



**EASTERN INSHORE FISHERIES & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY**  
**NATURAL ENGLAND**  
**JOINT POSITION STATEMENT**

**Management of the Potting Fishery**  
**in the Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone**

**March 2023**

*Eastern Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority (Eastern IFCA) is responsible for managing inshore fisheries and protecting the marine environment, particularly within designated sites such as Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ). Natural England is the statutory advisor on nature conservation, tasked with providing information and advice on protected habitats and species, including their location, condition and sensitivity to pressures caused by human activities. Eastern IFCA and Natural England work collaboratively to understand and manage risks to the marine environment. This statement sets out our joint position in relation to the potting fishery in Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ.*

1. Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ was designated in 2016 to protect marine habitats including subtidal sediments, peat and clay exposures, and subtidal chalk<sup>1</sup>. Although much of the chalk is overlain by sediments, in some parts of the MCZ the chalk occurs as irregular outcrops at the surface of the sea bed, known locally as “rugged chalk”. As a rare topographical feature in a marine region that is dominated by smooth, sandy habitats, rugged chalk is associated

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<sup>1</sup> The Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone Designation Order 2016, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukmo/2016/4/contents/created>

with high biodiversity as it supports a wide range of plants and animals. Providing shelter and prey, the chalk outcrops also support a long-established crab and lobster potting fishery, producing the renowned “Cromer Crab”.

2. As an exposed and relatively soft rock, rugged chalk is sensitive to physical impacts from human activities, for example from contact with fishing gears, anchors or cable-laying equipment. The rugged chalk feature is already protected from damage from trawling via a long-standing Eastern IFCA byelaw<sup>2</sup>. Potting is not currently restricted in the MCZ, since at the time of designation, potting was believed to pose no significant risk to the site’s features.
3. However, in 2018 concerns were raised to Eastern IFCA and Natural England that the potting fishery could cause physical damage to rugged chalk in the MCZ.
4. There was very limited existing research and data around the impacts of potting activity on subtidal chalk habitats. Eastern IFCA and Natural England have therefore collaboratively examined the available evidence, undertaken new research and liaised extensively with local stakeholders to better understand the issue<sup>3, 4</sup>. This work showed that potting activity can cause damage to rugged chalk, on a small scale. Natural England and Eastern IFCA have identified that **pressures on MCZ features are not likely to have reached a point where they could be hindering the conservation objectives at the current time. However, cumulative impacts from potting fisheries over time could cause significant risk to designated features of the MCZ**<sup>3, 4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Eastern IFCA Byelaw 12 Inshore Trawling Restriction, available at <http://www.eastern-ifca.gov.uk/byelaw-12-inshore-trawling-restriction/>

<sup>3</sup> Tibbitt, F., Love, J., Wright, J., Chamberlain, J. 2020. Human Impacts on Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ: Chalk complexity and population dynamics of commercial crustaceans. Natural England Research Report number 04412., available at <https://www.eastern-ifca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/D2020-00111615-NERR-Human-Impacts-on-the-Cromer-Shoal-Chalk-Beds-MCZ.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Eastern IFCA (2022) Cromer Shoal MCZ Adaptive Risk Management Research & Development Task & Finish Group Project Summary 2021- 2022, available at <https://www.eastern-ifca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2021-2022-Research-Development-Task-Finish-Group-Project-Plan.pdf>

5. Eastern IFCA and Natural England agree that although the evidence shows the current potting fishery is not currently hindering the conservation objectives of the MCZ, some management needs to be developed to prevent significant impacts to rugged chalk building up over time. Additional research is also needed to further understand the rate and significance of damage from potting compared with erosion of the chalk through natural processes. The effectiveness of management to reduce damage to chalk will need to be monitored, and management adapted where necessary to ensure the MCZ feature is protected.
6. Natural England and Eastern IFCA agree that, based on current evidence, this process of management, research and monitoring, referred to as “Adaptive Risk Management” (ARM), should provide sufficient mitigation to prevent the MCZ’s conservation objectives being hindered. ARM is an iterative approach whereby management is implemented and refined over time through research. Eastern IFCA are creating a detailed ARM plan to show how the management being developed will reduce the risk of damage to rugged chalk features, how research will help fill evidence gaps, and how monitoring will be undertaken to allow us to measure the effectiveness of actions taken. The results of monitoring may then either confirm the effectiveness of any management, or result in changes to management measures as appropriate to ensure that rugged subtidal chalk is adequately protected within the MCZ.
7. Eastern IFCA and Natural England agree that Adaptive Risk Management is a precautionary whilst proportionate approach to managing the risks to chalk from potting activity. We recognise that an alternative approach would be to close the potting fishery in the rugged chalk area, but we wish to avoid this scenario if possible because our current understanding is that the fishery is not currently hindering the conservation objectives, the relationship between potting and the condition of the rugged chalk is still uncertain and because of the impact that closure would have on the Cromer fishery. However, we acknowledge that stricter controls or some spatial closures might be required if the research and monitoring undertaken as part of ARM identifies that the risks to the chalk feature are greater than they are currently understood to be.

8. A key element of the ARM approach is the development of a flexible, permitting byelaw for potting in the Marine Conservation Zone. This byelaw, being proposed by Eastern IFCA with support from Natural England, has been developed through extensive engagement with local fishery stakeholders. The intention is to have a flexible management mechanism for the potting fishery that ensures the fishery does not hinder the MCZ conservation objectives. It will enable permit conditions to be introduced as required to limit impacts from potting on chalk, as identified through the research and monitoring. Eastern IFCA is committed to further consultation with stakeholders regarding the introduction of permit conditions.
9. In May 2022, local fisheries stakeholders agreed a Code of Best Practice for Lost and Stored Gear<sup>5</sup>. This Code, supported by Eastern IFCA and Natural England, is designed to minimise the potential for potting gear that has been lost or is stored at sea to cause physical damage to rugged chalk. Eastern IFCA is working with fishers to monitor implementation of the Code.
10. Eastern IFCA and Natural England are continuing to undertake research to better understand the extent of rugged chalk in the MCZ, the location and intensity of potting activities, the economic importance of the rugged chalk, the social value of the potting fishery, and the incidence of damage to chalk from potting compared with natural erosion. Work planned for 2023-25 includes a bespoke assessment of natural erosion compared with damage to chalk from human activities, to be undertaken in partnership with Blue Marine Foundation and University of Essex. We welcome the support for this work that has recently been demonstrated by local fishery stakeholders.
11. Continued collaborative working between Eastern IFCA, Natural England, partner organisations, the fishing industry and wider stakeholders is key to this work. We are pleased to be developing research in partnership with academic and not-for-profit organisations, and we welcome the ongoing support provided

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<sup>5</sup> Code of Best Practice – Potting in Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone, available at <https://www.eastern-ifca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Code-of-Best-Practice-MCZ.pdf>

by Marine Conservation Society to help us engage effectively with local people interested in supporting our fisheries whilst protecting our marine environment.

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