

**NWIFCA Technical, Science and Byelaw
Committee**

14th May 2019: 10:00 a.m.

**AGENDA
ITEM NO.
6**

SCIENCE REPORT
13TH JANUARY - 12TH APRIL 2019

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

Recommendation: that Members approve the report.

This quarter has seen the attendance of two Science Officers at the annual week long Torquay IFCO Training Course. The team has been reduced by the loss of Science Officer Huw James who has departed for personal reasons to a position of fisheries observer in South Georgia. We wish him well and thank him for all his work here. It leaves the capacity of the team reduced in person-power which affects survey ability and the development of the Recreational Angling Strategy in particular. Recruitment has begun for his replacement.

1. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE NWIFCA DISTRICT:

The Senior Scientist's attendance at the monthly national Inshore Fisheries Working Group tele-conferences has been sporadic this quarter due to other work commitments.

a) Marine Conservation Zones

i. West of Walney MCZ

There has been no further update on the signing off of the MMO byelaw to prohibit bottom towed gear within the whole MCZ.

ii. Defra consultation on Tranche 3 MCZ sites

There has been no further communications on T3 sites. Defra intend to announce site designations by June 7th 2019, and will publish a full government response to their T3 consultation, outlining the evidence received and explaining the decisions taken on each site.

b) Assessment of Fishing Activities in Marine Protected Areas

i. Work continues to assess bait collection and hand-gathering activity within the District's MPAs.

ii. The Senior Scientist along with the Chairman attended the AIFCA's National MPA project launch in the House of Commons, hosted by Scot Mann MP. The event was well attended, with brief appearances from the Secretary and Under Secretary of State. The work of IFCAs in managing fishing in MPAs was applauded.

c) 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.

d) St Bees Head - Cumbria Coast MCZ - Netting Voluntary Code of Practice

The Voluntary Code of Practice for 2019 began on March 18th and runs until 22nd July unless Natural England advise it needs to be extended due to the birds' behaviour. IFCO Erik Thinessen provides regular reports from clifftop patrols and any boat patrols in the area. These include fishing activity sightings along with information on what he observes from the birds on and around the cliffs, which are all logged.

Natural England are leading on a further disturbance study and have contacted NWIFCA for our involvement. Working with the National Trust and RSPB, local volunteers are to be engaged to carry out surveys from the cliffs, recording disturbance events and the effects on the birds' behaviour. This will include fishing activity, the point at which NWIFCA has influenced the design of the survey.

2. NWIFCA RESEARCH PROJECTS

a) Bass populations and tagging study – Cefas project. No further work during this quarter but a meeting planned for early May.

b) Razor Clam collaborative research – meeting with Bangor University Shellfish Centre scientist appointed to the project and Deepdock to progress research plans. Data is being provided to the scientist. A meeting with Natural England to discuss any concerns they may have around the project confirmed the requirement for evidence already identified by NWIFCA for full HRA.

c) Whelk Fisheries in the North West – first samples from industry collected and to be worked up.

d) BLUEcoast - meeting - no further developments this quarter.

e) Nephrops creel fishery trial - Natural England project set to go ahead, and MMO dispensation obtained.

3. NATIONAL IFCA TAG CONFERENCE and WHELK WORKING GROUP

NWIFCA hosted the annual TAG Conference at the Lancaster Conference Centre. The conference was attended by 50 delegates from Jersey States, Defra, Natural England, MMO, Cefas, the Environment Agency, the Zoological Society of London, Institute of Fisheries Management, Isle of Man Government as well as all IFCAs. Members Dr Baxter, Brian Leigh and Dr Pearce all attended. The conference showcased the scientific and research work of each IFCA, along with presentations from fellow agencies. The Senior Scientist has taken on the role of Vice Chair of TAG, with Colin Trundle from Cornwall IFCA taking on the Chair.

Day One saw the inaugural meeting of the Whelk Working Group with the development of the Terms of Reference of that group, which seeks to provide a forum for sharing research and management experience. There was a call for a national approach to whelk management in UK waters from Defra as there is widespread concern over the risk to stocks, particularly in relation to the legal minimum landing size.

4. HALITE GAS STORAGE AND BRINE DISCHARGE

The planned second meeting of the Marine Management Group was cancelled again at short notice. The Senior Scientist raised concerns with EA about the implications of the group not meeting when it is understood that Halite are progressing the project. This issue was

discussed with Natural England who will approach EA for further information on where the project and survey work is up to.

5. CROWN ESTATE MARINE AGGREGATE DREDGING TENDER ROUND 2018/19

The Crown Estate has announced the provisional results of its 2018/19 marine aggregates tender round, which closed at the end of October. Eight areas of seabed have been selected as potentially suitable for the extraction of marine aggregates, seven of which lie within English waters, with one area, the only one from the northeast Irish Sea, overlapping English and Welsh waters. This shortlist has been announced following a bid assessment process undertaken by The Crown Estate. The press release and link to the map can be found here: <https://www.thecrownestate.co.uk/en-gb/media-and-insights/news/2019-the-crown-estate-confirms-areas-selected-for-201819-marine-aggregate-tender-round/>

6. EMFF WORKSHOP - Developing a participatory approach to the management of fishing activity in UK offshore Marine Protected Areas.

A multi stakeholder workshop was held in February in Lancaster to bring together the project partners and West of Walney regional stakeholders to further the project process. Huw James attended for NWIFCA to keep up-to-date with the project development. The primary aims of the workshop were:

- To bring regional stakeholders together to further explore the participatory management of fisheries in marine protected areas;
- To further develop the proposed MPA management toolkit;
- To explore data requirements for MPA management;
- To develop the first set of management scenarios for ecological modelling.

7. RECREATIONAL ANGLERS ENGAGEMENT

Science and enforcement officers attended a meeting of Sefton Sea Anglers, giving a presentation on the work of the NWIFCA, the Recreational Angling Strategy and answering questions from the floor. The event was well received and is encouraging for future engagement with the angling sector.

8. NORTH WEST MARINE PLAN – MMO

Ms Knott attended a workshop in Carlisle on Iteration 3 of the NW Marine Plan - Policy Development - and participated where she could in the online consultation. This consultation was extremely lengthy and she felt that the majority of stakeholders would not even attempt to respond let alone have time to respond to every document within it.

9. COCKLES

a) Morecambe Bay

i. Fisheries

Fishing activity on Pilling East, Flookburgh and Leven Sands, and Newbiggin has been on-going at relatively low levels, and it is understood that compliance with management has been good.

The Senior and Deputy Senior Scientists have been working with CEO and HoE to progress the review of the Cackle and Mussel Hand-gathering Byelaw.

ii. Breakage rate study

Following last year's breakage rate trial at Pilling, a further trial developing methodology was carried out at Flookburgh. There were no conclusive results and due to fishing activity and bird predation over the winter months the stock has now changed, and does not provide the mix of size and juvenile cockle that the study requires. It is also proving problematic to decide on a methodology that removes the numerous variables that affect the breakage rates, and it may be decided not to progress the study.

In future if a suitable stock exists, officers may attempt to observe gatherers as they work in order to provide an assessment of breakage from use of jumbo and rake on small thin-shelled cockle.

b) Leasowe - Wirral

An inspection was carried out in February revealing a substantial stock of juvenile cockle, mixed in with significant size cockle, presumably remaining from the last recruitment in 2017. A survey is scheduled for during the summer giving time for HRA to be carried out should the stock persist and grow through and a fishery be possible for September 2019. The stock on this bed is known to grow extremely quickly and the relevant agencies have been notified. The whole of the bed is now classified as a B which is beneficial to gatherers and their market avenues, as previously the eastern part nearest to New Brighton had been a C classification. This indicates an improved water quality from the mouth of the Mersey which should be welcomed.

c) North Penfold - Southport

An inspection has been carried out on the North Penfold cockle bed and surrounding sands. There is currently no stock of any significance there, and no spat settlement as yet. This will be monitored should a summer recruitment occur. The area has been declassified in terms of hygiene classification. This was an agreed approach when stocks of cockle or mussel are too low to support a commercial fishery as a cost-saving measure for local authorities. However it has been revealed that if there are gaps in the data it can affect classification ratings should there be spikes of e-coli levels over the year, as is often the case with heavy rainfall during the summer. This affected the cockle fishery at Pilling, which after many months and increased sampling has now been resolved. However it has highlighted an issue about temporary declassification which needs to be addressed by the next Shellfish Liaison Group meeting in September. See Annex B for the inspection note.

10. MUSSELS

a) Chinese Mitten Crab risk - Morecambe Bay

The Senior Scientist has liaised with scientists in Eire over their risk-based approach to mussel imports from Morecambe Bay, and shipments resumed at the beginning of the year after a month in which they were denied. Ms Knott also wrote to Northern Ireland regulators DAERA who refuse to allow any imports of mussel in from the Bay. Having been unsuccessful in gaining any real communications with them, Barrow MP John Woodcock was contacted by the CEO, and he was able to elicit documentation from DAERA on their Invasive Non-Native Species Strategy. This evoked a raft of further questions on how this had been developed, what stakeholder consultation had been carried out, and the justifications behind its approach to mussel aquaculture. These have been submitted to John Woodcock MP's Caseworker for her to take back to DAERA for further response. It is still hoped that direct dialogue with DAERA might be established.

Quarterly surveys are being carried out by the Science Team on the Foulney and Heysham Flat mussel beds in order to continue the time series of data on monitoring and surveillance for Chinese Mitten Crab in the Bay. No CMC have been found. The full reports are supplied as Annex A which is distributed to other regulators to keep them current with the situation.

IFCOs are also liaising with crab tilers in the Walney Channel and Duddon Estuary areas, ensuring they are fully aware of what to look out for and who to report to should any CMC be found.

b) Solway Mussels

Please see separate report.

c) i. Foulney, Walney Channel and Low Bottom / Foulney Ditch

A low level size mussel fishery has been on-going throughout the winter on the mussel running along the Walney Channel on the Foulney bed. Dutch Wand surveys have been carried out on all three mussel areas in the north of the Bay - Foulney, Walney Channel and Low Bottom / Foulney Ditch. The Dutch Wand methodology enables an assessment of biomass to be made on patchy mussel areas, of which the District has many. However the Senior Scientist maintains her previous position on estimating biomass of mussels in Morecambe Bay. It can change so rapidly - increasing as well as decreasing - that a biomass estimate can only ever be given for a specific point in time.

It is useful to see how much bivalve resource is left following the winter months indicating that sufficient bird prey resource has been available alongside both size mussel and cockle fisheries.

See Annex B for full survey reports.

ii. Wash from Windfarm Maintenance Vessels - Foulney and Walney Channel

Byelaw 3 gatherers brought to the attention of officers an issue from the wash of windfarms maintenance vessels in the Walney Channel and the impact the increase in speed has on the mussel along the edge of the channel. Considering the number of vessels traversing this area each day the impact appears to be quite severe in that large amounts of mussel are believed to have been washed out. The problem has been taken to Natural England along with suggested re-positioning of the permitted speed restriction. NE will approach the port authorities to discuss as not only will the wash impact the mussel but will undoubtedly also affect some of the protected features on this skewer, such as red algae and sponges.

d) South America and Falklands

Officers carried out an inspection by quad bike on the far-out beds of South America and Falklands. The South America bed had been covered in sand and no mussel ground was evident. A short report with photographs on the state of these skears (contained within Annex B) has been circulated to BMWG members, and both areas will be monitored for change.

The Falklands bed area of mussel appears to have reduced in extent to last year. The area to the north of the mussel and exposed skewer has sanded over. There was evidence of heavy starfish predation.

e) Heysham Flat

Officers are monitoring Heysham Flat for mussel stock, so that there is ample warning for a fishery. See Annex B for short report.

11. Meetings / Conferences

Officers attended the Solway Firth Partnership Advisory Group quarterly meeting, and the Morecambe Bay Partnership Conference.

The Deputy Senior Scientist attended the six-monthly meeting of the Shellfish Liaison Group. Dr Hartley attended the Mersey Sediment Management Group where dredging of the estuary and the deposit of dredge spoil is the focus of discussion.

Science Officer Huw James attended a stakeholder workshop on the “Liverpool Bay island creation” scheme. ‘Royal Haskoning DHV is currently investigating the potential for large-scale habitat creation in Liverpool Bay, offering the possibility for the provision of difficult-to-create / declining habitats or habitats to attract species of conservation interest (for example, features of local designations that are in unfavourable condition). Habitat creation may also offer a beneficial alternative to the offshore disposal of dredged material, and introduces the concept of “habitat banking” as a provision of reliable compensatory habitat for important future coastal development’. Officers will keep a watch on the development of this scheme and report back.

The Deputy Senior Scientist delivered training on the work of IFCA in general and NWIFCA in particular to a team of national Natural England staff at their offices in Crewe.

**Mandy Knott
Senior Scientist
15th April 2019**