

Notes of whelk workshop held at Royal Temple Yacht Club / KEIFCA Office, Ramsgate, Kent on 5 December 2019

Present: Chris Attenborough (Fishing Industry), Neil Cleminson (Fishing Industry), Ben Cooper (Fishing Industry), Robert Cooper (Fishing Industry), Stuart Gosman (Fishing Industry), Andrew Mazirel (Fishing Industry), David Thomas (Fishing Industry), Jamie Parkes (Fishing Industry), Tom Brown (Fishing Industry) AM only, Andrew Rattley (Shellfish Processor & KEIFCA Authority Member) and John Nichols (Fishing Industry & KEIFCA Vice Chairman)

In Attendance: Will Wright (CIFCO), Dominic Bailey (ACIFCO), Robert Dyer (LSCO), Anna Plumeridge (Science & Conservation Officer), Ben Hermitage (Kent Skipper), David Deverson (Kent 1st Mate), Hayden Hurst (Lead Compliance Officer), Rob Watson (Fishery Officer), Ahmed Mohamed (Fishery Officer), Debbie O'Shea (Office Manager), Katie Woods (Admin Assistant)

Workshop aims

- To discuss industry concerns over inconsistencies with the riddling process
 - To discuss and review future management options for the whelk fishery
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INTRODUCTION

The CIFCO explained that the purpose of the workshop was for the industry and Kent & Essex IFCA to talk openly and honestly about concerns with enforcement and current management of the whelk fishery in order to make long term improvements.

John Nichols thanked those present for coming and acknowledged that the weather conditions were ideal for fishing which perhaps explained why more fishermen were not in attendance. He urged the industry to give their honest feedback on current management in order to best work with the regulator, i.e. Kent & Essex IFCA. He also recommended that they work on forming an association, as had been done by the Thames Estuary cockle fishermen.

The CIFCO made a brief presentation to remind the meeting why KEIFCA had introduced an emergency whelk byelaw at the end of 2011. At the Industry's request, action had been taken to limit the fishing effort of a few large vessels setting in excess of 1,000 pots at a time. A graph was shown which demonstrated that this high level of fishing effort by just three large vessels was the equivalent of the combined entire local fleet. Since the whelk permit byelaw had been place, stocks had been protected from crashing and approximately £5 million of landings had been made within the district.

Recent monthly landings data submitted by permit holders revealed an increase in fishing effort; the fishing season had extended in some parts of district and whelk fishing activity outside the 6nm limit had increased in recent years.

BIOLOGY OF WHELKS

The CIFCO explained that KEIFCA had carried out a lot of work with Bangor & Essex Universities on various research projects. Dr Phil Holyman (Bangor University) had developed a unique ageing technique which had been adopted by CEFAS. Dr

Holyman's research, some of which was with whelks taken from the Kent & Essex district, showed that just 1 in 100 34mm length whelks will have bred and at 78mm 99 in 100 will have bred. In addition to Dr Hollyman's research, KEIFCA had dissected and analysed over 10,000 whelks from the district in the past two years as part of an EMFF funded study. At 45mm (EU minimum landing size) only a small proportion of whelks would be mature and capable of breeding, therefore this MLS did not protect whelk stocks. 45mm equated to whelks of around two years old; by the time whelks were four years old they would have reached around 65mm and would have bred at least once.

11:30 moved to Ramsgate office for riddle & dissection demo.

The attendees gave a brief explanation of the aims of the EMFF funded research project and gave a step by step demonstration of the dissection work:

- weigh whole animal in shell
- remove whelk from shell
- weigh whelk body (out of shell)
- dissect to remove reproductive organs (gonad)
- weigh gonad
- visually assess gonad to determine maturity (more colour change = more mature)
- remove stomach
- weigh remaining edible part (foot)

Attendees were invited to carry out the dissection work themselves.

RIDDLE EXPERIMENTS

Working with Fishery Officers, the attendees were split into five groups to trial three different types of riddle:

- 24.9mm battery operated mechanical rotary riddle (KEIFCA riddle)
- 25mm flat-bed laser cut riddle (KEIFCA riddle)
- 25mm flat-bed round bar riddle (fisherman's own riddle)

Each group had a bag of mixed sized whelks which were riddled three times. The total number and weight of retained and rejected whelks were recorded, along with the number of immature and mature whelks retained and rejected. In order to show which whelks were statistically unlikely to have bred, the shells of those whelks had been painted red before the meeting.

All groups agreed that the mechanical rotary riddle was quicker than the flat bed riddles and had a definite, known finish to the riddling process. The three riddles retained similar numbers of smaller/immature whelks, but the rotary riddle had the least variance, i.e. it was the most consistent. The table below shows the percentage of immature/non breeding whelks which were retained by each of the riddles tested by the five groups:

sample number	1	2	3	4	5	variance
rotary riddle	22.04%	19.79%	20.32%	21.58%	21.72%	2.26%
flat bar riddle	23.03%	21.58%	24.25%	21.53%	21.16%	3.08%
round bar riddle	23.28%	25.00%	23.30%	19.21%	22.22%	5.79%

13:00 returned to Royal Temple Yacht Club

INDUSTRY FEEDBACK – QUESTIONNAIRES

The CIFCO explained that prior to the meeting John Nichols & Andrew Rattley had worked with KEIFCA to write a questionnaire seeking industry feedback on current whelk management. A total of 63 questionnaires were sent out and 13 responses had been received. A brief presentation was given on the results received, these are attached as Appendix 1.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Riddles – The ACIFCO asked for feedback on the use of riddles. He acknowledged that there were some practical concerns for the smaller boats where weight, cost & size of the rotary riddle may cause issues but from the trials carried out earlier in the day, as well as previous riddle testing by KEIFCA Officers, the rotary riddle had proved to have least human error and be the most consistent & efficient. Andrew Rattley commented that this was very relevant and had to be the foundation for everyone to work from to successfully protect the fishermen as well as give fair and even management. He stated that there would always be human error with a non-mechanical riddle. The group discussed the practical concerns of a rotary riddle being gunnel mounted on all vessels. Some felt that it would not be practical, especially for those boats which needed to change gear types from whelk fishing one day to another type fishing another day, nor for the Category 2 permit holders.

Small whelks – a member of the fishing industry asked about patches of small whelks in some areas across the district. The ACIFCO replied that the IFCA were aware of reports of areas of small whelks, but there was uncertainty as to whether these were nursery areas, where small whelks move on from once they reached a certain size, or whether whelks in these areas were fully grown, mature and capable of breeding. The CIFCO advised that Essex University had conducted some genetics research into different whelk populations; the findings suggested that whelks from the four KEIFCA areas, from outside the 12nm limit, from Jersey and from the Isle of Wight were genetically very similar. All agreed that further research was required on this matter and fishing industry representatives offered to collect samples and/or have Fishery Officers onboard to collect samples for IFCA to undertake dissection for maturity and age testing.

Enforcement – John Nichols said that he had received many comments from fishing industry complaining about unfair enforcement by KEIFCA and he invited the industry to speak openly about their concerns. A member of the fishing industry commented that the MLS was 45mm but the riddle spacing of 25mm meant a lot of sizeable whelks were rejected. The LSCO clarified that the KEIFCA byelaw requirement for 25mm riddle spacing was to protect the smaller whelks which would not have had a chance to breed and therefore needed to be returned to sea in order to allow the stocks to be sustainable. Whelks which were smaller than 25mm in width and rejected by the riddle but were larger than 45mm in length, must not be picked out of the rejected pile and included in landings. The KEIFCA byelaw clearly stated that all whelks must be passed over a riddle and all rejected whelks must be returned to sea. The group discussed the inconsistencies in riddling by Fishery Officers for enforcement purposes versus by the industry while fishing. It was accepted by all that enforcement riddling was usually done on the quayside by two people, whereas fishermen were often single handed and at sea which inevitably made the process more challenging. The industry requested a

tolerance for undersized whelks when being inspected. The ACIFCO advised that there could not be any tolerance given for whelks below 45mm as this was EU legislation.

Undersized whelks – leading on from earlier discussions, the ACIFCO posed the question “what does undersized mean?”. He explained that the EU regulation stated sizeable was larger than 45mm. However, the KEIFCA whelk permit byelaw (paragraph 21) stated that “*All whelks within a catch must be graded for size. As part of this procedure all whelks must be passed over or through a riddle constructed of parallel bars with a minimum spacing between bars which a gauge, the size of which is set in a whelk permit, will pass through.*” A member of the fishing industry commented that he had accepted that the minimum size was effectively 25mm width, due to the riddle spacing requirements and that if a new MLS were to be introduced in the Kent & Essex district it should be the equivalent shell length of a 25mm shell width.

The ACIFCO advised that the current byelaw wording did not allow for the introduction of a minimum size but KEIFCA could look at making a new byelaw which could stipulate a minimum size and suggested this could be a shell length measurement, rather than a shell width measurement. The ACIFCO explained that due to the conical shape of the shells, a whelk that may be retained by the riddle on one occasion could twist and be passed through it another time. Mud and barnacles adhering to the sides of the whelks could also affect the effectiveness of the riddling process. The introduction of a shell length MLS would eliminate these discrepancies as a standard way of measuring could be adopted by industry and KEIFCA, such as a stop/go gauge. This would help to address the industry’s concerns over unfairness of enforcement.

The CIFCO thanked everyone for their attendance and valued contribution to the discussions.

Meeting outcomes:

- Standardisation of riddle is key, rotary riddle best option
- Research Canadian vibrating riddle plate
- Look into byelaw wording to introduce MLS with a tolerance for undersized
- Whelks be an agenda item at next Authority meeting (31 January 2020)
- Science & Conservation officer to go out on whelk fishing boat to known areas of small whelks to collect samples for maturity assessments
- Industry to form a whelk association
- Meeting notes & riddle trial results to be distributed to all attendees