

North Western IFCA

**Technical, Scientific and Byelaws Sub-Committee: 21 June 2011
Strathmore Hotel, Marine Road East, Morecambe: 10.30 a.m.**

**AGENDA
ITEM NO.
8**

UPDATE ON LEASOWE COCKLE FISHERY

Purpose of Report

- 1. To update members of the current status of the Leasowe Cockle Bed.**
- 2. To inform members of the interest of Wirral Council of proposing a Fishery Order for the area**

Recommendation

- 1. The report be received.**
- 2. Officers continue to monitor the bed and the growth of the cockles.**

Background

- 1. In October 2010 a new cockle bed at Leasowe on the Wirral became classified and available for commercial fishing. A high density of cockles was found in a localised area off of Gunsite Car Park. Large numbers of hand gatherers operated during November - December 2010, with peaks of around 700 for several days soon after the beds opened. Stocks were soon greatly reduced and the bed was fished by declining numbers for several months. By March 2011 15-40 gathers per day were seen working the bed until the seasonal closure came into force on 1 April.**
- 2. No fishery has been present within this area for over 10 years and large amounts of public concern and confusion were caused with many complaints reaching the Council through extensive media coverage. The foreshore is a Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation. The area behind the foreshore is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, as well as part of the North Wirral Coastal Park. There were concerns from the local council and environmental groups over the damage caused through litter, vehicle access and the area being used for hand gathers to camp overnight.**
- 3. During 2011, the area of the bed has increased and the hygiene classification of the area is therefore also being extended out from the main bed northwards along the shore towards the Mersey.**

Current Status of Cockle Beds

- 4. During April and May officers conducted several surveys of both the previous fished cockle bed area and the new classified area to the north.**



Figure 1. Map of Leasowe Cockle Bed are with Current Sampling Stations and Hygiene Classification Area Marked.

5. The area to the right of the existing sampled area (Figure 1.) was surveyed as fishery officers and fishermen identified it as having cockles present. A survey is due to be conducted to the left of the original area in the week prior to the TSB meeting. A verbal report will be given on the information found.
6. Cockles both 2010 and 2009 year classes were present across the areas which were accessible at low water during the surveys (Figure 2). No 2011 spat was observed at the time of surveying. Average densities across the whole sampled area were 17/m² 2010 year class and 14/m² 2009 year class. The densest areas found are directly in front of Gunsite Car Park and to the north east of the survey area.
7. The average size of the 2010 year class cockle in April 2011 was 17.7mm within the original bed area (Fished Area). The average size of 2010 year class cockles within the extended bed area when surveyed in May was 20.5mm.
8. The 2010 cockles are found to be growing through and should yield a fishery in autumn/winter 2011, barring mass die-offs. The growth of these cockles will be monitored and a full survey of the area will be conducted in July/August as part of the annual district assessment and to monitor growth and commercial viability.

Management Option for September 2011

9. As discussed above, cockle stocks in 2011 have the potential to provide a relatively short term low level fishery commencing in September. Depending on survival and growth in the summer up to opening, the density on the bed is expected to be a minimum of around 20 fishable cockles /m². The NWIFCA could be faced with 3 management options:

Option 1: If stocks are close to 20/m² or below, it may be appropriate to keep the fishery closed on grounds of stock management and to protect environmental interests. This option has the major disadvantage that enforcement would be demanding and expensive on the Authority's limited resources. The fishery would be subjected to continuous

poaching attempts and it would not be possible to prevent some fishing taking place. This option is not recommended.

Option 2: If stocks are significantly above 20/m², permit fishing from 1 September until reduced to this level then close the fishery using a temporary closure to 31 March 2012. Allowing some fishing whatever the stock levels has the advantage that the industry would fully understand the scarcity of the stock and would be more supportive of a closure if required.

Option 3: Allow fishing to take place as traditionally without closure so that fishing ceased when stocks reduced to a below economically viable level. In the past the NWSFC did not regulate cockle fisheries but allowed market forces to dictate the fishery.

10. Following further surveys of cockle stocks before 1 September, Officers will recommend management action.

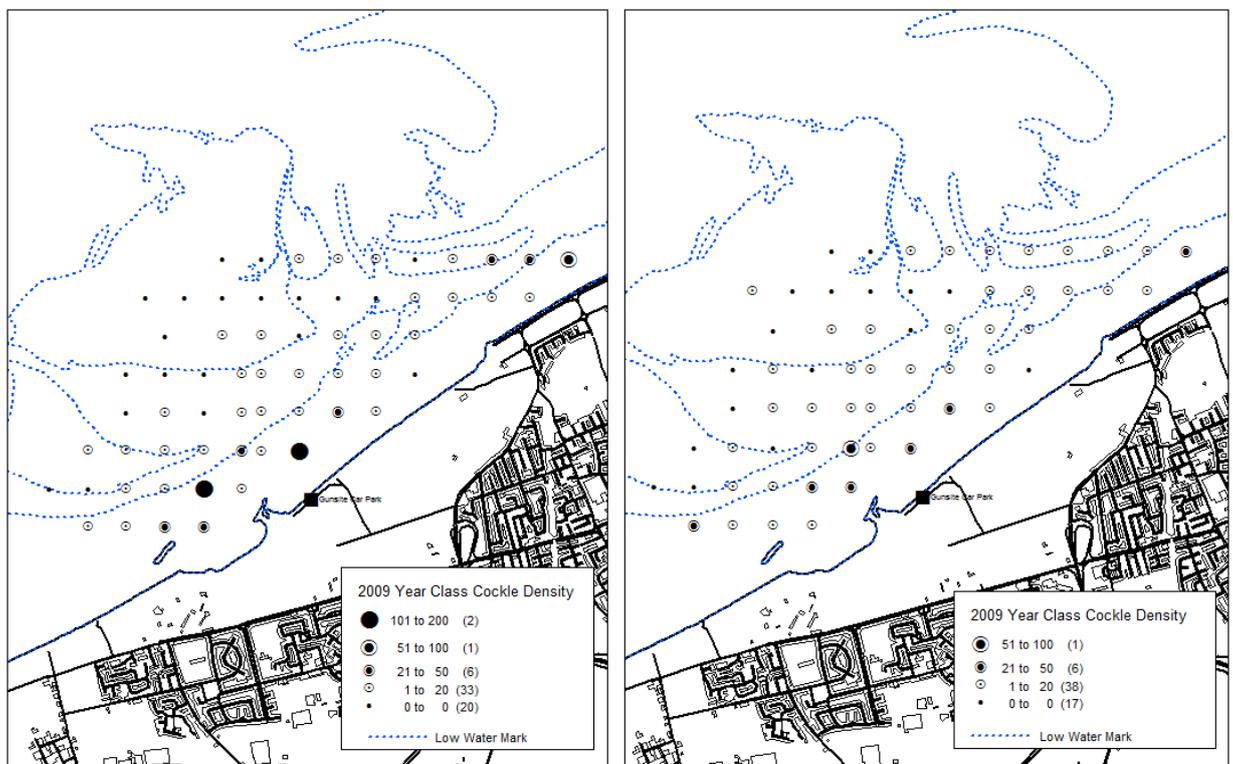


Figure 2. Survey results for April and May 2011 of Leasowe cockle year class densities.

Wirral Council Meeting 24th May 2011

11. Wirral Council requested a briefing on the fishery and advice on the potential for using a cockle fishery order to assist management. The Chief Executive and Wirral Fishery Officer met senior Council Officials and presented the data in this report and the management options which may be available in September.
12. In the absence of evidence of a 2011 settlement of cockles on the foreshore, Wirral Council were advised that the fishery was as yet too unpredictable to warrant the investment required to enact a fishery order. An Order would require a dedicated officer

for approximately 1 year to complete an Order which may not be successful if substantive opposition were mounted during the consultation process. An alternative option could be to apply for an amendment to the Dee Cockle Fishery Order so that the area of the Order is extended to include cockle fisheries on the Dee. Depending on the future development of the cockle stocks, this option should be kept under review.

13. Council Officers indicated that they would report to Wirral Council and may communicate a preferred management approach to the Authority in due course.

Scientific Officer
7 June 2011