

**Note of Skates and Rays meeting held at Friends House, London. Tuesday 8 October 2013**

**Seafish Skates and rays page – for minutes and further information on the skates and rays and the Skates and Rays Group see:**

<http://www.seafish.org/responsible-sourcing/discussion-forums/the-skates-and-rays-group>

**Attendees**

Ali Hood	Shark Trust
Andrew Charles	J Charles and Sons
Andrew Gooch	Ray Gooch Ltd
Andy Matchett	Ocean Fish
Bill Lart	Seafish (Chair)
Charlotte Bury	Tesco
Chris Sparkes	Jaines and Son
Jamie Rendell	Defra
Jim Masters	Marine Conservation Society (MCS)
John Butterwith	North Devon Fishermen's Association (NDFA)
John Richardson	Shark Trust
Karen Green	Seafish (Minutes)
Leanne Llewellyn	Welsh Government
Nathan de Rozarieux	Falfish
Phil Nickels	Young's Seafoods
Rowland Sharp	Natural Resources Wales
Scott Wharton	S&P Trawlers Ltd
Sophy McCully	Cefas
Tony Rutherford	Bideford Fisheries Ltd
Victoria Bendall	Cefas

**1. Welcome and apologies**

Bill Lart welcomed attendees to the Skates and Rays Group meeting. The aim of the group is to improve communication along the supply chain for skates and rays.

**Apologies were received from:**

Ally Dingwall	Sainsburys
Clare Eno	Natural Resources Wales
Dale Rodmell	NFFO
David Donnan	Scottish Natural Heritage
Hannah MacIntyre	M&S
Huw Thomas	Morrisons
Jeremy Langley	Waitrose
Jim Ellis	Cefas
Keith Brown	Sealord (Caistor) UK
Mike Platt	Co-op
Stuart Hetherington	Cefas
Stuart Reeves	Welsh Government
Tom Blasdale	JNCC

## **2. Minutes from the last Skates and Rays Group meeting held on 10 March 2010.**

The minutes from the previous meetings were circulated before the meeting and were accepted as a true reflection of the meeting. As this meeting was some time ago there was some discussion about the supply chain situation at the time.

### **Actions arising and reflection**

**2.1 Action to rectify variables regarding speciation of skates and rays in Sub Area VIa/Sub Area IV.** There appeared to be a difference in the way that skates and rays were recorded in area IV and in VIa (in England rays are recorded by species). Enquiries were made at the time but this would require a legislative change at EU level. There was a formal request from Marine Scotland to the EU asking that rays were recorded by species. The Skates and Rays group took the initiative on reporting rays by species, prior to it being a requirement.

**Action 2.1.** BL to formally write to Marine Scotland as the Chair of the Skates and Rays Group

### **2.2 Status of skate.**

The group discussed developments in stock status over recent years;

- Norwegian (black) skate are not landed at all now due to prohibition and do not appear in research vessel surveys so it is difficult to ascertain the status of this species.
- Isolated numbers of common skate are being found in the north North Sea and this is welcomed.

It was recognised that the group had made good progress through the provision of industry speciation data ahead of the statutory requirement to report skates and rays by species. This group has lost momentum (over three years since the last meeting). There was scope for a brief description of the way in which skates and rays management has progressed and the achievements of the group.

**Action 2.2.1.** A description of the group and its achievements will be included on the headline page of the Skates and Rays Group section of the Seafish website

### **2.3 Action to clarify implementation of bycatch regulations with MFA.**

This was based on reports of a 25% bycatch limit on skates and rays. Bill Lart had spoken to the MFA at the time but they did not perceive it as an important issue.

However, it was unclear whether this rule was still in place in the TAC and Quotas regulations. It was noted that changes to regulations needed to be better communicated. The annual update to the MMO guidance on elasmobranchs was flagged as the primary source of information on regulatory requirements. It was requested that a wider audience be notified when this guidance was updated. The Shark Trust also produces fisheries advisories on an annual basis which summarise the regulations concerning certain elasmobranch species and these are available on-line and in hard copy format. It was noted that efforts should be made to improve communication between all organisations.

#### **Action:**

2.3.1 Defra to confirm the rules regarding bycatch regulations.

2.3.2 Defra to contact the MMO to ensure PO's are included on the elasmobranch guidance mailing list.

2.3.3 The Shark Trust need to expand their core circulation list.

2.3.4 Seafish to provide skates and rays circulation list to Defra and Shark Trust, provided members of the list are in agreement.

### **2.4 Minimum Landing Sizes.**

There was a lot of discussion at the last meeting about Minimum Legal Landing Size (MLLS) and Minimum Market Size.

#### Discussion

Although there are no European statutory Minimum Legal Landing Sizes, minimum landing sizes are considered to be viable conservation tools for skates and rays based on evidence that indicates these species can survive discarding.

A number of trends and initiatives had been undertaken;

- A sizing board had been voluntarily introduced in by NDFA Devon establishing a minimum marketable size of 38cm measured across the wingtips. Post script; it is intended that this will be increased to 45cm from 1 January 2014.
- It was reported that 45cm across the wingtip was the minimum size (statutory) measured on the cut wings in Wales. However, this was under review and it was not uncommon to get oversized wings from undersized fish.
- The market is moving towards a bigger wing. As a result trawlers are discarding undersize skates and rays but there remains uncertainty over their survivability.
- Regional management is very important – different areas have different needs – a one size fits all approach to fisheries management does not work, therefore MLS need to be tailored to the fishery in question.
- Belgian fishermen have adopted a voluntary MLS of 38cm measured across the wingtips.
- A paper has been published by Cefas which includes length at maturity information, including length at 50% maturity, conversion ratios between total length and disc width to wingtip. Lengths at maturity were found to be significantly different between the North Sea and Celtic Sea for cuckoo ray and female thornback rays.  
<http://icesjms.oxfordjournals.org/content/69/10/1812.abstract>
- Since TACs were introduced in Sub Area VII selective grading has occurred.
- The policy environment has and continues to change. Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy brings with it crucial opportunities for decentralizing the management of our fisheries. Regionalisation will allow management at a more appropriate spatial scale and the discard ban will bring an end to the wasteful practice of discarding dead fish.
- From a retailer perspective they want to be able to demonstrate to their customers that they are buying from a managed fishery.

**Action:**

2.4.1 Consider how Skates and Rays Group could facilitate communication on different regional issues concerning MLS.

2.4.2 John Butterwith to supply information to Welsh Government regarding the voluntary agreement on ray Minimum Landing Sizes agreed with the Belgian Fishermen's Association.

2.4.3 Cefas to provide information on length to wingtip conversion factors. See paper above.

**3. Issues surrounding the paper by the University of Salford; “DNA barcoding unveils skate (Chondrichthyes: Rajidae) species diversity in ‘ray’ products sold across Ireland and the UK.”**

Bill Lart showed a presentation which illustrated that speciation on landing is 98.5% in the UK, and that the species mix for landed rays was different from the limited samples taken by this study from retailers.

The study took 41 samples in the South West and North West – so not a representative sample of the whole country. However, this study was not really about landings, it was more about whether skates and rays are correctly labelled at the point of sale in order that consumers could make informed choices.

Discussion

- Although the publication of the University of Salford report was the catalyst for re-convening the group, in reality the report itself was not damning of the skates and rays sector. The real issue was the media interpretation of the report and this did cause concern the sector with calls on suppliers to justify what they were doing.

However, it was reported that retail customers did not pull away from skates and rays as a result and customer bases have remained the same.

- The author of the study was reported to be concerned about it being misrepresented.
- This group, before it went into abeyance, provided a framework to help support the supply chain with information and interpretation.
- Retailers demand is for a constant supply.

#### **4. Latest scientific advice on skates and rays. Sophy McCully, Cefas.**

[http://www.seafish.org/media/1128245/s&rgroup\\_oct2013\\_cefas\\_scientificadvice2.pdf](http://www.seafish.org/media/1128245/s&rgroup_oct2013_cefas_scientificadvice2.pdf)

This advice is biennial for 2013 and 2014 and can be found at:

For Celtic Sea and West of Scotland

<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2012/2012/Rays%20and%20skates%20in%20the%20Celtic%20Seas.pdf>

For North Sea

<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2012/2012/Rays%20and%20skates%20in%20the%20North%20Sea.pdf>

Management concerns are;

- That skates are vulnerable to capture from an early age.
- They are slow growing and late maturing; fecundity is low.
- Some skate species have disappeared from some areas (e.g. white skate), or show retracted distributions; that is they do not occur over their former ranges (e.g. thornback ray) and have patchy distributions (e.g. undulate ray).

Currently ICES assessment methods rely on a time series of survey vessel catch per unit effort, which may not be optimal for assessing these stocks, since there are many unknown factors, including: the stock area occurring outside of the survey areas, and the low catchability of particularly larger skates in some survey gears. However survey trends under the data limited assessment methods have been used to provide advice - some of which is summarised below:

- Thornback ray - catch rates in trawl surveys increasing in both North and Celtic Sea ecoregions, and most notably in the Thames Estuary.
- Blonde ray - catch rates in trawl surveys low, highly variable, with uncertain trends.
- Spotted ray - catch rates in trawl surveys increasing in North Sea and sub-areas VIIa,f,g, but decreasing in ICES area VI.
- Cuckoo ray – increasing CPUE trends in North Sea, but decreasing in Celtic Sea ecoregion.

Skates and rays fisheries are currently managed under a generic, multi-species TAC, along with prohibitions for severely depleted species. Thus although advice is given by species, the TAC is for skates and rays as a whole.

There is an EU request that more regional management of skate fisheries should be considered, given both reform in the Common Fisheries Policy, and also because this will allow more bespoke advice/management that better considers the contrasting life-histories and levels of local abundance of the constituent skate species over a more appropriate spatial resolution.

Of note was the recent capture of a white skate in the English Channel, an area which was previously believed they were extirpated from.

#### Discussion

- There is insufficient knowledge on stock status of blonde ray. There are clear limitations to the trawl survey data. How can this be improved? Cefas are restricted to their routine fisheries surveys, with limited budget. It was recognised that although

survey data was not ideal the ICES framework is very strict and requires precaution where knowledge is lacking. However, the framework is continually evolving.

- There was a request for support from Seafish to help in the push for more data. It was perceived that more data were available than was actually being used. However, it must be recognised that additional data cannot currently be incorporated into the ICES data limited framework to assist in changing advice at this time.
- The essential role of industry participating in providing data on skates and finding practical measures to manage skate and ray fisheries has been taken into account in the design of several Defra funded and Cefas led projects, such as Project NEPTUNE and Sharkbywatch;
  - Project NEPTUNE is a collaborative project majoring on porbeagle shark, spurdog and common skate, which brings together fisherman and scientists in order to provide the necessary evidence to influence the management of fisheries. The project enables fishermen and scientists to work together to address data gaps, which otherwise would result in precautionary management decisions, and to identify and implement practical measures that improve the sustainability of the fishery. For example, it will look at, codes of conduct for discarding elasmobranchs to improve survivability. More details can be found at [www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/media/617263/neptunefactsheet\\_scientificbycatchfishery\\_final.pdf](http://www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/media/617263/neptunefactsheet_scientificbycatchfishery_final.pdf) and <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=17020&FromSearch=Y&Publisher=1&SearchText=shark&SortString=ProjectCode&SortOrder=Asc&Paging=10#Description>
  - Shark Bywatch which is studying the elasmobranch fisheries and stocks in the Thames Estuary Shark By-Watch UK. <http://www.sharkbywatch.org/>
  - A Progress Review of the Defra Shark, Skate, and Ray Conservation Plan. July 2013 can be found at. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/224294/pb14006-shark-plan-review-20130719.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224294/pb14006-shark-plan-review-20130719.pdf)
- The industry reported that catches are consistent, year on year but there are issues regarding discarding good quality saleable fish. We need a mechanism whereby support can be gathered for sustainable fisheries practices at a regional level, preferably with the help from Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and MCS. Ray fisheries in the Bristol Channel had entered the MSC Certification process, and this was supported by good data, but the process has not been completed because of concerns about the selectivity of the gear for plaice.
- There is a protected box which is observed by North Devon fishermen. There is a requirement to establish what benefit was being derived from this protection

## **5. Marine Conservation Society ratings. Jim Masters, MCS.**

MCS ratings rely on science. MCS focusses on three key aspects – vulnerability, stock assessment and management.

There is a case for regional management and it is important we invest in fisheries science in support. If a stock is seen to be increasing it does not necessarily mean that the ratings will improve. However, there could be some merit in possibly trying to take into account some of the regional conservation initiatives such as the ray box. MCS would be interested in working with the Skates and Rays Group (alongside the Industry Review Group) to develop some descriptors for data-limited stocks.

### Discussion

- There were questions over the down-grading of some species. On what evidence was this based? Answer: To be able to comment we need to go back to each individual species.

- Fisheries management is changing and MCS does need to reflect this. Would MCS be prepared to advise on a regional basis and potentially reassess the ratings?  
Answer: this would have to take place within a framework and an agreed set of descriptors for a data-limited stock. There is the possibility that MCS could look at this and try to identify information gaps. Presently MCS has to advise on the basis of the information that is available and there is also a capacity issue at MCS, but we have to accept that data is limited.
- It is important that MCS does work with industry. It would appear that an advised reduction in catch is viewed negatively and is a contributor to downgrading ratings.
- As a sector we must understand that what is published does have a very strong influence on consumers. Are MCS aware of this? Answer: We could choose whether we stop producing a ratings list or we could re-assess how we rate fish, however funding and resource are a major issue. With no forthcoming financial support we need to retain our independence but we do recognize that the landscape is changing and that the decline in a number of stocks is being halted. There are positive stories and we are hoping to launch a project to celebrate best practice. This was viewed as good news and welcomed by the group.
- The information that MCS uses – does it have to be published? Answer: It should be peer-reviewed and we need to be confident about its source.
- Could Seafish help with publication? Answer: Seafish did have SIN as a resource for publishing data. This has now been overtaken and there is a lot of information in the public domain. However it is not just about data there is a lot to be said about behaviours as well.
- The term ‘responsible’ has a lot of different aspects and should reflect management measures and fishery behaviour and co-operation with science. The Seafish Risk Assessment for Sourcing Seafood (RASS) initiative which will include stock assessment information and localized fishery information. Other information would be available from Project Inshore. <http://www.seafish.org/industry-support/fishing/project-inshore>
- Fishonline does give the consumer the confidence to purchase seafood they might not have purchased before. But could we refine ‘sustainable’ and ‘responsible’ – could we have a two-lane rating system? Answer: One rating system is the best way, however MCS does welcome the idea of rethinking how seafood is rated, for the metrics to be refined, possibly with more emphasis on management.
- It was reported by MCS that MCS had approached Seafish to collaborate on a ratings system. The Seafish Board was not happy with this proposal but had endorsed the RASS project. There is the idea that the RASS tool will include reference to other ratings such as MCS.
- Retailers are keen to know how we can seek some flexibility in their decision trees to incorporate some of the ‘softer’ aspects of the available information.

## **6. Management measures for skates and rays. Led by Bill Lart.**

WGEF Special request.

The June 2013 Report of the Working Group on Elasmobranch Fishes (WGEF) mentions a special request from the European Commission to ICES to provide advice on exploring alternative and/or complementary management measures such as closed areas/seasons or effort restrictions which may better protect demersal elasmobranchs.

The response can be seen at Annex 3, page 626.

[http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Expert%20Group%20Report/acom/2013/WGEF/wgef\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Expert%20Group%20Report/acom/2013/WGEF/wgef_2013.pdf)

There is also a further request with respect to using commercial landings data in assessments but the timescale has not been set for this.

**Action 6.1.** CEFAS to update on response to request when it becomes available



## **7. European Elasmobranch Conference, 1-3 November, Plymouth. Ali Hood, Sharks Trust.**

This is a scientific symposium which is held in the UK every 10 years.

<http://www.sharktrust.org/en/eea2013>

## **8. Looking ahead**

Cefas outlined ongoing work and work under consideration in particular Defra-funded work on survival rates; a pilot study to look at Thornback rays and lost/forgotten shark and ray fisheries; discard evidence; by-catch reduction and dead discarding. Other projects include Project NEPTUNE and Sharkbywatch, see above

Defra reported that in addition to the above there would be a number of projects under the general heading of support for the CFP which would include an elasmobranch element

### Final comments

- I am encouraged about what I have heard from ICES, Defra and MCS. There have been changes in stance since the Skates and Rays Group last met.
- What we need is a 'responsible approach' to reflect a collaborative working partnership using such knowledge as is available.
- Project NEPTUNE in particular is a positive step forward, but scientific studies take time. In the meantime the scientific advice is considered inconsistent with what the fishermen see on the ground; there is a danger that vessels will leave the industry.
- It is important to recognize that Project NEPTUNE covers only spurdog, porbeagle and skates.
- Welsh Government has CCTV for fully documented fisheries on a few vessels under an observer programme.
- It is important that the Skates and Rays Group keeps going. It has been an important conduit for information, was a key part of the development of the ID guides and helped champion appropriate species when under threat of removal from supermarket shelves.
- The Skates and Rays Group has an important role to play in instilling confidence in buyers which has been set back by MCS ratings. It was felt that Project NEPTUNE and similar projects had a key role to play.
- The future of the group was discussed. The group was assured that given the enthusiasm to re-convene the group that Seafish would be able to facilitate this. The group thought that a meeting once a year was appropriate. In addition Seafish would develop a web page for the group this would include the minutes, meeting presentations, key reports and links to further information.
- The crux is that the supply chain wants help to instill confidence in buyers.
- I think I can promote skates and rays on the back of what this group is doing to keep the sector up-to-date with new developments and new information.

### **Actions**

8.1 Skates and Rays Group to be reconvened.

8.2 Seafish to develop a web page for the group. This will include the minutes, meeting presentations, key reports and links to further information.

8.3 Seafish to introduce an adhoc news alert on skates and rays news to include updates on the progress of Project Neptune.

## **9. Date of next meeting**

Likely to be October 2014.

### **Action list and Actions to 22 November 2013**

2.1 BL to formally write to Marine Scotland as chair of the Skates and Rays Group. BL has discussed this with MMO - they report in their statistics all species from all around UK, but the MMO only report to Commission the landings as specified in the regulations. So it would be Defra's role to request that the landings are reported by all species in the December Council negotiations. This is to be discussed with Jamie Rendell.

2.2.1. A description of the group and its achievements will be included on the headline page of the Skates and Rays Group section of the Seafish website; webpage in the process of being created

2.3.1. Defra to confirm the rules regarding bycatch regulations. The bycatch rules still in place are a maximum; of 25% rays in vessels of >15 m in European waters of Division IIa and Sub Area IV; see page 23 of

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:023:0001:0053:EN:PDF>

Jamie Rendell will contact MMO to find out whether this regulation has been an issue. It would be useful to hear from Skippers whether this has been an issue.

2.3.2. Defra to contact the MMO to ensure PO's are included on the elasmobranch guidance mailing list.

2.3.3. The Shark Trust needs to expand their core circulation list.

2.3.4. Karen Green to provide the skates and rays circulation list to Defra and Shark trust, provided participants on the list are in agreement.

2.4.1. Consider how the Skates and Rays Group could facilitate communication on different regional issues concerning MLS; Bill Lart currently working with John Butterwith on this.

2.4.2. John Butterwith will supply information to Welsh Government regarding the voluntary agreement on ray Minimum Landing Sizes agreed with the Belgian Fishermen's Association.

2.4.3. Cefas to provide information on length to wingtip conversion factors. This is covered in the recent article in the ICES journal.

6.1. CEFAS to update on response to request to ICES WGEF on use of commercial catch data when it becomes available

8.1. Skates and Rays Group to be reconvened.

8.2. Seafish to develop a web page for the group. This will include the minutes, meeting presentations, key reports and links to further information.

8.3 Seafish to introduce an adhoc news alert on skates and rays news to include updates on the progress of research projects and management initiatives.