

**NWIFCA Technical, Science and Byelaw
Committee**

6th November 2018: 10:00 a.m.

**AGENDA
ITEM NO.**

9

WHELK FISHERIES IN NWIFCA DISTRICT

Purpose: i) to provide information to Members on current knowledge of whelk fisheries in the District.

Recommendation: i) that Members approve the report;
ii) that Members approve work to produce a full report on the knowledge gained from stakeholder consultation, issues identified and proposals for a precautionary approach to management.

Background:

1. Whelks are a gastropod mollusc caught by commercial fishermen in pots. In most coastal regions, whelks have rapidly become an economically important species, now more than just supporting a few fishing jobs during the traditionally quiet winter months.
2. In 2002, UK whelk landings were 8,687 tonnes, worth just over £4million. By 2012 UK landings had almost doubled to 16,000 tonnes with a value of £10.8million. By 2015 UK landings were up to 20,855 tonnes, and worth £18.6million. Whelk are now amongst the most economically important shellfisheries in the UK with total UK landings (21,606t) equating to a value of £21.7 million in 2016. A paper from IOM scientists in publication reports that landings throughout the Irish Sea region increased by 227% between 2011 and 2016.
3. Interest in whelk fishing nationally continues to grow, probably due in the main to the opening up of markets in the Far East, and also by fishers' need to diversify when other fisheries are being restricted, through legislation and construction/development in the marine environment.
4. This gives cause for concern as whelk are late maturing, slow moving and do not have a planktonic phase through which widespread dispersal is possible during spawning. Populations are therefore understood to be spatially discrete and vulnerable to overfishing.

Current Position:

5. Whelk fishing occurs in the southern part of the District, where fishing vessels are restricted 15m overall length from 0-6nm by NWSFC B9 – MECHANICALLY PROPELLED VESSELS – MAXIMUM LENGTH, other than in the Dee Estuary where no restriction applies.
6. Due to the anomaly of the inherited CSFC B25 – REQUIREMENT FOR ESCAPE GAPS IN POTS, CREELS AND TRAPS designed to allow immature lobsters and crabs to escape from pots, whelk fishing does not currently occur within the northern part of the District.
7. Vessel length restrictions in the northern part of the District are a little complicated. Cumbria SFC Byelaw 3 - SIZE LIMITS OF BOATS ALLOWED INSIDE THE DISTRICT was made in 1993 when the SFC District only extended out to the 3nm. It restricts vessel length to 13.72m within the 3nm area.

8. Within the remainder of the old SFC boundary there is a vessel length restriction of 21.34m. In effect this roughly applies to the area north of St Bees Head up the Solway and out to the median line in the Solway.
9. The area between the 3-6nm south of St Bees Head to Haverigg Point has no vessel length restriction. Fishing there has been controlled through gear restrictions – eg. CSFC Byelaw 13 – MULTI-RIGGED TRAWLING GEAR, whereby only single trawls are permitted.
10. Whelk fishing is prosecuted immediately beyond the 6nm in both the north and south of the District, and also in the Isle of Man where it is managed under specific whelk licences, pot limitations and a MLS of 75mm, as opposed to 45mm in NWIFCA District (EU measure).
11. There are conflicts between whelk potting and bottom towed gear, as with other forms of static gear, including scallop dredge and nephrops trawl which restricts areas that whelk potting can be successfully prosecuted.
12. The proposal to issue a derogation against CSFC B25 was discussed at the August TSB. It was agreed that in order to ensure a sustainable fishery the NWIFCA needs to gain a better understanding of the fishery and the management required.

Progress since August TSB:

13. Officers have met individually with six whelk fishermen and two processors and had detailed whelk focused discussions.
14. Officers know of five other whelk fishers who either currently fish for whelks or who intend to prosecute the fishery once it is opened. All have been sent the draft Byelaw and questionnaire.
15. From current knowledge there are potentially 18 vessels based in the District's ports that could prosecute the fishery, ranging in vessel lengths from just over 8m to 18m.
16. Without any restrictions on opening the fishery access would automatically be given to all UK and Isle of Man licensed fishing vessels.
17. Sampling for size at maturity and age at maturity using established Bangor University protocols is due to begin imminently with all authorisations and equipment in place. The aim is for monthly samples from the same area within the 6nm for a minimum of 12 months. If possible this work should be extended working with other pot fishers to sample more parts of the District.
18. Overwhelmingly all whelk fishers state that a requirement for an escape gap in whelk pots is not necessary and proves useless when the pot either fills with mud or holes get blocked by large whelks. Use of a riddle is paramount in sorting undersize whelks from the catch and should be included in the byelaw.
19. Officers have had lengthy discussion with a Bangor scientist working with Isle of Man fisheries on whelk populations and management and received research papers which provide further information to be digested. This is a valuable contact who is keen to maintain dialogue.

Next Steps:

20. Officers support moves to open a fishery once clear management measures can be identified to ensure sustainability. Officers recommend that detailed thought needs to be given to issues such as the MLS and pot limitations.

21. Officers are aware that Jersey's whelk fishery, which has a 50 mm MLS, has seen large reductions in CPUE indicating the fishery may be in trouble, and wish to speak with the researcher at Jersey Fisheries, a TAG member.
22. Deputy Senior Scientist Jon Haines is due to attend a stock assessment workshop at Cefas and will have opportunity to discuss whelk issues with government and IFCA scientists.
23. It would be beneficial to draw up information from all other IFCAs, Welsh government and Scottish government on their whelk management and research to inform TSB's discussion.
24. The Senior Scientist recommends that TSB approve work to produce a full report on the knowledge gained from stakeholder consultation, issues identified and proposals for a precautionary approach to management.

Three video links of whelk potting activity are provided for Members to view:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVApbjdkQjI#action=share>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYgnCOVGWAO>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYFWhciZDNo>

Mandy Knott
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18th October 2018