



Whelk Working Group

1st Annual Report

2019



Rebecca Treacy, Chair
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Introduction

The Whelk Working Group (WWG) was formed in February 2019 to facilitate the exchange of information relating to the common whelk (*Buccinum undatum*) between Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), other government agencies, fisheries authorities, academics, researchers and others interested in whelk fisheries.

Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation in the amount of whelk landed and in the investment of whelk fishing gear. The lack of thorough stock assessments and absence of collaboration between local researchers and managers was the main driver to create the WWG group and address this increase and effort in whelk fishing with a matter of urgency.

The work of the WWG will help improve and develop the understanding of whelk and look at the advantages of joint working to develop appropriate management. The Group is comprised of representatives from organisations engaged in the provision of evidence, advice and management of the whelk fisheries on a national level. Working together will improve communication, collaboration and consistency.

Whelks are a gastropod mollusc which are caught by commercial fishermen, typically in pots. It is an important fishery and the amount of fishing has generally increased over the past decade. The amount of whelk landed and the amount invested in whelk fishing gear has increased. There is relatively little regulation on whelk fishing, allowing expansion into this fishery. Markets have also developed, particularly in Europe and Asia.

Whilst the evidence needs of managers may vary, there are significant benefits from developing a more coordinated approach to whelk research. The focus of the Group is on research that provides evidence to support management decisions.

This report describes the activities of the Group over its first year.

Whelk Working Group Aim

To support sustainable whelk fisheries.

Objectives

- To facilitate better research which provides sound evidence to support management decisions for whelk fisheries.
- To improve the quality and extent of whelk fisheries management information through better coordination and dissemination of whelk fisheries related scientific research between relevant organisations.
- To increase communications between all the Group members.
- To identify and facilitate joint working opportunities and explore ways of working to support collaborative and comparable data collection.
- To help standardise research and technical practices between IFCAs and other relevant bodies so that information can be easily shared and analysed.

- Where appropriate, the Group will provide guidance and advice.
- Facilitate collaboration with external organisations (non-Group members) where appropriate and with the agreement of members.
- Where appropriate, the Group will identify national training needs and facilitate their provision.
- To improve access to expert advice and increase learning from each other.
- The Group will meet a minimum of twice yearly, either in person or by phone/Skype. Task and finish groups set up under the Whelk Working Group will meet as necessary.
- Matters of a confidential nature will be treated with discretion.
- Commercial fishers and other industry stakeholders will be engaged as appropriate with the work of the Group.

Completed actions

- Group administration

Set up the framework for the Group; established the Terms of Reference, agreed the membership list, set up the Work Plan, the Google drive and Skype calls.

- Summary information

Used the summary from the 2018 IFCA Technical Advisory Group (TAG) conference as the basis for a wider summary including information from all members of the Group on previous, ongoing and future research, as well as current management measures. Southern IFCA and Devon and Severn IFCA also produced summaries, as did MRAG for Blue Marine Foundation. All documents on the Group's shared Google drive.

- Information sharing

Established a document reference library; a spreadsheet cataloguing relevant literature and reports. A useful reference source. Updates ongoing. Also shared standard operating procedures.

- Maturity stages

Whelk maturity key was shared with the Group, available to members on the Google drive.

- Catch returns forms

Collated existing catch return forms, looking for similarities, as starting point for discussions about greater coordination. On Google drive: Eastern IFCA, Jersey, Sussex IFCA, Kent & Essex IFCA, Northumberland IFCA – and comparison of content.

- Riddles

Summarised the riddle specifications which are currently in management measures.

- Sampling equipment

Information on measuring equipment shared with the Group; measuring equipment, digital, blue tooth, wi-fi calipers or measuring boards, summary of options.

- Parasites

Evidence suggests that certain parasites can affect sexual maturity. Group shared information on parasites including photographs of parasites that those dissecting whelks might observe. All observations to be reported to the Group (ongoing). Minimal additional work but potential to develop a useful dataset through coordinated cooperation.

- Stock assessment

Created a summary of existing stock assessment models for consideration for establishing a stock assessment for whelks.

- Potting impacts

Natural England has collated evidence on the impacts of potting. All information is on the Fisheries Impacts Evidence Database. Impact Assessments on potting activity, conducted as part of the revised approach to fishing in European Marine Sites, are being collated.

- Economics of whelk fisheries

Seafish analysed economic data for whelk fisheries over the last ten years. Main findings were a large increase in number of vessels, amount landed, income and value of whelks.

- Pot bait

There were concerns about the use of bait in whelk pots; in particular regarding use of brown crab, use of undersize, and under-reporting of catches which are directly used for bait. Short report written which describes what bait is being used (type, amount) in whelk pots around the coast,

location and seasonal variation, where does the bait come from, is it being recorded, is there a risk to crab stocks/elasmobranch species (or other vulnerable/valuable species).

- Size of maturity

Summarised the existing findings around the coast of regionally specific size of maturity. There was variation around the coast, even within IFCA districts, all above the EU minimum size limit of 45mm shell height.

Actions in progress

- CEFAS is investigating the use of a surplus production stock assessment model for assessing regional whelk stocks.
- Kent and Essex IFCA are conducting onboard sampling, including discards and bycatch.
- Welsh Government are considering setting up a whelk sampling program and are investigating options for alternative fisheries.
- Jersey Government are continuing long term sampling of catch per unit effort.
- Bangor University has a PhD student researching a range of biological parameters.
- Orkneys Sustainable Fisheries and Heriott Watt University are researching size and age of maturity in four geographically distinct fisheries and also recording fisheries data.
- The Marine Management Organisation are investigating the location of whelk fishing activity using Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data.
- North Western IFCA are currently researching size and age at maturity to inform new flexible permitting byelaw for potting fisheries being introduced that will limit entry to the fishery and set pot limitations for whelks.

Discussion

The Whelk Working Group was established at a face to face meeting in Lancaster in February 2019. There have been three meetings via Skype, in May and September 2019 and January 2020. Holding the meetings using Skype and the Google drive has been efficient and convenient for the majority of the members. It has minimised travel time and costs. Using the Work Plan to track progress on specific tasks has kept discussions focussed and productive. Whilst a face to face meeting or conference is likely to occur in the future, for the time being, members are happy to continue meeting online.

The Whelk Working Group has facilitated closer working between its members and increased information sharing. Already there have been numerous productive conversations, increased network strength and knowledge exchange. As can be seen in this report, many useful tasks have already been accomplished, particularly in summarising current research, evidence, management measures and fisheries information.

Looking forward to the Whelk Working Group's second year, it is hoped that the strength and influence of the group will continue to grow. By working together, we can coordinate research and collaborate on evidence gathering, strengthening the evidence base which underpins management decisions. The aim of the Group is to support sustainable whelk fisheries and in working in partnership, we can ensure that robust information is available to inform management decisions.

Acknowledgements

The Chair and Vice Chair would like to thank all Whelk Working Group members for their hard work and contributions to the Group.

