

Extracts from the West Mersea Fisherman's Association (WMFA)

Appropriate Assessments (AA)

Report on

The affects of local Trawling on seabed features, within the River Blackwater Marine Protected Area (MPA).

This extract from our report is for KEIFCA members at their January 22nd meeting; as we have been unable to complete the full report due to the very short deadline, which we understood to be late May 2016.

We also see this report as an opportunity to dispel the many myths and misconceptions; many outside of the industry have about Trawling and the fishing industry, such as harming the marine environment and over-fishing. I have therefore written the report with this in mind and will be sending copies to various influential organisations and individuals, whom we hope will find interesting.

Although within this MPA it is for the producer to prove their type of fishing methods do not harm the seabed features, we would ask all stakeholders to note that, out of all the hundreds of seabed surveys conducted in this MPA area by KEIFCA and Natural England, no evidence to date has been found in any of these surveys, or by any other means that suggests, trawling in this area has, or does have an adverse affect on any of the seabed features in any way.

During the last fuel crisis, all the local boats had to review their fishing activities, in order to cut costs, as a local trawler burns approximately 1,600 litres of diesel a week, with the combination of very low quotas and very high fuel costs this meant few would survive unless running costs could be drastically reduced.

This included many changes to the trawl gear used to reduce ground contact and drag; in order to reduce the power consumption required to tow it. The main saving being replacing the old design of wooden otter board which relied on heavy ground contact to gain the desired sheering affect, needed to open the net, with modern more expensive Bison otter boards which have a more effective sheering effect created by the water flow design, thus do not require high ground contact, nor do they need to be towed at such a high degree of angle, to gain the desired net opening, greatly saving on the power required to tow them.

Below is an extract copied from the Bison trawl door website.

The Bison Trawl Door, Extremely efficient, less drag loads. Holds the seabed at all times, without damaging the seabed, even though lighter than other designs. Perform well in poor weather. Easy to operate and handle. When set up correctly will go over any ground. Environmentally friendly.

Other improvements included lightening all the ground gear on the trawls, clumps and towing slower which surprisingly has improved catches, as high towing speed is not necessary when targeting flat fish.

Skippers have also found that instead of working with 30/40 fathom towing wires, which was standard practice in this area, it is more cost effective to make wire length adjustments during a tow to keep the towing wires to

the otter boards at the maximum angle, as the seabed varies in depth during a tow, which also reduces drag and ground contact. This has been helped with modern day fish-finding equipment with a good ground discrimination facility.

I have seen it mentioned in the KEIFCA AA report, that some otter boards are rigged to dig into the seabed and give off a high mud cloud to help scare fish into the net, this is often the case in clear water but normally combined with very long sweeps between the otter boards and net. This method is not used in this area as our bridles between the wing end and otter boards are normally only 2 fathoms and we have very cloudy water, meaning such scaring affects in this area are not effective.

I have also seen it mentioned that otter boards can dig into the seabed up to 300mm, when the light gear used by local boats has been proven to only leave an imprint of less than 10mm on the seabed, which is removed by the tide scouring affect after just 24 hours.

The seabed in all of this MPA is continually and rapidly moving on a daily basis, two good examples of this are: -

- On the Buxey sands, just outside of the MPA area, which on the latest edition of Admiralty chart shows one area drying 2-metres above low water mark, when in fact there is now a 5-metre deep channel below low water mark running through the same area. This equates to an area of sand, 7-metres deep, 1 mile long and 200- metres wide, being moved by the tide in just two months.
- Another example being the Edinburgh Channel, which was used by the largest ships on route to the Thames and London, this channel has now had to be closed and shipping diverted, as it no longer exists due to filling up with sand, which is a common occurrence within this EMS area.

We often witness the shoreline build up with silt, small sand banks and gravel spits in all parts of the MPA form on one tide, but gone the next, which proves all the seabed within the MPA is continually moving and changing, so all marine life in the top layers of seabed are naturally being continually displaced with every tide, yet this is very difficult to scientifically prove, although we would expect KEIFCA to confirm this as a fact, as it is common knowledge in the area.

The river Blackwater and surrounding areas are very important fishing grounds to the local Trawlers, as surprisingly out of all the Northern Thames Estuary area, this is where the spring Dover Sole season always starts, where as fishing grounds outside of this area do not start producing fish for another 2/3 weeks. Why this is no one knows, but we suspect it has something to do with warmer waters in the area and Dover Soles migrating mid-water. This fishery gives local boats much needed income, after a long winter with little else due to very low Cod quotas, which apart from a few Skate is the only marketable winter species available in this area.

Within the MPA the Soles may be in any part of that area, sometimes in deeper water sometimes in shallower water as they follow feed, they can be at the lower end or top end of the area, but the fish always stay together and the area they frequent is continually moving, so to close any part of this area would have a major impact on local trawlers income, as apart from the grounds the fish are actually on, fishing is poor in all areas around it.

Apart from the main spring season, the area is also fished through out the summer and winter seasons at different times of the year, it is often used to top up on the Skippers' month's quota, as this is so low all boats must try their best to catch all of it every month in order to keep their average income up for the year and earn a basic living, as any quota not used one month cannot be rolled into a new month.

We often find this is the only area that offers enough shelter, that can be fished in strong North East winds, which often set in for up to 6 weeks at a time in the spring and stops any boats leaving the MPA area, so any closure would force boats out of the only area they can presently earn a living in during these gales and cause some very serious safety issues.

The local Oyster fishermen give their full support to local trawlers, as they consider it beneficial to their cultivation activities. As we fully support them dredging or cleaning their oyster layings with rakes within the MPA, which has a far greater impact on the seabed than our form of trawling

In conclusion

The WMFA cannot accept the KEIFCA draft SAC AA report on trawling, as it is based in its entirety on findings of different forms of trawling from outside of this area, which bare no resemblance to the type of light trawling conducted in this area, so they are irrelevant to this case and contrary to the following DEFRA Matrix guidelines, *the effect of that fishing activity or activities on such features will need to be assessed in detail at a site specific level*, so we will have to ask KEIFCA, to postpone all decisions on any management options at the 22nd January meeting, until our AA report has been completed in the spring, which will be based on the factual evidence of local trawling, in line with DEFRA guidelines.

We fully appreciate the purpose of this MPA and the need to protect our marine environment, but closing or restricting trawling activities in this area, when this type of local trawling has such a minimal seabed impact and the top layers of seabed are proven to be continually displaced daily anyway, we would suggest would be a pointless exercise, be very costly and at times cause many safety issues to local trawlers. Also as any form of closure in this area would require costly policing, we would suggest under these circumstances this would be a dreadful waste of taxpayer's money.

We intend to have the full WMFA AA report completed in the spring, including surveys, studies on our type of trawling and the affects it has on the seabed, which we would like a member of KEIFCA to witness. Once completed, we expect this form of light trawling to qualify for being moved, from Amber to Green within the Matrix system.

Yours faithfully,

Andrew Craig