

MPA NEWS



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Perspective: A new start to effectively managing fishing in English European Marine Sites?

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Over 100 European Marine Sites (EMS) have been designated in the UK under EU laws since 1994, covering 7.6% of UK seas. Yet until recently, they have not been systematically effective at managing destructive fishing practices.

Since 2008 the Marine Conservation Society (MCS; www.mcsuk.org) and Client Earth (www.clientearth.org) have been collaborating on a national campaign to effectively protect EMS from damaging fishing. Initial letters written by our organizations to regulators highlighted that fishing by any means in EMS required proof of a lack of damage to the seabed habitats inside the protected sites before being permitted. This is important because scallop dredge fishing intensity has grown in the UK over the past 20 years since whitefish stocks have declined.

English government and its local fisheries regulators initiated a new approach to deliver protection to vulnerable habitats in 2012. Since then a number of laudable initiatives have been enacted:

1. Scientific tables of the (likely significant) impact of fishing gears on protected features of marine sites, to guide management decisions (<http://bit.ly/FisheriesEMS>).
2. A timetable to deal with the most damaging activities affecting the most vulnerable features by Spring 2014. The system codes this combination of factors 'red'.
3. A timetable to deal with other fishing activities that are less damaging, or where data on distribution or vulnerability of natural features are less known, by the end of 2016. The system codes this combination of factors 'amber'.
4. A clear structure of spatial responsibility for different regulators.
5. Funding to determine better spatial resolution of habitat to better inform management decisions, thus allowing management measures not to be overly precautionary.
6. The oversight of decisions by a central stakeholder Implementation Group that meets every four months to review progress on management. This is composed of statutory nature conservation advisors, regulators, eNGOs and the fishing industry.
7. The timing of the new approach was when there was the introduction of a new regulator to manage inshore fisheries - the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (there are 10 around the English coast). These bodies have emerged from the "old" Sea Fisheries Committees (SFCs) that, until 2009, were effective only to preserve local short-term fishing interests. Now they are more balanced.
8. The emergence of cheap cost-effective monitoring / enforcement technology (<http://succorfish.com/fisheries>) using mobile phone technology for inshore vessels. This has yet to be systematically put on every fishing boat, but it is a logical step.

Progress has been good on the 'reds' to protect around 3080 km² of seabed in 25 sites covered by 17 bylaws. These were put in place between December 2013 and May 2014. Most of these sites have been deemed to be legally compliant by MCS and ClientEarth, but there are a few that we still feel don't meet the minimal requirements of the law. 'Ambers' — where evidence of damage is less clear cut — are being considered now (Summer 2015), whilst there is huge uncertainty as to whether the UK will be able to adequately protect UK sites that lie in international fishing waters (outside 12 nautical miles).

Fishing in offshore waters is managed under the framework of the Common Fisheries Policy, where the European Commission is looking to different fishing states to come together to produce mutually agreed management plans for MPAs. Past experience would suggest that achieving consensus among different fishing nations is unlikely where individual nations have been able to veto restrictive management decisions. For example, the Dogger Bank is a large EMS that straddles UK, German, and Dutch waters. Unfortunately, it remains open to beam trawling due to a veto of management measures by the Dutch authorities.

IFCAs offer promise

Inshore, the story is much more promising with IFCAs offering resilient governance at the community level. They are better respected than centralised government, as they are often staffed by ex-fishermen; are ensclosed in the local community; and have (in most cases) a balance of conservation and fishing interests on their committees.

The bottom line is that fishing was hitherto ignored in European Marine Sites on a systemic basis, leading to some protection in a few small areas (often by voluntary agreement), whereas other sites were progressively damaged. Some may say a cultural shift has occurred in the protection of English MPAs from damaging fishing practices. Only time will tell if this 'new approach' is truly resilient. But developing relationships among some regulators, eNGOs and the scientific community show promising glimpses of a more collaborative future. For example, the Marine Conservation Society (eNGO), Cornwall IFCA (regulator), and the University of Exeter are undertaking a collaborative surveillance project on a Cornish EMS to record the impact of the cessation of bottom trawling over (an initial) three years.

The author of this blog post (Dr. Solandt) and Peter Jones of University College London looked into these sorts of issues when moving from individual sites to networks of sites in their paper from IMPAC 3 in Marseille in 2013, including case studies from around the world:

Solandt, Jean-Luc; Jones, Peter; Duval-Diop, Dominique; Kleiven, Alf-Ring; Frangoudes, Katia (2014). Governance challenges in scaling up from individual MPAs to MPA networks. *Aquatic Conservation-Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems* Volume: 24 Pages: 145-152. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/aqc.2504/abstract>

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