

Wash Forum: Engagement Report

May 2023

Curlew Centre, Bridge Rd, Sutton Bridge, Spalding, PE12 9SA



Introduction

The purpose of the Wash Forum was to gather the views of Wash fishing industry on a number of important issues.

Sixteen fishermen attended representing a range of business models within The Wash. Information relating to the agenda was presented and attendees contributed to discussions in groups, facilitated by officers.

This report outlines the key information gathered from the meeting.

Cockle Mortality

Cefas presented the findings from a study investigating cockle mortality at the 51st Eastern IFCA meeting (March 2023). They identified the presence of a parasite named (*Marteilia*) which is thought likely to be responsible for the die-offs since 2008. Officers presented the key findings to attendees and sought posed several key questions for discussion.

What information should the Authority include in communications with the industry?

Officers sought the attendee's views on what key pieces of information should be included in future comms on the matter.

The most common queries related to the exact relation between cockle deaths and the parasite in the Wash, in particular challenging the notion that the parasite directly caused the die-off, rather than contributed to it alongside other factors. Concerns were raised regarding any interaction between the parasite and safety for human consumption, and whether reassurance could be provided to the media. More specific questions included the degree of genetic variation in the Wash population, and whether resistant strains of cockle may exist, queries about which beds are the most vulnerable and whether other species in the Wash (bass were named) could be acting as vectors for the parasite.

Contingency Measures

Attendees were also asked to consider how effective contingency measures implemented by the Authority had been to date.

Often the Authority implements closures to protect stocks for following years. Industry raised concerns on using closures in the context of the die-off, on the basis that any adult stock within a closure is liable to die, and any caught within a closure cannot be fished but will not contribute to sustainable stocks. Along similar lines were comments that as cockles are very difficult to overfish, it could be worth investigating the possibility of clearing beds, allowing industry to get a reasonable quantity of cockles and potentially clearing out infected cockles.

Flexibility was also a key issue for attendees, including providing fishermen with more flexibility in which and how many tides they work in a week and whether IFCA could be more flexible with their surveys, in the sense of when and how quickly they are undertaken – with suggestions that the stock survey should be undertaken earlier and later both being made – as well as how quickly cockles can be made available after survey, especially in the case of any identification of die-off.

Information collection and availability was also raised, with suggestions that there should be more monitoring during the cockle season, and that fishermen should be kept informed better throughout the process.

Other suggestions included a study on the impact of dredging compared to hand-working, requests to look into how the Welsh government handled a similar parasite, and what further biosecurity measures could be put into place.

TAC Calculations

The Total Allowable Catch (TAC) is calculated as 1/3 of adult stock in accordance with the cockle fishery management plan¹. However, as a result of the die-off, the adult portion of the stock is less relied on compared to when the TAC was first developed and implemented. As such, officers presented an alternative TAC calculation which takes into account the whole stock, with a sixth being allocated to the TAC.

The discussions ranged from whether they had time to properly consider the proposal, to whether a TAC was actually needed at all. On suggestions that enough safeguards exist to potentially remove the TAC as a control, responses ranged from positive, to a concern that removing the TAC would be used to blame industry for any future problems with the fishery, as any issues would be attributed to industry overfishing, and that it would be easy to ruin the following year's fishery. Other concerns included the risk that a larger TAC would encourage people to take smaller cockles to try and use up the TAC.

There was a degree of hesitation as the attendees were not all certain about the full impact of the change, and of setting a precedent in the event that it had negative impacts, so a trial of the new TAC was suggested. Other comments included the desire for any survey to factor in the growth of cockles between the survey and the opening of the fishery and that flexible open dates may be more beneficial than increased TAC.

Ultimately it was agreed that no permanent changes should be made as of yet, but that the new TAC could be trialled to allow more cockles to be taken.

Potential Small Cockle Measures

The cockle fishery has relied to a greater extent on smaller juvenile cockles since 2009. Whilst the fishery can sustain the removal of such to an extent, there is more

¹ https://www.eastern-ifca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2019_07_WFO_cockle_fishery_management_plan1.5_Final.pdf

likely to be an impact on future fisheries where too many cockles are taken at too small a size.

Attendees were presented with information showing how the removal of smaller cockles has and could impact the fishery and the groups were asked to consider potential measures for reducing the likelihood of impacts.

The groups were presented with a number of potential measures for managing the cockle fishery and asked to rank them according to how effective they believe those measures would be. The table below shows the outcome, with 1 being the most effective and 6 the least. This shows that the use of rakes and nets was considered the most effective option, followed by special closures. These two measures were then discussed in more detail.

Measure	Overall rank
Rake & Net	1
Spatial Closures	2
Catch Composition	3
Riddling	4
MLS	5

Rakes and Net:

The intention of this measure was to necessitate some sorting of cockles before they were removed from the fishery.

While this was the most highly ranked individual measure, there were some reservations about its effectiveness as a measure on its own, as it is easy to circumvent by using the rake in a certain way. The potential damage to cockles from the rake was raised, and so attendees suggested the measure should only apply in beds with mixed sizes of cockles, with a similar suggestion that shovels should only be permitted where there is no spat. Others highlighted that in order for the use of nets to be effective, they must be used according to best practice, and it may be beneficial to consider a minimum mesh size to ensure that smaller cockles can be rejected. Finally, concern was also raised on the survivability of cockles left after sorting.

Spatial Closures:

While spatial closures were supported as a method, there was a clear desire for a greater degree of industry involvement in how and why closures are decided. An industry liaison was suggested, to give input into closures, as was the idea that officers and fishermen should walk the sands together when investigating potential closed areas.

Composition elements were also suggested; that closures could come into force when the composition of the bed reaches a certain distribution of large to small cockles, and that cockle size during surveys should be considered in light of their expected growth prior to opening.

The nature of the closures was also heavily discussed, and again the desire for flexibility was raised, with the suggestion that closures could be made with the potential to open later, for example in the case of high demand, allowing areas to be kept closed and allow growth when low demand enables it. Linked to this was the desire for closures to be practical; that any closure should result in measurable benefit.

Mussel Mortality

Officers presented the outcomes from a Cefas study investigating mussel mortality in The Wash. Whilst the study could not conclusively determine the reason for mussel mortality, it did identify that a parasite, called *Haplosporidian* was likely to be responsible for reduced spawning success in mussels and that relocation to lower beds (i.e. those covered by water for longer periods) could increase the likelihood of spawning.

Attendees were asked for ideas on how to manage around the parasite with a view to identify areas for further consideration.

Attendees were keen to highlight the obstacles to the mussel fishery, from the windfarms to the limited internal market to trade implications of EU Exit to lack of seed, as well as the limited space available to create new lays. There were suggestions on how best to try removing the barriers to mussel fishing, including dredging and clearing of beds, the movement of seed to lower ground (and suggestions experiments could be done comparing cleared areas to untouched areas in their suitability for mussel), and potential facilitation of the mussel fishery by Eastern IFCA aiding in the detection of mussel seed.

Further considerations

The meeting generated a lot of discussion on topics outside of the agenda and these have been logged for further consideration and feedback in due course.

Conclusions

The event provided insight into the key concerns of the Wash fishing industry and their views on how to solve some of the key issues facing the fisheries. This information has been used to inform the management proposals for this years' cockle fishery and will be the basis for further discussions.

We would like to thank all those who attended and contributed to the discussions.