

NWIFCA Technical, Science and Byelaw Committee

11th August 2020: 10:00 a.m.

Agenda Item

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SCIENCE REPORT 29TH MARCH - 21ST JUNE 2020

Purpose: To provide an update to members on the work of the Science Team in the last quarter

Recommendation: Report provided for information.

This quarter covered the period of full lock down and then partial lifting of restrictions. After the initial time needed to adjust to new ways of working, all SOs have continued to work from home throughout and have remained healthy. Unfortunately although shortlisting for a replacement science officer was carried out during lock down, no further progress has been made with recruitment due to the necessity for face to face working in the final stages of appointment and induction.

This quarter has been very busy with survey and inspection, not helped by NWIFCA being four officers down overall, three of whom would be part of survey teams (SOs and IFCOs). This has put additional pressure on the team.

Some survey work, particularly vessel work, has simply not been possible due to social distancing requirements, including:

- the subtidal mussel in the Solway which has created further anxiety and may I say distrust of the NWIFCA by mussel fishers expressed in email correspondence to the Senior Scientist;
- as the mussel beds offshore in north Morecambe Bay are now inaccessible to quad and need the RIB to dry on the beds. Initially attempts were made through industry to provide evidence on the condition of the stock and the substrate, but this caused disagreement between sectors, and officers are unable to make recommendations on management of these areas;
- Morecambe Bay Chinese Mitten Crab intertidal surveys in June.

Two BMWG meetings were held in May and June to discuss the mussel resources in the Bay.

1. NWIFCA RESEARCH PROJECTS

a) Razor Clam collaborative research

(i) Bangor University Shellfish Centre electro-dredge study - a detailed HRA has been agreed with Natural England and MMO dispensation has been issued. Officers await news from the Bangor University scientist on when vessel work aboard industry vessel may be started;

(ii) Science Officers attended a virtual webinar on the Scottish Razor Clam trial fishery in the hope of gaining some useful information to inform our work;

b) Whelk Fisheries in the North West – samples for size of maturity (SOM) study continue to be supplied by Cumbrian fishers and Science Officers are able to collect and process them at the lab observing safe distancing.

2. Whelks

i. Dr Hartley attended the national Whelk Working Group meeting via Skype in June, the group continues to work through the extensive work plan although much of the practical research has been halted due to Covid-19.

Work plan - A national picture of the Size of Maturity of Whelk has been completed. Ongoing work of note focusses on stock assessment. Work by Cefas concluded that simple production models were insufficient to provide robust assessments of UK whelk fisheries. Cefas are investigating alternative models and will be approaching the whelk working group for regional data to improve model certainty. Welsh Government have commissioned research with Bangor University to develop stock assessment techniques and a Welsh specific stock assessment model. This work will be supported by practical investigations in September 2020. Stock assessment work continues in Jersey with data now spanning 20 years.

Whelk management updates - Management of whelk fisheries continues to develop with participants sharing updates, measures include increasing minimum landing sizes, considerations of a closed season, pot limits and total allowable catches.

Whelk Management Group - Several members of the Whelk Working Group also attend the Whelk Management Group, the whelk focussed sub-group of the Shellfish Industry Advisory Group established by Seafish in 2019. Although the Whelk Working Group has a more research focus, there is a clear overlap and it is hoped the two groups will work together.

Covid-19 – members agreed that recoding the impact of covid-19 on whelk fisheries would be of merit. Collation of regional fishing activity and the impact of Covid-19 are to be collated by Eastern IFCA.

3. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE NWIFCA DISTRICT:

a) Shell Flat and Lune Deep SAC and Fylde MCZ Fisheries Assessments

MMO, Natural England and NWIFCA have discussed the MMO draft assessments of fisheries activity in the Shell Flat and Lune Deep SAC and the Fylde MCZ - comments and inshore fishing activity data had previously been provided by NWIFCA.

c) Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs)

Defra published the report 'Benyon Review into Highly Protected Marine Areas' in June, which detailed the work carried out by the review panel and their conclusions and is provided as Annex A. The panel, chaired by Richard Benyon (former MP and Fisheries Minister) consisted of academics, and representatives from fishing industry, offshore wind and other seabed user groups and conservation bodies.

The purpose of the panel was to review if there was evidence of the need for Highly Protected Marine Areas with a remit to cover the inshore and offshore English waters and the offshore Northern Irish waters. They concluded that "there is such a need and that the substantial benefits of HPMAs justify the negative effects" and they provided government with proposals for their designation.

Covid 19 had an impact on the outputs as the intention had been to "include clear recommendations for pilot sites in the Report, but evidence gathering for that was not possible during the Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, we feel we have provided a set of well-thought-out recommendations for government which should be implemented in a reasonably short space of time".

Officers have received a degree of correspondence from concerned fishers in Morecambe Bay because the site is listed as a 'Suggested Site' at the back of the report, and when HPMA's are designated it is highly likely that **all** fishing activity will be precluded. Morecambe Bay is the only site within the NWIFCA District mentioned. However the list must be read in the correct context as a list of sites suggested put forward by respondents to the public Call for Evidence. The panel suggest that government use it as a starting point for identifying sites to designate but "***the list is not endorsed by the Panel***".

For concerns around Morecambe Bay a key point to digest is stated on page 74 in relation to recommendations for pilot sites: "***They should not be in intertidal areas*** due to the additional complications associated with governing and regulating the marine/terrestrial interface and its users".

Chapter 9 (page 77) of the report provides the panel's conclusions which include (with my emphasis):

"Government must identify HPMA's on the basis of their ecological value and according to the principles recommended in this Report. We acknowledge the potential negative effects for some sea users from introducing HPMA's, and therefore recommend applying social and economic principles as a secondary filter when identifying sites. Once ecological principles are met sites can be selected to minimise negative impacts on certain groups. For all aspects of the HPMA process, including selecting and managing sites, government and marine managers should regularly engage with a diverse range of stakeholders".

Officers were not at liberty to disclose that earlier in the year there were hurried discussions between the advisors to the panel and IFCA's relating to 'suggested sites,' at which point NWIFCA Officers put forward very clear evidence in terms of the socio-economic importance and ecological value of the intertidal and subtidal fisheries in the Bay. Discussions were also had on the difficulties of defining subtidal areas in such a highly dynamic site, which was designated under EU and international nature conservation mainly for its intertidal value.

Officers share the concerns of fisher stakeholders should Morecambe Bay be taken forward and will keep a very close watch on developments. However, when considering there is no intention of including intertidal areas in HPMA designation, and the vital importance to coastal communities from a socio-economic and cultural heritage point of view of the remaining fishing activity in the Bay, it is hoped that the site will be removed from the list of sites taken forward.

d) NWIFCA MPA Monitoring and Control Plan

The rolling programme of review of HRAs for all activities in all sites continues to ensure if any significant change occurs the HRAs are still fit for purpose and management is appropriate.

4. MMO North West Marine Plan

Following the consultation on the draft North West Marine Plan MMO have published their draft consultation report provided as Annex B.

5. Future of Our Inshore Fisheries

A report that may be of significant interest to members has just been published by Seafish and is attached at Annex C. Entitled 'Future of Our Inshore Fisheries - Conference Report' it summarises the discussions held at a multi-sectoral event in October 2019. The Future of Our Inshore Fisheries Steering Group was convened after recognising that management of UK inshore fisheries has been criticised for being overly complex, inconsistent in its approach and

ineffective at delivering on long-term sustainability goals. The Group brings together representatives from the UK fishing industry, government, and the research community with a key aim of collaborating to find workable, enduring solutions for the future management of this important resource.

Representation at the conference was split between inshore fishermen and regulators with the inshore fishermen (34.5%), inshore fisheries representatives (18.7%) or regulators (20.1%).

Issues covered and summarised in the report include:

- How should we define inshore fisheries?
- How to successfully deliver co-management in inshore fisheries
- Spatial conflict & how to avoid it
- How to provide for access & deliver business certainty
- Delivering compliance outcomes
- Enabling industry-led science.

6. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Fisheries (APPG)

A website that may be of further interest to Members and to which you can subscribe can be found here: <https://www.fisheriesappg.org/>

“The APPG on Fisheries is a neutral, cross-party forum for debate, discussion and learning within Parliament. The Group was founded by MPs and Peers who want to promote and support the UK fishing industry, whilst exploring key questions for the future of fishing, processing, coastal communities and the marine environment.

We are at the forefront of the vital conversations for fishing and associated industries in Parliament, and bring together best practice and inspirational case studies from across the country in a series of Parliamentary seminars, open to all. As we enter a new era for fishing in the UK, maintaining open and informed debate around fisheries management, science, policy, economics - and all related subjects - is more important than ever”.

7. Defra Blue Carbon

Dr Hartley attended a further meeting of this new group convened by Defra along with other IFCA representatives. Blue Carbon is a term for carbon captured by living organisms in coastal and marine ecosystems, and stored in biomass and sediments. These are ecosystems that are relatively amenable to management, and have high carbon burial rate per unit area, accumulating carbon in soils and sediments. The purpose of the group is to investigate possibilities for protecting and restoring blue carbon habitats as a nature based solution to the impacts of climate change. Considering the wealth of appropriate blue carbon habitats in NWIFCA District, including mudflats, saltmarsh, seagrass and sub-tidal mud, continuing involvement is important and Dr Hartley will report back to members as the work develops.

8. St Bees Closure 16th March - 24th July

Officers implemented the St Bees Voluntary Netting Closure on 16th March and the area has been monitored for compliance by IFCOs. As in previous years it is pleasing to report full support and compliance from netters. The closure was removed on 24th July.

9. Halite Water Extraction Licence - Preesall Gas Storage

A report has been picked up from Cat Smith MP’s webpage that Halite have lost their water extraction licence from the Environment Agency. The licence was for pumping water from

Fleetwood fish dock to wash out the salt caverns at Preesall for the gas storage project. The licence included a condition that stipulated the abstraction must have commenced by 17 July 2020. Halite failed to meet this deadline and instead applied to change this condition and extend the date to 2023. However, the EA did not receive the information they needed to make their assessment and determine the application before the commencement date. To be able to abstract water from the docks, Halite will now have to make an application for a new licence. A number of changes have been made in the interim to designated nature conservation sites in the locality of the project.

The EA have been contacted for an official line on this but in the absence of a response the following is taken from the Member of Parliament's account:

<https://www.catsmith.co.uk/latest/2020/07/21/halite-loses-water-abstraction-licence/>

10. Middleton Sands - and SSSI Byelaws and Enforcement

Science Officers investigated reports of numerous vehicles on the beach at Middleton Sands in the first weeks following full lock down when people were allowed to travel for exercise again, and which coincided with particularly fine weather. It has been observed for many years that car tyre tracks are often visible from the car parking area on to the sands but these reports suggested tens of vehicles and officers were concerned about the impact on the cockle bed.

On that day officers observed 20 vehicles parked out on the sands as people were finding secluded places to picnic. Tyre tracks were observed but very few if any ran over the cockle areas but mainly remained on the upper reaches of the beach. Information was passed to Natural England because of the impacts on the site which is designated as a SSSI as well as lying within the overall Morecambe Bay SAC and SPA.

The SS responded to a consultation on a review of SSSI byelaws which are held and enforced by Natural England back in 2018. A report has now been published (Annex D) on improved powers and Natural England have been recruiting for SSSI enforcement personnel. It is hoped that it might be possible to deal with some of these issues more effectively in the future.

11. Tidal Lagoon proposal - Mostyn Docks, Dee Estuary

Officers have picked up on a newspaper report of a proposed tidal lagoon at Mostyn Docks, Dee Estuary. This is the first knowledge NWIFCA has of this project although the paper reports that "Preparatory work, including environmental and ecological studies, has been taking place for four years and the lagoon will be designed to maintain navigational access for shipping".

Mostyn SeaPower Ltd want to build a 6.7 kilometre long lagoon on the Welsh side of the Dee with walls standing 2m above sea level. They have "been working with engineering consultants Ban Nuttall from Camberley and environmental experts ABPMer, from Southampton and the company has already negotiated with the National Grid for the electricity to be used by the nearby Connah's Quay Power Station. The firm is planning to submit an application to the UK Government for a Development Consent Order by the end of 2022 and hopes to get the green light a year later".

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/tidal-lagoon-north-wales-swansea-18521546>

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