

Agenda Item C3

Report on the patrol vessels 'Tamesis', 'Blue Jacket', and "FPV Vigilant" Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority Report for the period January 2020 – September 2020

Vessel priorities:

- Patrol district boundary for incursions by oversize or foreign vessels
- Patrol areas closed for bottom trawling under Essex Estuaries byelaw
- Record data of all vessel sightings
- Record data of all static fishing gears (fixed nets and pots)
- Input key enforcement information into national fisheries enforcement database (MCSS)
- Inspect recreational angling vessels to ensure compliance with regulations
- Conduct spring oyster survey
- Conduct cockle stock surveys for Permit Fishery & TECFO
- Conduct out of hours patrols for commercial and recreational Bass fishing
- Monitor TECFO fleet to prevent early starting
- Conduct damage rate inspections on TECFO fleet

General Trends

This period is traditionally quite important for vessels working the Essex coast. Generally the commercial vessels would be targeting cod in the early parts of the period (though this has been poor in recent years), whilst in the latter part of the quarter the effort would be shifting to sole, with netters with an allowance benefitting from an "unintentional" bycatch of bass. This is also when the lobsters become more mobile leading to an increase in effort in the north of the district.

The pattern this year has been markedly different due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to a brief period of stagnation when markets closed and demand for fisheries products fell with the closure of pubs, restaurants, and other food businesses. The domestic market for local caught fresh fish soon picked up however which saw many of the finfish vessels return to sea, though demand for shellfish remained low.

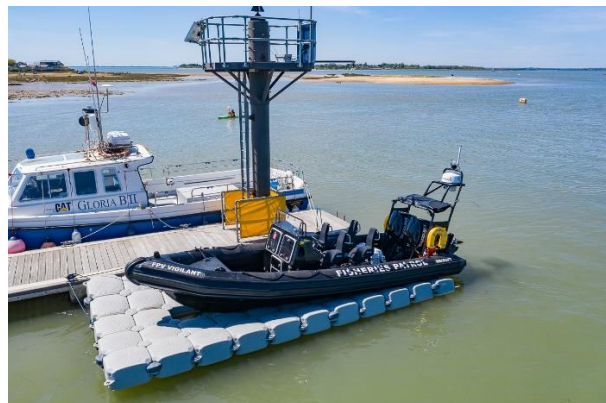
As the summer progressed fishing activity returned to normal levels and the Thames Estuary Cockle fishery opened on schedule. Charter recreational vessels also began accepting passengers, though numbers were reduced to allow for

social distancing on board the vessels. Recreational fishing activity remained high though unseasonal windy conditions did have an impact throughout.

Fisheries Enforcement

Patrol activity was severely disrupted as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, as vessels did not go to sea until sufficient safety protocols had been established, and procedures developed for conducting work at sea. Even though these have been completed and now thoroughly tested full boarding inspections are not yet being conducted due to social distancing requirements. Procedures and protocols for boarding inspections have been developed and are utilised where required. Blue Jacket was launched and left berthed alongside Tamesis for the latter part of the first quarter in the event that the park-and-ride facility ceased functioning due to government lockdown restrictions. With the arrival of FPV Vigilant however, she was stood down and sold.

FPV Vigilant was due for handover on March 27th, however the announcement of the lockdown on March 23rd led to significant delays due to closure of factories and marinas. It was delivered to Brightlingsea on 18th May and handover took place whilst maintaining social distancing. It was then sea trialled by officers and is now fully operational. A floating pontoon has been installed in Brightlingsea harbour to allow for rapid deployment and recovery. FPV Vigilant has since been deployed on 39 patrols covering the TECFO fishery, cockle damage rate checks, the bass fishery, the Essex Estuaries, the Stour and Orwell, the Medway No-Take-Zone, and the patrols along the 6 mile limit.



Boarding operations were completely stopped for the initial period of lockdown however non-boarding inspections, where the patrol vessel draws alongside the fishing vessels and may inspect catch from a distance continued as social distancing could be maintained. Once protocols were developed and tested boarding operations recommenced, though limited to essential circumstances (such as gathering damage rate samples from the TECFO fleet) and with the co-operation of the fishermen involved. Over the course of this extended period the patrol vessels logged 148 fishing vessels and conducted 71 non-boarding inspections, including 18 on recreational and charter recreational vessels. No offences were detected, however the patrol vessel succeeded in disrupting a vessel which had a significant "bycatch" of bass in a drift net and observed as the fish were returned to the sea (most of which survived), as significant

number of intelligence reports were also submitted on the basis of the NBI's. With the procedures in place, officers boarded commercial vessels on 31 occasions, including 1 charter recreational vessel.

With the main vessel tied up for the most part of this extended period, the opportunity to haul and inspect gear was severely limited. The vessels logged fixed gear on 34 occasions nonetheless, and attached 4 offence notices for poorly or incorrectly marked gear.

Conservation/Survey Work

Oyster Survey

Following winter refit Tamesis resumed the native oyster stock survey for the Blackwater Crouch Roach and Colne MCZ. This was ongoing when the vessel was tied up for a period as the lockdown was implemented and procedures were being drawn up for social distancing and operation of the patrol vessels. Due to the crewing requirements for the oyster survey it is currently uncertain when this will resume though work is ongoing to develop procedures that would allow the oyster survey to resume in the autumn.

Cockle Surveys

Usually every April Tamesis is engaged in the cockle stock survey of both the the Permit and TECFO cockle areas (excluding the Maplin Sands), around the Buxey and the Barrows off the Essex coast and along the North Kent coast at Scrapsgate and Minnis Bay. As with the oyster survey above this has been postponed until such time as a safe working method can be developed.

Whelk Survey

As there are very few vessels involved in the whelk fishery in Essex, Tamesis was tasked to collect whelk samples from inside the district which will then be analysed the data used to inform the ongoing EMFF population study. This took place on schedule in March but has not taken place during April and May.

Marine Mammal observations

Patrols have led to sightings of marine mammals on 15 occasions with individual seal sightings on the Colne, the Blackwater, and in the Crouch and Roach. The usual groups of seals were observed hauled out on Foulness and on the Buxey. Some porpoises were also observed at Horse Shoal in the river Crouch.

Maintenance

Routine maintenance was conducted on the vessels as required and monthly safety checks were carried out on schedule. Tamesis was hauled out at Suffolk Yacht Harbour and had skin fittings replaced as advised by the surveyor in 2019. She underwent a MECAL survey in April and was found to be in good order and no defects were identified. In August the vessel was beached on Brightlingsea hard for scrub down of the hull.

Nerissa was brought to Brightlingsea for the summer so she could be maintained along with the Tamesis. She was returned to Ramsgate at the beginning of August.

Other Information

Statistics

During this quarter of much reduced activity, Tamesis has put to sea on 7 occasions and took 614 litres of fuel and travelled 251 nautical miles. Blue Jacket also put to sea 11 times using 719 litres of fuel to cover a patrol distance of 578 miles. FPV Vigilant was deployed on 39 patrols, and used 3075 litres of fuel to cover a distance of 1990 nautical miles.

Other trips

Blue jacket was tasked to conduct a joint operation with Essex Marine Police on Saturday April 4th during the early part of lockdown. A police officer was brought out to the Wallet, the Blackwater, and the Colne and in to harbours and marinas along the way to direct leisure boaters to stay at home. FPV Vigilant was also used for joint work with Essex Marine Police and again covered the area from Walton on the Naze down to Heybridge Basin on the Blackwater. Operations were conducted in accordance with standard operating procedures; the procedures outline safe working practices for employees and other agencies whilst working on the boat.

Invitation to Authority Members and P.R

An open invitation is usually extended to Authority Members to join the crew on an enforcement patrol or survey aboard the vessel, unfortunately however under circumstances due to government guidance on social distancing requirements and the size of the vessels it will not be possible to do until further notice.

Colm O'Laoi
Skipper & IFC Officer