

Appendix A to Agenda item B11

Notes from KEIFCA meeting to discuss the development of a Code of Practice that would relate to the harvesting of oysters on Southend Foreshore.

The meeting took place at The Tickfield Centre, Southend-on-Sea, at 2pm on Tuesday 23 April.

Background

The meeting started with introductions from the group and a brief recap on the recent history of the exploitation of shellfish on Southend foreshore and the issues surrounding its exploitation. Individual sectors that use or have responsibility for the site then reflected on their duties and their concerns.

Natural England reflected on the fact that pacific oysters are regarded as an invasive species and that Natural England's preferred policy for managing this species is to promote its total removal. However, as was discussed by the group pacific oysters have established themselves as a viable population on the site and it is very unlikely that the population could be removed or fished out even if money was made available to try.

The stakeholders involved in oyster harvesting on Southend foreshore

The group identified that a range of different groups of people used the foreshore and exploited the shellfish on the site in a number of different ways (commercial fishermen using boats, bait diggers, anglers', hand gatherers as well as members of the public using the beach for recreation). Each method of exploitation/ interaction had advantages and disadvantages depending on different people's objectives of the site (i.e whether the site should be managed to maximise biodiversity and habitat or whether the site should be managed to maximise the commercial exploitation of pacific oysters, mussels or bait (in the form of worms and crabs).

Commercial fishermen

The group reflected on the fact that the commercial fishermen using vessels to fish the site were generally local and used a towed round bar dredge to harvest the oysters. The oysters were then graded by the fishermen with only the smaller oysters (around 10% of the catch being kept for sale). As the oysters were being collected by registered businesses, London Port Health generally felt that there were less health risks as the commercial fishermen generally followed statutory legislation and that if the legislation was not followed there was a recognised organisation to work with.

The meeting reflected upon the impact of dredging on the oyster habitat views were expressed that this activity resulted in the flattening of the oyster beds (a perceived reduction of the biodiversity of the beds) and that the oyster dredging left tramline marks that remained on the ground well after dredging had finished. The commercial fishermen felt that the impact of their gear was minimal compared to natural sediment movements and did not recognise that the gear was having a long term impact compared to other activities.

The commercial fishermen also reflected on the fact that exploiting this stock helped the local economy and created jobs. The commercial fishermen generally saw no requirement to regulate the commercial vessel based fishing in any way.

Oyster hand gathers

The hand gathers working the oyster beds generally worked by groups of people walking out to the beds at low tide from the foreshore and walking through the bed selecting the oysters that met their requirements. When discussing hand gathers it emerged relatively quickly that there were two main groups of hand gathers; the first were generally regarded as commercial hand gatherers that generally supplied markets for direct human consumption or on growing oyster companies, these were aware and generally seen as compliant with public health regulations and in some cases were linked to the commercial vessels that also exploited the stock. The second group of hand gathers were seen as more opportunistic, were less aware and compliant with public health regulations and in some cases totally disregarded health issues (taking oyster meats in plastic bags or buckets and leaving them in the sun). The public perception of this group were that they were generally from outside the borough. London Port Health and Southend Borough Council have both allocated a lot of effort and resource to managing this specific problem

The group reflected on the impact of this activity on the foreshore habitat and felt that the opportunistic hand gathers posed a safety risk on the foreshore as they were removing the oyster meats and leaving the sharp shells in areas of public use. There was also a view expressed that large numbers of people accessing and walking over the oyster beds could also damage the habitat and other protected features on Southend foreshore.

The economic value of the hand gathering activity was difficult to quantify as there were no gathers present to provide this information. The point was strongly made that the opportunistic hand gathers required considerable enforcement and this drew upon large amounts of Port of London Health and Southend foreshore time thus having a negative economic impact.

Anglers/ bait diggers-collectors

Although anglers' and bait diggers did not access the stock directly both groups felt that the exploitation of this stock impacted on their activities. Bait diggers and collectors commented that the spread of the oyster beds was in their view starting to encroach on grounds where bait was traditionally dug. Bait collectors (crabs) felt that the oyster habitat provided refuge to crabs and that the dredging of the site could affect these populations (this was disputed by the commercial fishermen as they felt this was a small area and their activity had a very small impact on this stock). Anglers expressed the view that the oyster beds provided important habitat and diversity that could attract fish for them to target.

Management Options

A range of management options looking to control the exploitation of shellfish on the site were discussed the key options that the group discussed at length were:

- To dedicate parts of the Southend foreshore as a mussel cultivation area

- To develop a code of conduct detailing harvesting best practice (an outline of which was developed by KEIFCA and supplied in notes for the prior to the meeting)
- Issuing permits for shell fish/ oyster hand gathering

In developing management options both KEIFCA and Southend Borough Council reflected on the time and resource that taking forward any management option would take. KEIFCA highlighted that the pacific oyster stock did not seem to be over exploited and even if it was, it was seen by Natural England as an invasive species that required removal. Southend Borough Council reflected on the limited foreshore resource at their disposal and that the management options of a voluntary code of conduct or a permit scheme would not address the major issue that concerned them; the opportunistic collection of oysters.

Actions that could be taken to address the opportunistic collection of oysters were then discussed including exploring the potential of requiring the removal of only whole shellfish from the foreshore, the merit in developing and promoting recommended amounts that individuals could collect (gallon bucket etc) and developing notice boards to base on Southend Borough Council existing leaflet explain best practice and legal requirements.

After discussing the merits and problems of these different approaches the meeting agreed that developing notice boards would be a good first step towards helping to minimise the problem. After developing notice boards a code of conduct detailing harvesting best practice could then be explored.