaos-and it was discovered that many people did not have permits. What will the Government do to help IFCA and other local agencies to protect the interests of the legitimate fishermen in that area who pick cockles so that they have a safe, reliable and environmentally sustainable business, which is being put at risk by what is going on?

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: As my noble friend will know, the situation is that North Western IFCA took the decision, in the light of the safety requirements, to protect lives. The Morecambe fishery is closed; the Ribble estuary fishery has just been reopened; and the price of cockles, at £700 a tonne, has encouraged a lot of people who do not have permits to go cockling. However, IFCA recognises the effect that the by-law will have on legitimate fishermen and is urgently looking into possible management measures that it could introduce to ensure a safe fishery and to operate it as soon as possible. The Government support IFCA in this endeavour.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: My Lords, we are grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Greaves, for raising this important issue. The House remembers the Morecambe Bay tragedy, which involved cockle picking. In the aftermath of that, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority was established, which has since made great progress in rooting out modern-day slavery and supporting a competitive industry. Can the Minister therefore reassure the House that the

Government remain committed to a properly resourced Gangmasters Licensing Authority that will not be merged into a larger enforcement body?

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: We are indeed entirely supportive of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, which plays a very important role in preventing the exploitation of workers. In this instance, the authority has not been particularly involved—there is no evidence of gangs working the fishery—but I am pleased to give the noble Lord the assurance he seeks.

Lord Clark of Windermere: My Lords, is the Minister aware that there is deep confusion in the north-west of England, in Cumbria and around Morecambe Bay, about the present situation? Although, rightly, most attention has been paid to the saving of human lives, the natural environment is very fragile. Can the Minister assure us that Defra is monitoring that situation to ensure that irreparable damage is not done to the cockle beds and to other related species?

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Lord Taylor of Holbeach: My Lords, the noble Lord has clear local knowledge of the area. He will know that the Morecambe cockle fisheries are closed in order to encourage restocking. The Government, Natural England and the IFCA itself are very conscious of the need to preserve a proper balanced ecology, and that is exactly the reason for the closure of the Morecambe cockle fishery.

Lord Storey: My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Knight, is right to remind us of the tragedy in Morecambe Bay, where 23 Chinese workers lost their lives. Does the Minister agree that IFCA needs to be robust in checking permits, that wherever possible permits should be issued to local fishermen, because that is their livelihood, and that where there is illegal fishing we should again be robust in arresting those people?

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: I thank my noble friend Lord Storey, who also has local knowledge of the area. The principles he espouses are ones which I personally would endorse, but this is of course a matter for the local IFCA, as the issuing of permits is in the hands of the North Western IFCA.

Lord Campbell-Savours: What testing is organised by the Environment Agency to test for contamination of the cockle beds by sewage outfalls from south Cumbria and the Morecambe Bay area?

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: I am not sure exactly what the procedures on that are, but I will certainly write to the noble Lord. Healthy food is obviously important, and shellfish infection can be very dangerous. The Government are mindful of that. I cannot tell the House the exact procedures at present, but I will write to the noble Lord and place a copy of the letter in the Library.