

NOTES of a Technical Panel meeting of the **KENT AND ESSEX INSHORE FISHERIES AND CONSERVATION AUTHORITY** held in the Council Chamber, Gravesham Borough Council, Civic Centre, Windmill Street, Gravesend, Kent on 6 March 2015 at 10am

Present: Cllr J Lamb (Southend BC), Mr W Baker (MMO), Mr L Roskilly (MMO), Cllr M Harrison (KCC), Mr J Nichols (MMO), Mr A Rattley (MMO), Mr B Smart (MMO), Mr S Abbotson (MMO), Mr P Wexham (MMO), D L Fonseca (MMO)

In Attendance: Mr P Wickenden (Clerk), Dr W Wright (CIFCO), Mr D Bailey (ACIFCO), Mrs D O'Shea (Office Manager), Mrs K Woods (Administration Assistant)

Also Present: Mr S Hales (ROFF), Mr N Boyce (Bradwell fisherman), Mr R Mole (W Mersea fisherman), Mr J French (W Mersea fisherman), Mr I Digby (Canvey fisherman), Mr A Mazirel (Hole Haven fisherman), Mr C Attenborough (Whitstable fisherman), Mr V Alderton (Essex fisherman)

The meeting opened at 10.00am

At the quarterly meeting held on 22 January 2015, Members met and considered the issue of management measures to control the over exploitation of Bass stocks. It was resolved that a Technical Panel be convened to discuss this matter in more detail and to make recommendations concerning the implementation and time line for delivery of the options provided.

Declaration of Interests:

Mr John Nichols declared a personal interest as Chair of Thanet Fishermen's Association.

Mr Simon Abbotson declared a personal interest in respect of ROFF's bass conservation area in the River Medway.

Mr William Baker declared a personal interest as a member of West Mersea's Fisherman's Association

Dr Leila Fonseca declared a personal interest as an employee of Defra

Correspondence was laid around the table:

- Email from Mr Peter Holborn (forwarded to Members on 2 March)
- Proposed joint letter from Kent & Essex IFCA and Eastern IFCA
- Letter from A & J French
- Letter from Stewart Ward
- Notes from Dr Fonseca
- Email from Mr Mark Sessions
- Notes from Mr Chris Attenborough

The Chairman gave Members time to read through these additional papers.

Key Points considered by the meeting

The Panel were provided with a presentation by the Chief Fishery Officer on the current situation with regard to Bass from European and national advice. They were advised that scientists had suggested that the number of mature male and female fish were decreasing and that in a few years' time it would become rare to see Bass. ICES advice was that some fishing effort was required to be taken away.

The Panel were advised that the French caught 50-60% of Bass so they should be aware that any management measures would need to be considered with regard to those measures the French would be proposing. Of the catch landed nationally then 2-3% were landed within the Kent and Essex district.

Research carried out two to three years ago showed that, across all countries, nationally, recreational anglers took 25% of the Bass stock and it would be necessary to take into account their impact. The Chief Officer advised the Panel that different countries reported recreational fishing in different ways. It would be for the Government to define what was recreational.

The EU had brought in a set of management measures using emergency legislation. Pair trawling in the Western Approaches, where Bass spawn, had been closed until 30 April 2015 and an EU press release had suggested that a three bag limit per angler per day for recreational fishing would be introduced. An increase in minimum landing size from 36cm to 42cm (the age at which most females breed) was also suggested. Defra had been spoken to but no clear statement or progress had been made, although it was likely these measures would go ahead and could happen quite quickly.

As a local regulator the action the IFCA could take would centre on nursery areas and information regarding spawning areas.

The Panel discussed the draft Policy Statement. Members made the following pertinent comments:

- Introduction of management measures would have the potential to dramatically impact on the livelihood of commercial and recreational fishermen.
- Enforcement of any management measures, especially unreported or illegal fishing, was an area that needed to be focussed on and should be integral to any management plan.
- Examples of partner organisations should include local fishermen associations and local stakeholders
- Data collection of currently unreported catches should be taken into account in the management plan.
- In 2004 ICES said that Bass was being fished sustainably but effort should not increase. Effort did increase and as a result this issue should be urgently addressed. The issue of over exploitation should be addressed before the issue of nursery and spawning areas were looked into.
- Within the Medway ROFF area no engine fishing was allowed. However over the last 10 years there had been a proliferation of fast boats coming in and fishing for restaurants and families. It was felt that a 3 bag limit would be

acceptable to the recreational angler. In the River Medway over the last 35 years there had been an explosion in juvenile bass.

Mr Chris Attenborough (a local fisherman) addressed the Panel. He advised the Panel that he operated an under 10m vessel with which he targeted sole, skate and bass. Bass between 36 and 42cm made up at least 50% of his earnings. In his opinion there was no evidence that bass returned to a particular area and there were no large bass in the Thames estuary. In the late 1980s he experimented with different mesh sizes and could not catch commercially with any net greater than 90mm. He stated that bass were full of roe from 36cm onwards and that this size was seen as an ideal plate size. He stated that seals were a problem and that they followed trawlers, feeding on the catch in their nets. Any additional restrictions placed on the catching of bass would mean that he would need to let some crew go, go further out to sea and put more pressure on non-choke species. He had invested a lot of money in 90mm gear; any increase in MLS would make them obsolete and they would require compensation. He felt the stock was as healthy as they had ever seen it in the Estuary. The only feasible measures that could be put in place would be the introduction of quota or nursery areas. He did not agree with an increase in minimum landing size or track records.

Mr Viv Alderton (a local fisherman) addressed the Panel. He advised them that he agreed with the points made by Mr Attenborough. With regard to seal predation he believed that legislation was in existence that allowed them to be shot. In his opinion an additional predator was cormorants. He pointed out that there had been a reduction in inshore boats over a period of time with only 1 in 5 or 7 inshore boats now left and that he considered predation was an issue in this.

The Chairman thanked both speakers for their comments and advised that the issue of predation was one that had been discussed at a national level.

The Panel were advised that officers had looked into grant funding and support to raise the profile of bass spawning areas. Eastern IFCA (EIFCA) had agreed to work with KEIFCA with this and these issues had also been raised with Defra at a recent meeting with them. KEIFCA and EIFCA had written a joint letter which was aimed at local organisations and Defra.

Mr Abbotson, on behalf of ROFF, offered their assistance in obtaining and providing data from the River Medway area. Members were advised that the EA had approached the IFCA to advise them that they were looking to sample in May 2015.

Funding could be obtained from the following bodies:

- Innovation & Environment Regions of Europe Sharing Solutions (INTERREG) – financed through the European Regional Development Fund
- European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) – successor to the European Fisheries Fund due to be launched in early 2015
- ICES Science Fund

Dr Fonseca discussed with the Panel the notes that she had provided for them in relation to the work already being carried out by C-Bass which she felt was relevant to the District. These consisted of:

- Stakeholder engagement
- Assessment of current management measures and identification of key data groups
- Population dynamics
- Modelling conservation strategies
- Application of the findings to other species

She suggested that this information should be taken and added to by local people. She suggested that the focus should be on the 36cm to 42cm age group as not a lot of information was known on them.

Dr Fonseca also provided the Panel with details of other funding options that they could consider.

The CIFCO advised that any information gathered would be added to the model that Dr Fonseca was producing with C-Bass.

The Chairman reminded the Panel that the IFCA had a finite resource and that there were other work plans that needed to be carried out.

In response to a Member's question as to the length of time these measures would take, the CIFCO advised that it all depended on who was introducing the legislation. If it was at an EU level then it would happen quicker than if at a national level. The French wanted measures brought in within the next few months.

Members made the following comments:

- The industry was now prepared to work with the IFCA to find a resolution. They were aware that bass would become a precious stock species and wanted to work with the IFCA to carry forward to the AIFCA and Europe to establish something far reaching that could be managed. However any restrictions must be phased in and not brought in overnight.
- The IFCA should be aware that the EU commission could unilaterally put in measures. It was expected that measures would be introduced in April which could increase the MLS and catch limits.
- Consideration should be given to working with Steve Colclough (Institute of Fisheries Management) to establish nursery areas

The Panel were provided with a presentation in respect of Bass nursery areas. They were advised juvenile fish of up to 3 years of age came into the estuaries and near shore environments. Once they reach 3 years the adults then undertook seasonal migrations to offshore spawning sites. After spawning bass then tended to return to the same coastal areas. It is now understood that KEIFCA do have breeding populations within its District which were becoming more established, making them easy to over exploit. For this reason it was important to start to further protect these nursery areas as it would provide protection to the larger fish as well.

Nursery areas protected fish below minimum size and also those that were larger and more mature, as bass tended to come back to the same place. This localness needed to be understood in the management of the stock. The Panel were also advised that it would be prudent to also consider protecting other species that relied on the same habitats as Bass when developing management measures. Protecting the estuarine environment was key to this as it was a very productive area. These quite small shallow areas provided the fish that fishermen would catch in the future. These were the areas which were disappearing around the coast due to development. It was important to try & take measures to raise the profile of these areas as they would be providing the District with fish in 5 to 7 years' time

At present the distribution of nursery areas did not adequately protect the stock in the district and a reassessment of these areas needed to take place. This reassessment could be undertaken by KEIFCA but due to the amount of work involved it was important that other organisations and local communities were included in this work.

It was recommended that this review be undertaken in two sections:

- Development of an evidence base
- Discussion with local communities at potential bass nursery area sites as follows:
 - ❖ Essex Stour
 - ❖ Hamford Water
 - ❖ The Colne
 - ❖ Tollesbury and Mersea creeks
 - ❖ The Blackwater
 - ❖ Bradwell
 - ❖ The Crouch
 - ❖ The Roach
 - ❖ Canvey Island
 - ❖ Isle of Grain
 - ❖ Kingsnorth
 - ❖ The Medway
 - ❖ The Swale
 - ❖ Kentish Stour
 - ❖ Hythe Bay
 - ❖ Dungeness

This consultation would take place over a number of months to ask for comment and feedback on possible management options, using a questionnaire and by holding meetings. Following this consultation a Technical Panel could be held to review the evidence gathered and prioritise two to three sites to go forward for more detailed development of management and legislation. Some could go forward quite quickly and it should be possible to develop byelaw wording for these to be brought before the Authority for approval

The Panel were advised that it was intended to develop a 5 page document that was easy to read, explaining why that area had been suggested, the process

involved and information on the advantage of it becoming a nursery area, information on that specific estuary or bay and why it was important.

Possible management measures would be provided within these consultations which interested parties would be asked to comment on their appropriateness. These would include:

- Technical measures
 - ❖ Voluntary increase in minimum size of fish
 - ❖ Legislative increase in minimum size of fish
 - ❖ Voluntary increase in mesh size in specific areas
 - ❖ Legislative increase in mesh size in specific areas
 - ❖ Technical restrictions on the length of gear and type
 - ❖ Capture/release bass fishery
- Spatial and temporal measures
 - ❖ No fishing areas
 - ❖ Closed seasons
 - ❖ Closed areas
 - ❖ No fishing for bass
 - ❖ Permit to fish in area
- Effort control measures
 - ❖ Voluntary bag limit
 - ❖ Legislative bag limit

The questionnaire could be held on the website or handed out by attending and holding meetings where the IFCA would present to local people.

The panel were asked to consider this process and recommend how they wished to proceed with:

- The scope, structure and timing of the consultation
- The content, structure and scope of the evidence pack
- The management measures that should be included in the consultation
- The structure and content of the accompanying questionnaire
- The process for reviewing the evidence from the consultation and making recommendations to the Authority

12:00 Mr Nichols left the meeting

Members made the following comments:

- The IFCA should also look at habitat, to define what makes each particular area a good area for bass, rather than how many bass were using it at the moment. Protection and perhaps enhancement of habitat should be put in place. The re-creation of salt marsh should be investigated, together with looking at the underlying food sources, to look at what measures were in place to protect these sources.
- Saltmarsh has been shown to be a feeding ground for small bass, either for safety or food. Steve Colclough had been investigating this and it would be useful to tie in with his research.

- Local data should be included in the evidence base as much as possible. The EA and Dr Fonseca had carried out surveys of the Blackwater Estuary from 2006-2007 on the size of bass using the estuary on the value of saltmarshes.
- At low tide the saltmarshes were dry, the juvenile bass were then in the Estuaries. The deeper waters also required protection.
- Possible management measures could include log books and selectivity devices.
- The questionnaire was quite quantitative, consider wording it as "in your opinion"

Recommendations

The Panel made the following recommendations:

1. The following draft policy statement be approved by the Authority
 - ICES advice shows that Bass stocks are being over exploited and management actions need to be developed and quickly.
 - KEIFCA strongly supports the development of an EU bass management plan and the need for bass management measures to be introduced as fairly as possible over the range of the stock
 - KEIFCA wants to work closely with partner organisations (defra, IFCAs, EA, CEFAS, local fishermen, local stakeholders and the MMO) as well as the all the different local sectors fishing for bass in the district.
 - Management measures need to be apportioned as fairly as possible between the different sectors that fish for bass.
 - Legislation developing nursery areas and spawning areas are best developed and managed by regional fisheries managers.
 - KEIFCA will prioritise developing nursery areas and building and developing an evidence base for bass spawning areas.
 - Potential management measures such as; an increase in minimum size, an increase in mesh sizes and catch limits for commercial and recreational fishermen, would be best introduced on as large a spatial scale as possible. KEIFCA will review the progress of national and international management measures at the November Authority meeting and reassess the need for regional management measures at his point.
2. The joint letter from KEIFCA and EIFCA be approved
3. The report in respect of Bass spawning areas be agreed
4. The consultation/review process be undertaken by developing an evidence base including local data as much as possible and consulting with stakeholders in the areas suggested
5. The questionnaire should be reviewed to limit the number of quantitative questions.

6. Once the consultation/review process had taken place, the results should then be reviewed by a Technical Panel with recommendations passed to the full IFCA

12:45 meeting closed