

INSTITUTE OF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Position Statement

Sustainable Fisheries Management in Estuaries

Introduction

Estuaries provide some of the most productive and dynamic aquatic environments available. They act as important migration corridors, as well as spawning and nursery grounds for a broad range of freshwater, estuarine and marine fish species. Some species need to spend part of their life cycle in the estuary itself. Others need to migrate through the estuary in order to complete their lifecycles in freshwaters upstream. The intertidal margins of the estuary provide the most productive microhabitats in the whole estuary. A number of studies have now demonstrated that saltmarshes represent the optimal nursery grounds for the early life stages of species such as bass.

In the past, fisheries management in most estuaries has been somewhat fragmentary. Migratory fisheries have tended to be managed by the Environment Agency (EA and other equivalents) with little direct contact with marine fisheries interests and regulators, other than to protect migratory salmonids in specific locations. Clearer information, based largely upon new sampling regimes for the Water Framework Directive (WFD), provides an improved evidence base to inform managers. Given the new regulatory framework in the inshore area and defined responsibilities of regulators, the time is now right to properly review fisheries management in estuaries.

Under the Marine & Coastal Access Act, 2009, the new Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) have responsibility for regulation of all marine fisheries, including those in estuaries. The EA have been provided with new powers to maintain, improve and protect additional migratory species that utilise estuaries, smelt, river and sea lamprey.

Given its aim to promote sustainable fisheries management, now is a propitious time for the Institute to be using its considerable experience and unique skill base in this particular field to promote more sustainable management regimes in all estuaries. The socio-economic benefits to the wider community may well be profound.

General Position on sustainable fisheries management

The IFM has established a number of general positions on sustainable estuarine and marine fisheries management:-

- The promotion of a healthy fish resource, available equally to all users, with maximal associated benefits for society and the economy
- Holistic integrated and inclusive management based upon the ecosystem approach and the precautionary principle
- Full inclusion of recreational sea angling in the management process
- Sustainable well regulated exploitation based on sound science

- Effective, robust, integrated enforcement following the principles established in the UK for Better Regulation
- Greater integration of fisheries and environmental policy
- Greater emphasis on stock and habitat protection and enhancement measures
- Greater emphasis on measures which tend to reduce discards and restrict unsustainable fishing and illegal landings
- Greater emphasis on the application of effort controls to marine fisheries management. These may include limitations on fishing methods and the temporary closure of fishing grounds to protect spawning and nursery grounds
- The promotion of branded, local, high value, low impact, commercial fisheries
- Greater recognition in management regimes of the high importance of intertidal areas as key nursery grounds for the early life stages of a range of economically significant species.

The Position in Estuaries

- There are a number of estuaries in England and Wales, where informed inclusive dialogue over a number of years, based on good local environmental data, have resulted in management regimes which permit and indeed encourage sustainable exploitation in an inclusive and equitable manner. They all entail high compliance and low enforcement costs, without jeopardizing the broad range of vital ecosystem services which these environments provide. Good examples exist in the Thames, the Welsh Dee, and in a number of estuaries in Cornwall, Devon, the North West and the North East of England. IFM members have been actively involved in the partnership processes which have led to these successful examples. The IFM will actively work to support the continued success of these good practice examples and seek to promote their wider adoption elsewhere.
- The unique and productive environment that an estuary provides demands that some of are worthy of formal protection. However, the Adhoc Technical Expert Group on Marine and Coastal Protected Areas working for the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity note in their publication *Technical Advice on the Establishment of a National System of Marine and Coastal Protected Areas* that “the term ‘marine protected area’ (MPA) is taken not to include coastal areas or cross the land/sea interface, and omits important parts of the overall marine environment such as estuaries, marine saltmarsh (CBD Technical Series no. 13, 2004). IFM members have been very active in the designation of a number of estuaries as candidate Marine Conservation Zones, in part based on their status as important nursery grounds, utilising WFD data sets. The IFM will continue to promote broader protection of estuarine fish communities and habitats. The Institute believes in the multi-functional approach to MPA designation and use, where a holistic and inclusive view is taken of what is protected and what can still be exploited sustainably.
- A number of the good practice examples cited above include some temporal and/or spatial restriction on trawling in the inner parts of estuaries. The Institute believes that all forms of trawling can be extremely destructive to juvenile fish life and benthic productivity in the narrow confines of the inner parts of estuaries, as well as impacting on migratory species, albeit unintentionally. This makes no sense in terms

of sustainable fisheries management and tends to run counter to Good Ecological Status under WFD. The Institute will continue to promote the limitation of trawling in the inner sections of estuaries, based not on dogma, but on a case by case, consensual and inclusive approach and on the basis of good local science.

- Drifting gill nets set in estuaries legally for marine fish can have devastating impacts on migratory salmonids. Some of the good practice examples set out above already place controls on this method of fishing, to protect migratory salmonids. The Institute would support this good practice and would also point out that overall production of some targeted estuarine species taken by these methods such as bass and grey mullets, might actually be increased to the wider benefit of all commercial and recreational interests, if these destructive fishing methods were removed from the narrow confines of the inner estuary.
- The IFM provides technical support for the sampling of fish in estuaries to meet WFD standards through accredited training courses. The IFM is now supporting a number of new partnership fish survey programmes, building upon this technical support base. In our experience, management regimes that build upon the commitment and trust that naturally ensues from such collaborative survey programmes are much more robust, inclusive and ultimately successful.

IFM members have a wealth of experience in the ecology of fish in estuaries and in estuarine fisheries management. We look forward to more engagement in this field with you and many other interests in the future. Through a range of fora, we will continue to promote more sustainable fisheries management in all its forms in estuaries and other inshore waters.

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