6 July 2017

Notes of stakeholder workshop held at West Mersea Yacht Club, West Mersea, Essex on 6 July 2017 at 11am

Present: Ms Lisa Jenner (Natural England), Mr William Baker (Oyster Fisherman), Mr Richard Haward (Blackwater Oystermen Assoc), Ms Alison Debney (ZSL), Mr Thomas Cameron (Essex University), Ms Sarah Allison (Essex Wildlife Trust & KEIFCA), Ms B Perkins (KEIFCA member), Ms Miriam Parish (Natural England), Mr Richard Morgan (Natural England), Mr Mark Duffy (Natural England), Mr Rob Whiteley (Natural England)

In Attendance: Dr W Wright (CIFCO), Mr D Bailey (ACIFCO), Mrs D O'Shea (Office Manager)

The aim of this workshop was to focus on the specific conservation issues and more detailed and technical stock management issues that a native oyster permit byelaw would address.

Key points presented to the meeting

Background

Those present were reminded of the designation of the Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne (BCRC) MCZ and the conservation objectives of:

- Recovery to favourable condition of native oyster beds (marine habitat)
- Recovery to favourable condition Native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) (Species of marine fauna).

The native oyster beds in this area had been closed in 2012 under existing KEIFCA legislation due to a lack of young stock. They had been opened a few times since then for short periods but this lack of young stock had meant that in May 2015 KEIFCA decided to close the beds until May 2018.

KEIFCA had been undertaking its own yearly surveys of the public grounds since 2014 which had continued to show that young stock was not coming through.

The legislation required that the 'population was sufficiently thriving and resilient to enable its recovery'. KEIFCA needed to be able to describe a 'thriving and resilient' population and a 'healthy and resilient' oyster bed/ marine habitat within the BCRC MCZ when developing a management plan.

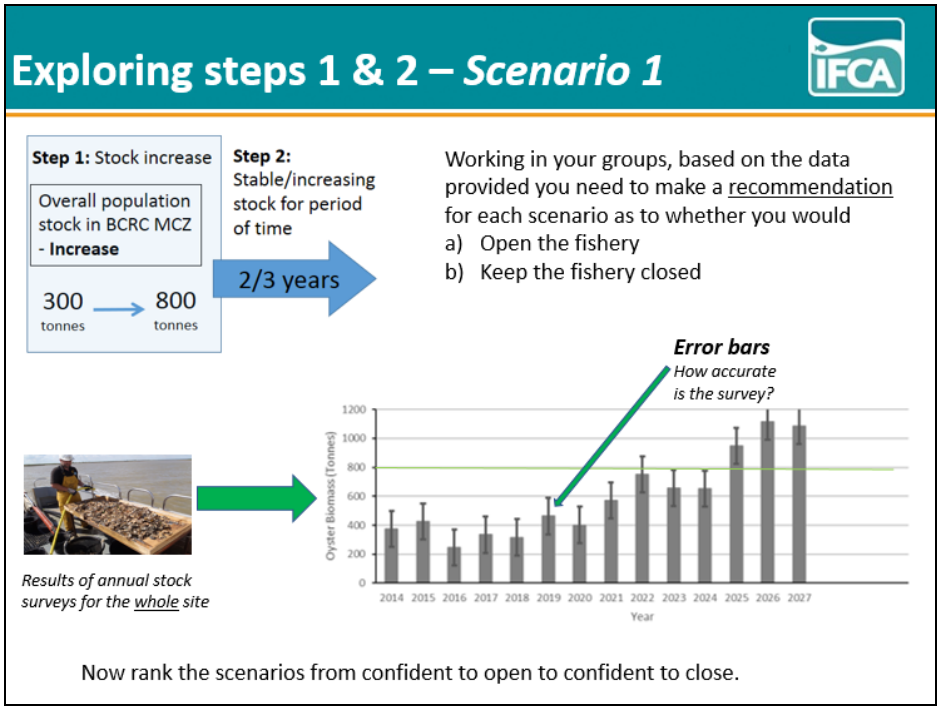
If a decision was made to introduce a permit byelaw, any management plan that was developed would lay out a framework, indicating in broad terms when the fishery could be opened and how it would be managed under certain scenarios. An annual assessment of native oyster stocks in the public grounds within the site would be carried out by KEIFCA. If stock levels were above agreed trigger points within the plan, following approval from Authority Members of management recommendations that had been developed with permit holders and an appropriate assessment with NE, the fishery would be opened. Key fisheries data would be required from all permit holders which would include landings, catch rates, number of tows; these returns would feed into any

fishery management plan. A meeting would be held with permit holders to discuss the result of the surveys and to advise them of the proposed management recommendations. If trigger points had not been reached the fishery would remain closed and reassessed the following year.

Testing the management plan

Stakeholders were put into groups made up of members of the oyster industry, NGOs and Natural England experts and asked to work through the detail of a potential management plan and to apply the management plan to specific native oyster stock scenarios.

<u>Scenario 1 – Explored the application of steps 1 (population increase to 800 tonnes) and 2 (population stable for 2/3 years).</u>



The groups worked through 5 different graphs, some that obviously met the criteria, some that obviously did not and some that where close to meeting the criteria.
Conclusions –

- The process was really useful in helping everyone think about applying the management plan
- There was discussion around the justification of using 800 tonnes – why pick this figure/ how should this figure be interpreted?
- Would a 'softer' rule help maybe a 3-year average?
- Steps 1 & 2 alone are not sufficient to decide when to open the fishery, need to bring together more information age structure, sex ratio, densities and locations.

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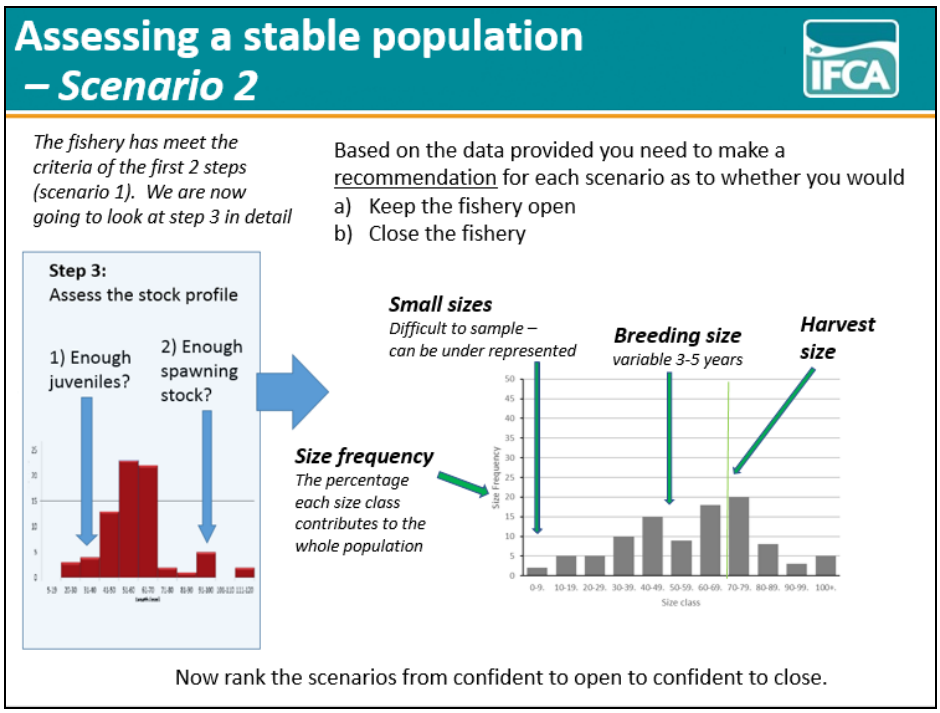
Scenario 2 – Assessing a stable population (Step 3)



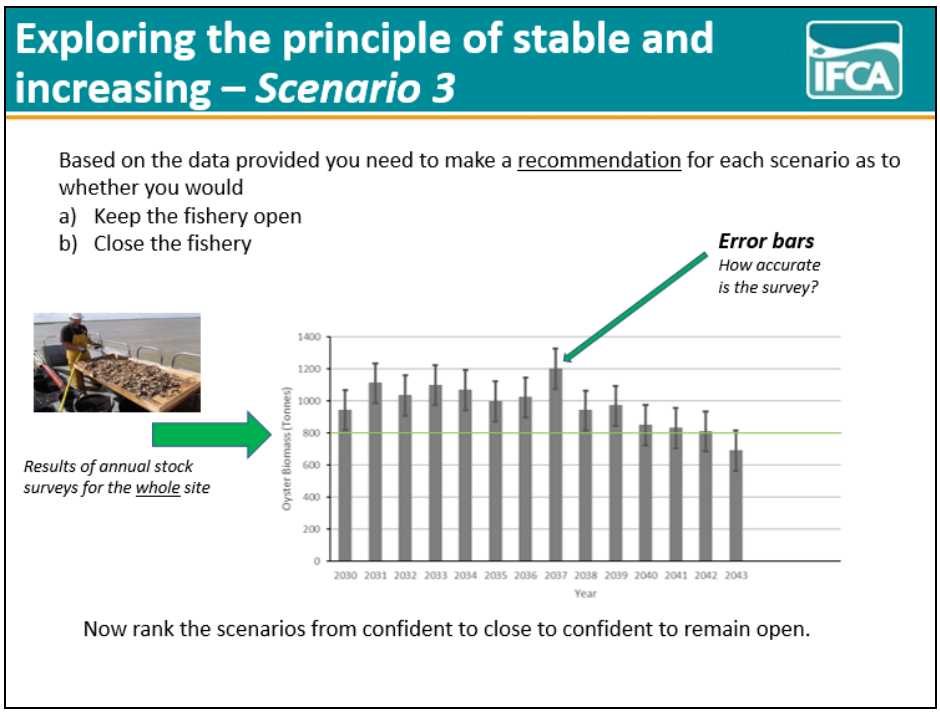
The groups worked again through different graphs that represented different population structures. Unlike steps 1 and 2 this assessment did not have a fixed metric to assess against and was weighing up both the requirement for future stock (smaller size/age classes) and the requirement for older breeding oysters (larger size/age classes).

Conclusions –
There was a lot of discussion about how to apply the requirement to assess the stock profile and in general there were far fewer scenarios where all the groups agreed and made the same recommendation. Some of the variation in between groups depended on their fundamental approach to either weight the recommendation to make sure there were high numbers of juvenile stock or to weight a recommendation in favour of higher numbers of larger breeding individuals.

Comments -

- Should consider a rolling, breeding population that would be coming through. Make a decision based on a future breeding population.
- Native oyster take 5 years to get to a harvestable size, natural mortality will play a role. No guarantee will survive.
- Need rules for age, size, sex but to guide discussion not a a definitive yes/no
- If there is no strong evidence of consistent recruitment, then the fishery should remain closed. If evidence is available then open up for discussion.
- Larger native oysters (100mm+) can spawn 4 times the equivalent of a 70mm oyster. It would be as important to consider that stock as it would more juvenile ones. Avoid taking 100mm sized stock.

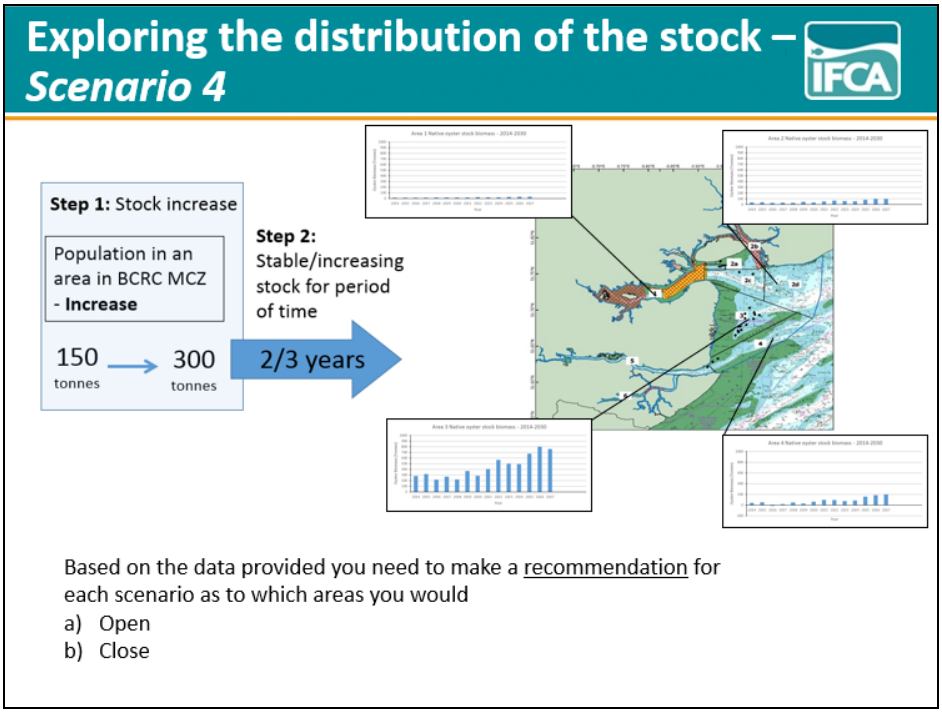
Scenario 3 – Exploring the principle of stable and increasing



The groups worked through different graphs, some that explored what the management response would be if the population started to decrease and at what point the management response would be to close the fishery. Some obviously met the criteria, some that obviously did not and some that where close to meeting the criteria.

Conclusions –
There was generally quite a lot of agreement between the groups as to when to close the fishery. The overriding feedback was that the fishery should close if it drops below 800 tonnes but that reducing stock above 800 tonnes could be kept open given other factors, however trends can be as important as absolute population size.

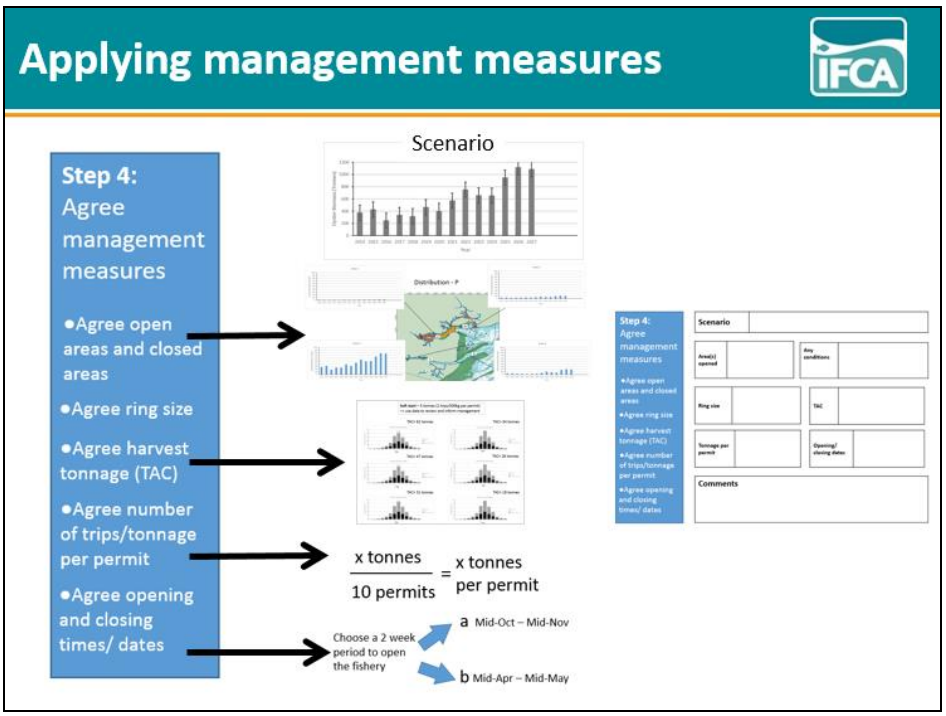
Scenario 4 - Exploring the distribution of the stock



More information was given to the groups showing the breakdown of the oyster population in different sub-areas. Groups where then asked whether areas should be opened or closed based on the amount of stock available and its historic stock levels.

Conclusions –
The exercise was useful as it showed the scale at which management could take place as well as the fine scale information that could be used to inform decisions. In general, there was agreement between groups and seen as a useful component of the management process.

Applying management measures



After looking at the range of data available and the application of the first 3 steps in the management plan, the groups then worked through a scenario and developed the appropriate management measure package.

Conclusions -
Discussions were very constructive and in general showed that the management plan provided a useful framework to help inform and resolve management decisions. By using the management plan in conjunction with the requirements of the sites conservation objectives, fisheries management criteria and expert judgement clear recommendations could be made on most scenarios. On the less clear cut scenarios the flexibility of being able to change key fisheries controls (amount of TAC, ring size, areas opened and opening and closing times of the fishery) as well as refer to detailed stock data helped the group reach clear recommendations. The conclusion, was that whilst the management plan was a very useful document the final decision on opening the fishery and developing management measures would rely heavily on the exact data and conditions at the time of the decision.

Comments -

- Working thought this process was very helpful as it helped show stakeholders the options available in managing the fishery and how risks could be mitigated by taking more precautionary management measures.
- Precautionary approach need for opening for the first time.
- Need to consider a viable industry in making recommendations
- A soft start of very low TAC (5%) and 80mm ring size would be a good idea. If the fishery remains viable the different management could be considered.
- A lower TAC allows management to be adaptive.
- There are tensions between manging the stock over the whole site and managing sub-areas.

Considering the requirements of the SAC and requirement for a habitat regulation assessment

A Habitat Regulations Assessment will be an important part of opening the fishery the development of the management measures need to take this into account. There was a brief discussion focusing on this issue and KEIFCA officers presented working estimates of the level of impact that the fishy could have on the underling SAC features if the fishery was opened for about 10 days with 10 vessels fishing their allocated TAC. The estimates showed that an approximate area of 0.78km2 would be impacted by the fishery, which are very small compare to the area of the SAC which is over 400km2. The limited time of the fishery would also mean that there would not be constant fishing in the site and that there would be over 350 days for the site to recover.

Management of oyster beds

The final matter for discussion was the issue of how to manage oyster beds on the site. Within the permit byelaw and the management plan the restoration box would be regarded as helping meet the recover objective for native oyster beds, as it meets the criteria laid out for oyster beds (i.e it is within an area of mixed sediment and on grounds that are regarded as most suitable and likely to support oyster beds). There was also then a discussion about creating further set-a-side areas for oyster beds in sea based sub-areas on the site. The areas would potentially be closed to fishing where no active regeneration would take place. These would be located in preferred habitat areas and build on the principles used in the Wash to manage *Sabilleria*. Concern was raised that if these areas were not fished then an increase in density could occur which could lead to *bonamia* spreading more quickly. However, those present could see the benefits of using this as a management tool that could be put into the byelaw. It was felt that it would be an idea worth exploring and useful to consult with the fishing industry on the benefit of these areas.

In summary, the Chief Fishery Officer informed the meeting that it would be necessary to take the information, ideas and suggestions that had been achieved in this and the previous workshop back to the Fishing Industry to discuss with them. Work would also be carried out with the University of Essex to develop a stock and habitat model and to look into achieving MSC certification for the fishery

Meeting closed at 15:15