

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

17 November 2021

Remote meeting via Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)
Andrew Brown, Macduff Shellfish
Andy Lawler, Cefas
Charlotte Colvin, Bangor University
Chloe North, Western Fish Producers' Organisation
Ella Brock, Seafish
Emma Plotnek, Fishing Into The Future
Hannah Fennell, Heriot-Watt University
Holly Kaiser, Seafish
Jack Emmerson, Isle of Man government
Joanna Messini, Defra

Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
Martyn Youell, Waterdance Ltd.
Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University
Natalie Hold, Bangor University
Phil McBryde, Defra
Jim Evans, Welsh Fishermen's Association
Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish
Philip Haupt, Kent & Essex IFCA
Rebecca Treacy, Seafish
Robert Clark, Association of IFCAs
Thomas Fortier, Heriot-Watt University

Apologies

Beshlie Pool, South Devon & Channel Shellfishermen's Association
Mark Merrick, AM Seafoods

General updates

1. The minutes from the Whelk Management Group (WMG) meeting in August were confirmed as an accurate representation of the discussions.
2. The chair summarised the actions from the last meeting:
 - a. Targeted whelk trawl fishery: Seafish were asked to look into the possible existence of a targeted whelk trawl fishery. There is no evidence that such a fishery exists but if any members have other information, please get in touch with Seafish: Lewis.Tattersall@seafish.co.uk
 - b. North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) whelk focus group response: the WMG sent a letter of response to the NWWAC with regards to engagement and data sharing. The letter stated that the WMG are keen to stay engaged on the NWWAC but that no data could be shared; any data sharing between the UK and EU should be carried out via the Specialised Committee on Fisheries. Seafish have received a response, and this will be circulated to the WMG.

Whelk science sub-group update

3. The last meeting of the whelk science sub-group was on the 25th October and focussed on narrowing down the research priorities. These are summarised:
 - a. Undertake a desk-based review of the existing data around the UK and see if there is any consistency or compatibility between data sets.
 - b. Modernising the data gathering process. This focussed on exploring possible technological solutions to data gathering at sea and at processors.
 - c. Establish stock boundaries, or ways of managing fisheries in their absence. The group discussed what research and data are required to set stock boundaries.

- d. Understand the management options for whelk fisheries. Building on work to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of existing management tools used in the whelk fishery.
- e. Undertake a desk-based review on alternate indices for stock abundance and stock indicators of health.
- f. Review the wider environmental impacts of the whelk fishery on other fisheries and vice versa.

Fisheries Industry Science Partnership

4. The whelk science sub-group is applying to the Fisheries Industry Science Partnership fund (FISP). One of the bids is focused on several elements of work highlighted by the WMG:
 - a. An investigation into alternatives for whelk bait, such as an artificial chemical bait replacement. If this is successfully it has the possibility to be more economically viable for fishers and could reduce reliance on costly natural baits.
 - b. Undertake an assessment of whelk trap selectivity devices to examine the different approaches used to eliminate or reduce the catch of undersized whelks. A secondary aspect of this research is to assess methods of handling whelks, such as the impacts of rotating them through a rotary riddle, in comparison to passing them through a static riddle.
 - c. Fisher knowledge gathering exercise to improve understanding of the variation in whelk populations. This builds on the anecdotal data work already carried out by Heriot-Watt University, Bangor University, and Cefas on behalf of the WMG and aims to improve geographic coverage of data.
5. The WMG are applying for an additional bid focussed on a data collection technology using autonomous sampling units to measure the size of whelks, which could be deployed either on vessels at sea or at processing sites. The aim is to gather evidence with a high resolution spatial and temporal coverage. It is collaborative and participatory research which will hopefully provide long-term capabilities for improved data collection.

Whelk Fisheries Management Plan (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

6. The Whelk Management Plan is currently focussed on developing species-specific management objectives that align with the Fisheries Act 2020 and that are specific to whelk fisheries. This work is being carried out by the WMG Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) working group.
7. Whelk-specific research needs are being developed by the WMG science sub-group, which will develop a scientific research plan to compliment the whelk FMP.
8. Collaboration with the Devolved Administrations is ongoing, but the level of collaboration on FMP development has not yet been decided. It is possible that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may progress their own FMPs with likely overlap between species and objectives. Despite this, there is appetite to ensure that alignment and consistency in the FMP process remains as far as possible. Further clarity on the process is expected with the publication of the Joint Fisheries Statement later in the year.
9. Work being progressed includes:

- a. The scope of the FMP, including target and bycatch species, fishing methods, geographical areas and ownership.
- b. The overview of shellfish fisheries included in the plan, including biological, environmental, social, and economic information, and how they are managed.
- c. The objectives, focusing on understanding what data is required, how to collect it, understanding stock boundaries, measuring CPUE, impacts of whelk fishing on the wider marine environment, bait provisioning, and stock status and sustainability.

Whelk anecdotal data gathering questionnaire (Hannah Fennell & Thomas Fortier, Heriot-Watt University)

10. The anecdotal data gathering questionnaire, carried out over summer 2021, has now closed and responses are being analysed. The questionnaire received a good number of usable responses, particularly from the south coast of England and Wales, though there is a lack of responses from Scotland.
11. The project team is exploring opportunities to maximise the use of the anecdotal data by combining the data set with existing environmental and climate change related data assets.
12. Current findings suggest that a sandy and gravelly seabed is the best fishing ground for whelk fishing and that whelks tend to be larger in winter months, with most eggs found in pots in January. It was acknowledged that the findings do not reflect all whelk variations across the UK and there is the possibility to use processor data to validate the information collected in the questionnaire.
13. A report on the work will be shared with the group in November/December 2021 with final publication expected in Q1 2022.
14. It was acknowledged that the format of mapping aspects of the questionnaire were not appropriate for nomadic fishers, and that mapping questions should be reconsidered if a wider response is required.
15. Concerns were raised regarding the potential consequences of sharing the data on industry and its potential to misguide fishers, in particular the way in which heat maps could be misconstrued as evidence of whelk abundance in some areas. Considering this, no data from the questionnaire will be shared until it is confirmed that it is appropriate to do so. If any members of the WMG have queries or concerns, please contact Hannah Fennell: hf4@hw.ac.uk

Managing whelk effort (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

16. The group began unpicking in detail the “*discussion paper on managing fishing effort*”, focussing on section 7.
17. **7a:** limiting the type of fishing method – formally restricting the fishery to a pot fishery only. This would be more of a pre-emptive measure. Comments from the group:
 - a. Some members found issue with restricting the fishery to one fishing method (potting) as it could displace fishers into other fisheries (such as trawling). Thus, the wording of this section should encompass these potential issues by stating that it will exclude trawl fisheries (with whelk only caught as a bycatch) and focus only on the pot fishery.

18. **7b**: exclude new entrants to the fishery by restricting access (on a temporary basis) to existing operators. Comments from the group:
- a. Some members found issue with restricting access *on a temporary basis* due to the risk of developing a boom-and-bust scenario in the whelk fishery. However, the idea behind the objective was to “ring-fence” effort by allowing everyone in the fishery to remain in the fishery but restricting new entrants. The reason for including a time restriction to this objective was to ensure it has the flexibility to adapt to new scientific evidence in the future.
 - b. Other members noted that it is difficult to enforce a restricted licensing scheme without data. It was suggested that a better approach would be to establish a permit scheme which could then be expanded or restricted based on the biological status of the stock.
19. **7c**: establish a whelk only effort license/permit issued for an agreed period (possibly 24 months) to existing participants. Comments from the group:
- a. More consideration of how EU vessels will interact with any management measures is required and this needs to be described in the discussion paper.
 - b. Some members found there was a distinction required between points “b” and “c”.
 - c. Other members suggested that pot limits would be the simplest management measure to manage fishing effort.
 - d. Deciding the “agreed period” to establish a licensing system will require careful consideration to ensure fishers who have a genuine history in the fishery and are economically depend on the fishery, remain in the fishery.
20. **7d**: attach conditions to a whelk specific license/permit to manage/cap effort e.g., a tonnage limit, or a pot limit, or permitting access to certain fishing areas. Also, option to specify what information should be reported. Comments from the group:
- a. Some members of the group found issue with the wording of point 7d which should refer to an entitlement, instead of a whelk-specific license.
21. Next steps: the purpose of the discussion paper was to kick-start conversations regarding alternative management measures for effort restrictions on the whelk fishery. It was agreed that an in-person workshop for members to discuss managing whelk fishing in more detail will be held in 2022. Seafish will update the group with further details of a workshop accordingly.

Number	Action	Responsibility
7.1	Follow up with Heriot-Watt regarding the data protection agreement for the whelk anecdotal data gathering research.	Mike Kaiser/Hannah Fennell
7.2	Share the whelk anecdotal data gathering report once it's available.	Seafish/Hannah Fennell
7.3	Update the WMG on progress with FISP bids.	Seafish
7.4	Host a workshop in early 2022 to further discuss the topic of managing whelk fishing effort.	Seafish