Stakeholder Group Meeting 9 Summary

Date: 20 February 2025

Location: Northrepps Village Hall

Attendees Summary:

A total of 28 stakeholders attended the meeting, with interests from the Wildlife Trusts, Natural England, The Wash and North Norfolk Coast Marine Partnership, other volunteer conservation organisations, local community members and fishermen.

1. Welcome

The CEO and chair of the meeting welcomed members to the meeting. Members were also reminded of the meeting etiquette.

2. Adaptive Risk Management plan progress and risk assessment

An update on progress against the ARM plan was provided by Samantha Hormbrey, Senior Marine Science Officer (Projects and Policy):

- The majority of management related workstreams are on track or not yet scheduled.
- Research workstreams are largely delayed with the exception of mapping sensitive chalk features, a key milestone which was reached at the end of 2024.
- Two milestones for 2024 were not achieved: determining baseline fishing activity and determining the economic value of the rugged chalk. Delays in achieving this milestones have resulted from a lack of available data to inform baseline fishing activity and limited resource to conduct the chalk value study. The chalk value study has the aim of informing us of the impact of potential management, rather than informing us of the impact of potting on the MCZ, and so is of lower priority, however, it is intended this study will be picked back up in 2025.
- A detailed summary of progress against the ARM plan is provided in the latest quarterly newsletter.

An ARM risk assessment was presented identifying two high risks to the project; non-compliance with voluntary management measures and not being able to deliver practical components of research projects. These high risks require action to reduce the risk to the project and potential mitigation was presented to the group. Mitigation included the development of voluntary measures as regulatory ones and identification of alternative suppliers to conduct research work.

No discussion points

3. Research Task and Finish Group update

An update on research projects was given by Ron Jessop, Senior Marine Science Officer (Research) on the following projects:

i) **The Natural Disturbance Study** is ongoing. Multibeam and ROV surveys were completed in 2024, and subsequent data analysis is ongoing. Spring multibeam surveys are planned for March 2025. The monitoring of voluntary closed areas is ongoing and the deployment of marker buoys to de-mark each corner of the closed areas is planned for early March 2025.

No discussion points

ii) **Adaptive Gear Trials:** The adaptive gear trials are intended to test specific gear adaptations to determine whether they reduce gear/feature impacts. Impacts will be monitored using accelerometers, underwater cameras and an ROV. In 2024 sea trials were completed to test the gear and the effectiveness of the monitoring equipment and lessons were learnt about camera positions and type of accelerometer required. Similarly, following discussion with stakeholders, weight of pots, rope width and the drag this creates are also factors to be considered.

Key Discussion points:

Pot identifiers: In a picture shown to the group, laminated card was fastened to the side of the pots so that pots could be labelled. Some stakeholders felt these would significantly affect the way the pot behaves in the water by increasing drag and that this could potentially affect results. Other methods such as coloured twine or cable ties were suggested as an alternative. It was highlighted by officers that pots require some form of ID which can easily observed when surveying the ROV.

Rope thickness: It was raised that rope thickness should be similar to ropes used by fishermen as this can significantly change the lift of the pot. Some explained they used 8 to 10mm rope whilst Eastern IFCA have used 12mm.

Weight of pots: The adapted pots weigh approximately 20kg out of the water, some felt that this was too heavy as heavier pots with smaller mass will create more damage and a 'draggy' pot, however, others thought that weighty pots are more stable and also fish better than light pots which tend to move about more, creating more damage.

Rubber Armoring: Some were concerned around the potential for the rubber armoring to break down, pollute the sea and acting as a source of microplastics. Natural England advised that this is something they are looking into.

iii) **Measuring fishing activity**. Monitoring of fishing activities is ongoing. With a decline in uptake and use of voluntary vessel trackers (in lieu of the national implementation of I-VMS requirements) progress has been delayed and has been compounded by limitations of available national (MMO) data sets (including their limited spatial resolution).

No discussion points

a. Social Value Study

Guest speaker Dr Sarah Coulthard, a social scientist from Newcastle University, delivered a presentation on recent research, including a study which used Seafish data to quantify the decline of the small scale fishing fleet in the UK and initial findings from a public value study (funded by Natural England) which uses Cromer as a case study. More information about her work can be found here.

Key Discussion points:

There was some discussion surrounding the Seafish data used to assess the declines in the fleet and to the extent to which effort is considered. Some felt that consideration of vessel capacity and effort levels across the over 10m and under 10m fleet would be useful to see, alongside the data presented.

b. Rugged Chalk review

A presentation was delivered by Emily Parsons, Marine Science Officer, on the recent rugged chalk review. The presentation included a summary of the data used to inform the review and its associated confidence, the rational for defining Type 1 and 2 rugged chalk areas and provided examples of each.

Key Discussion points:

Dynamic seabed: Stakeholders raised concerns over the dynamic nature of the seabed, stating that it should be reflected in the rugged chalk extent and that the data used would only provide a 'snapshot' in time. They went on to explain that movement of the sand and rock would create an entirely different scene every time you were to look, thus, areas should not be eliminated as whilst chalk may exist in that area it may not have been captured at that moment in time.

The group was asked whether they considered the current extent to be accurate based on their knowledge. Whilst some felt that the study was not robust enough to draw conclusions there was a consensus that broadly speaking the area is appropriate. Some stakeholders indicated that the space between area 1 and 2 is chalk but is covered in flint so would not be identified by a snapshot with a camera and that the outer areas are generally covered in sand and are exposed to more movement from weather thus may be less identifiable. It was highlighted that Area 3 on the map was historically called the sands and is now mapped as chalk, which highlights the dynamic nature of the seabed. Some also thought that separating type 1 and 2 is not useful when protecting the
chalk.

4. Management Task and Finish Group update

Luke Godwin, Assistant Chief Officer, provided an update on workstreams including Lost gear, Pot tags, trackers. A summary of the update is provided below.

- The Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Byelaw (CSCB Byelaw) is at formal quality assurance with the Marine Management Organisation which is anticipated as being complete in April before submission to Defra for confirmation.
- The code of best remains in effect and is being monitored. Lost gear reporting has been limited and there are plans to engage with industry on reporting as it would be a requirement under the CSCB Byelaw.
- Approximately 300 pots were removed from the sea by Eastern IFCA as part of joint work with an industry member who was unable to put to sea.
- Compliance with the voluntary requirement to use vessel trackers was low and this has impact on delivering ARM.
- There were incursions into the areas closed for the purpose of the Natural Disturbance Study last year. Further non-compliance with these closures posed a high risk to the project.

Key Discussion points:

Pot tags – Following an update on the pot tagging initiative, a query was raised whether fishers could be identified from the tags on their gear. Officers explained that fishers would not be identifiable from the tags, but each tag has a particular code on it which relates to each fisher/ vessel so they would be known to Eastern IFCA.

a. Phase 1 permit conditions outcome

An update was given by Luke Godwin, Assistant Chief Officer on the outcome of the phase 1 permit conditions consultation which consulted on two measures:

i. An inshore potting vessel restriction

ii. A winter closure over the 'rugged chalk'

Following consultation, the Authority agreed on an inshore potting vessel restriction (which prohibits fishing using pots out to 3nm within the East / West boundaries of the MCZ except using vessels which were launched from the beach) and a winter closure during January and February across areas of 'Type 1 rugged chalk', within the boundaries of the MCZ. The winter closure does not apply within the 200m strip between the southern boundary of the MCZ and coastline.

Key Discussion points:

Winter diversification: Industry were asked if any diversification opportunity exist to potentially offset the income lost during winter closure. In response it was stated that that this measure coincides with a natural 'lull' in fishing activity. There is potential for netting and long lining however associated fisheries are not productive during winter and many crab / lobster fishermen are not authorized to fish for bass.

Fishery sustainability: Some expressed that the area needs to be protected from damage and is considered by many as a 'garden' in which they must protect to make a living and that this should be recognised when developing

management measures. However, some disagreed, expressing the existence of the crab fishery is not a measure of the chalk's success .

Crab Movement: Some felt that there may be potential for the fishery to be moved off the rugged chalk because in their opinion crabs will feed on a wide variety of food sources and will often move towards this area. It was hypothesized that if pots were baited further offshore, crabs would likely move towards this area. However, some disagreed explaining that fishermen target areas where species are known to be. The rugged chalk areas of the MCZ are historical fishing grounds and crabs from this area are considered sweeter and cleaner, which makes them more valuable.

b. Phase 2 permit conditions and interim measures

The phase 2 permit condition discussions were initially planned for this meeting, but it has been postponed for three months in favor of conducting a consultation on two interim measures using existing byelaws to address the incursions in the voluntary closed areas and to gather important fishery data. The delay is also proposed to allow for a review of the MCZ risk assessment, taking into account new data and evidence, which will help inform the development of phase 2 permit conditions.

The Interim measures proposed are:

i. Using Byelaw 8 (temporary closure of shellfish fisheries) to mandate closures required for the Natural Disturbance Study.
ii. Using Byelaw 11 (Development of shellfish fisheries) to require anyone undertaking commercial potting for crab and lobster within the MCZ to provide Eastern IFCA with positional data at a high frequency (at least once in every three minutes) and that Eastern IFCA would provide trackers free to fishermen to enable compliance with this.

Key Discussion points

- Some were of the view that the delay to Phase 2 permit conditions would increase the risk to the rugged chalk. It was explained that a 3-month delay was unlikely to cause a significant increase in risk.
- It was also expressed that the 'interim measures' do not reduce risk to the chalk. It was explained that the interim measures were required to address project risks (i.e. non-compliance with voluntary measures).
- Fishery stakeholders identified that there were a number of pressures detrimentally impacting their ability to fish, including climate change and wind farms. It was acknowledged that the fishing industry would be impacted by mandating the closures and having to provide positional data. However, it was also acknowledged that fishing activity information and robust outputs from the Natural Disturbance Study were crucial to the delivery of ARM and the continuation of the fishery within the MCZ.

5. Gear recovery protocol

Rob Spray, Local diver and chair of MCNAG, gave a presentation on a proposed fishing gear recovery protocol. The presentation included how to identify crab and lobster pots which are lost and the proposed protocol for divers to recover this gear and a proposal to mark lost fishing gear with floats to enable fishermen to haul such gear and remove it from the rugged chalk.

Key Discussion points:

- There was general agreement that the recovery of lost gear is a shared interest and a willingness from fishing industry to be involved.
- Eastern IFCA can facilitate communication between fishermen and divers.

6. Upcoming priorities and focus

A slide detailing the upcoming priorities over the next five months was shared with the group and is provided below.

