

Minutes of the meeting on skates and rays with the North Devon Fishermen's Association

MFA Port Office, Plymouth - Wednesday 4 June 2008

Attendees:

John Butterwith	North Devon Fishermen's Association (NDFFA)
Tony Rutherford	Managing Director, Bideford Fisheries Ltd
Dick Talbot	Director, Bideford Trawlermen's Co-operative Ltd
Ali Hood	The Shark Trust
Keith Bower	Chief Fisheries Officer, Devon SFC
Julian Roberts	Marine & Fisheries Agency (MFA)
Lindsay Harris	Sea Fisheries Conservation (SFCD, Defra)
Morwenna Carrington	SFCD, Defra

Introductions and welcome

1. John welcomed Lindsay, Morwenna, Ali and Keith to the meeting and thanked Julian for hosting the discussions. He also thanked Carl O'Brien and Jim Ellis of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), on behalf of Lindsay, for their work in the preparation of the discussion documents.

Profile of fishery in Bristol Channel & background to voluntary closure

2. Ray accounts for 50% of vessel landings and is essential for the survival of the fishery. According to Seafish, the ray fishery is 79% sustainable, although this may not include an accurate assessment of the population of blonde rays. The depth of the water is fairly shallow (approximately 50', deepening to 220'). The water in the Bristol Channel is slightly warmer, due to being open to the Atlantic at only one end, which has a positive effect on the fish stocks and abundance of rays.
3. In order to maintain a sustainable ray stock, the Bideford Trawlermen's Co-operative put into place a voluntary agreement four years ago, restricting fishing in an area of sea (within ICES rectangle 31E5), that encompasses Lundy Island and the waters to the north, and extends to mid-Channel, for six months of the year (1 December – 31 May inclusive). The reason for the self-imposed closure was that the area supported a large number of juvenile rays, with low market value.
4. There is an important squid fishery to the South / South-East of the closed area from June onwards, and a bass fishery during the open season, which includes ray. During the Dec – May closed season, no squid, bass or ray are found in the box, although there are numerous small rays and dogfish, suggesting that the area is an important one for juvenile rays and that closing the area should protect the young ray that are there. Spawning rays are caught in the area during the open season. There is also a whelk fishery in the area but this is not subject to the closure.

Skate & ray quotas

5. The NDFFA are keen to demonstrate that they have a sustainable fishery and that their members fish responsibly. Three-quarters of their vessels are currently going through Seafish's Environmentally Responsible Fishing Scheme. The NDFFA indicated that they hoped that by voluntarily closing the box to safeguard the fishery, the need for a quota

on skates and rays could be avoided. If a quota on rays was introduced in the Bristol Channel, it would devastate the fishery as there is little alternative to ray, when ray is in short supply. They wanted to know whether using regional closed areas could influence the European Commission not to introduce TACs for skate & ray stock management. Lindsay responded that it was quite likely the Commission would propose a skate & ray quota for Areas VI and VII, although probably not until next year.

6. The NDFA would prefer a days-at-sea effort limit, as an alternative to quotas, and believe this would be better for stock management. Quotas only work for species with high survivability, although the larger skate species, which are also the most vulnerable, are quite robust and have high survivability.

Species recording

7. It was agreed that there is little sense in a generic TAC for the range of skate & ray species, but that effective species-specific recording of landings would be needed before the introduction of individual TACs. Recordings by species at the point of sale are sent to Seafish. It was suggested that it would be in the fishermen's interest to sort the species in order to be able to provide species-specific data, so that any proposed TACs could be accurate for the different species. Furthermore, the different species of skate & ray should be marketed by species. It was pointed out that the Skate & Ray Group includes representatives from the major retailers.

Minimum Landing Size

8. Together with the closed area, the NDFA and Bideford Fisheries introduced a Minimum Landing Size (MLS) for ray on 1 May 2008, which equates to 37-38cm across the wingtips; a move welcomed by the Shark Trust and the Skate & Ray Producers' Association. These measures have not been endorsed by Welsh fishermen, who are covered by a Welsh SFC bye-law that prohibits the carriage and landing of ray with an MLS of 45cm. Kent & Essex have an MLS of 43cm but their fishery comprises mainly thornback rays. The NDFA would like to see adoption of the MLS by Defra as a national measure but there was recognition that any MLS regulation would need to be regionalised and might therefore be better left to the Sea Fisheries Committees.

NDFA proposal

9. It is the view of the NDFA that the biggest threat to the fishery's sustainability comes from Belgian beam trawlers, who use two multiple otter trawls from their beams in the 6-12nm zone, landing up to 600 boxes a time, 50% of which is ray. It was suggested that although no tangible benefits have been seen from the voluntary closure, this could be due to the Belgium trawlers, one of which can land more than 12 in-shore vessels. It only takes 1-2 trawlers to have an enormous impact. Furthermore, the rays congregate together and will leave an area if there is too much activity from boats. The NDFA wanted to explore the potential to extend voluntary measures beyond membership of the NDFA.
10. The NDFA requested that Defra to look into adopting the current voluntary closure as a nationally restricted area, and seek the extension of the closure to cover trawlers with historic access rights from other Member States in the 6-12nm zone, as they were concerned that any benefits from the scheme were being undone by the continued presence of foreign beam trawlers towing otter trawls. The NDFA believed that if the

Belgium trawlers are fishing in the 6-12nm zone, then they should be subject to UK law, and that the current penalties for fishing in the 0–6nm zone were insufficient.

11. The NDFA said that any decision on the closure would need to be taken in the context of other restrictions on fishing in the area, such as the proposal for a 350km² wind-farm in mid-Channel (the Atlantic Array) and a further 118km² dredging application, in addition to the seasonal closure (February – March) of the Trevoise box.

Discussion of vessel data

12. The VMS (for vessels >15m) and over-flight data (for all vessels) were assessed in order to ascertain which vessels would be most affected by the closure. The Jan-June 2008 data suggested that although UK, Belgian and French vessels were active in the area, the UK vessels would be most affected.

Scientific rationale for closed area

13. Lindsay responded to the NDFA's proposal by setting out Government's approach to closed areas for fisheries management. He highlighted the recent paper discussed at the workshop of the Marine Fisheries Stakeholder Forum (MFSF) on 7-8 April 2008 and mentioned that closed areas do not always have a positive impact on fish stocks due to displacement of effort. He explained that in order for the Commission to approve any restrictions of fishing, they would need to be convinced of the conservation benefits to the species of ray in the Bristol Channel. The current information available to CEFAS was limited as their data is based on the ICES rectangles, of which the proposed closed area is only a part.
14. It was suggested that the period of closure should cover the period of hatching and spawning. The Shark Trust have data from divers around Lundy, which includes egg-case data (that would indicate the presence of spawning grounds) that they would be happy to make available.
15. Defra agreed to ask CEFAS to carry out some survey work in the area in order to demonstrate the benefits of the proposed closure on the stocks of ray. Lindsay mentioned that the Fisheries Science Partnership (FSP) budget was fully committed for this year, but that there might be some flexibility in the survey work being done, resulting in some survey capacity available this year.