**Consultation response from IFM**

The consultation is titled: Potential extension to the Yorkshire and North East coastal sea trout netting season.

The Fisheries Minister instructed the Agency to investigate the possibility of extending the T and J net netting season for sea trout only, if this were possible without impacting those salmon stocks exposed to the fishery. However, the reports accompanying this consultation largely concentrate on the trials of modified nets rather than socio-economic grounds for extending the netting season. The justification for having a mixed stock sea trout fishery in the first place is not questioned. If it is unjustifiable, then the question of extending the season is irrelevant. Furthermore, little evidence is provided for the socio-economic grounds for continuing with the entire coastal sea trout fishery, let alone extending the season.

The IFM believes that the Precautionary Approach to fisheries management, as recommended by NASCO for the management of salmon fisheries, should equally be applied to sea trout, especially where a fishery is exploiting mixed stocks of both salmon and sea trout. Multistock fisheries cannot be subjected to adequate management without very good information about the status of each and every stock contributing to that fishery, including whether or not it has a sustainable surplus that would allow exploitation. Thus closure of the fishery should occur unless there is evidence that sustainable management of both the salmon and sea trout stocks can be achieved.

Statements in the consultation report accept the arguments in relation to closure of the salmon fishery, but it would appear that the Government has not accepted these in relation to sea trout.

The Environment Agency has made assessments of the sea trout stocks in rivers in the North East, albeit not to the quality of assessments made for salmon. Except for the Tyne, all were assessed as being ‘probably at risk’ in 2018, and the Tyne was showing a downward trend. Therefore a reduction in exploitation of sea trout should be sought whilst also continuing to minimise effects on salmon. Extension of the netting season would probably increase the risk to sea trout stocks.

Although the obligations are with reference to salmon stocks, the principles apply equally to sea trout. The evidence provided indicates that little is known about the status of individual sea trout stocks contributing to the fishery and about effects of recent changes in fishery intensity relating to the measures applied to protect salmon. The latter also applies to any bycatch, in this case, not just salmon, but also bass, sole and other species. No data on bycatches of sea fish are provided.

Although some evidence is provided on the statuses of individual river stocks of salmon and sea trout each year, these cannot readily be related to catches in the coastal fishery and vice versa. It would have been useful if catches in both environments had been also expressed in terms of temporal changes in catch per unit effort. The measure of effort that has been used is largely the issue of a licence, rather than any measure of the fishing effort employed.

All the fish are ultimately caught in this fishery after entanglement in the nets. Removal of the closed end of the monk of a modified T net therefore reduces the likelihood of entanglement after confinement in an enclosed space. For the modified J net, the funnel entrance to the monk of the T net was in effect replaced by a panel of larger mesh, therefore the size of this panel and its location within the curve of the J becomes very important. No data were given in the report on the proportions of catches taken within the court or monks of the T net or curved area of the J net, either before or after modification.

The trial with modified nets was adequate in District 1 to show the likely effects of an extended season, but the trial in District 5 was of inadequate duration to show the benefits of the modified J net.

The T net trial in District 1 showed the benefit to salmon stocks of the modified net, but at the expense to the fishermen of a significant reduction in sea trout catches. For the Yorkshire fishery, the modified J net met the success criteria for protecting salmon, but the average reduction in sea trout catches was about 65%. This would be likely to benefit sea trout stock protection, but would greatly detract from the economic benefit derived from the fishery.

Despite these results, it was concluded in the context of using the modified nets that “an extension to the current sea trout netting season is likely to be economically viable.” Whilst this might apply for T nets in District 1, it seems unlikely to be true for J nets.

If use of modified J nets were extended to the entire Yorkshire fishery, whilst keeping the current seasons, the overall effect of a drop in catches of 65% would probably be to make the Yorkshire net fishery unviable, with greatest effect in Districts 6 and 7. Extending the season could offset this to some extent in Districts 3, 4 and 5.

Although the supporting reports only refer to salmon and sea trout, the nets will also have bycatches of other species. Of particular importance are bass and sole, both of which are managed under NEIFCA’s Fixed Engine Byelaw. NEIFCA operate a limited permit system under this byelaw which extends from Withernsea to Flamborough Head, within Districts 6 and 7 of the NLO. This fishery operates from October to April primarily targeting sea bass, and then from May to June primarily targeting soles. The fishery consists of both subtidal permits where nets are operated from a vessel, and intertidal permits where nets are staked out at low tide by hand without the use of a vessel. Many of the permit holders also hold permits under the NLO.

However, Council regulation 2019/124 explicitly states that all commercial net fisheries from the shore are prohibited from fishing for sea bass. The NLO permits do not distinguish between intertidally operated nets and those operated from a vessel. Equally, whilst many of the NLO permit holders who fish from a vessel will do so from a registered fishing boat, it appears that it is not a requirement for a vessel used under the NLO to be a registered fishing vessel. There is therefore concern that non-registered vessels that do not have a sea bass entitlement may be capturing sea bass.

If further trials were allowed to take place of modified nets and extensions to the season, then this should also include extension to Districts 6 and 7 and to bycatch in all Districts.

In response to the options given in the consultation document, the IFM response is as follows:

*Option1. Maintain the current beach netting season with no extension* – Does not meet the objective of this consultation.

*Option 2. Extend the beach netting season on a trial basis in 2020* – The wording of this Option is ambiguous. It is unclear whether the trial would consist of a one year reversion to the former seasons in all Districts; of the modified netting trials in Districts 1 and 5 for the one year, but over the whole original season; or some other combination. Further trials are desirable in the Yorkshire Districts to gather more robust data sets about net modification and deployment, temporal effects, economic viability and bycatch.

*Option 3. Partially restoring the beach netting season for sea trout-* The evidence for the increased economic benefit from increased catches of sea trout needs to be weighed against increased damage to salmon and sea trout stocks and other species. It might be suitable for a one year trial to collect additional data or to use modified nets only in the extension period.

*Option 4. Fully restoring the beach netting season for sea trout-* This option only applies in Districts 1 to 5, and would increase risk to both salmon and sea trout stocks and increase bycatch, so should not be pursued further.

*Extending the use of modified designs of nets to the whole of the netting season –* From the point of view of stock protection for salmon and sea trout this would be a preferred option. However, on socio-economic grounds this would probably be unacceptable, especially in Yorkshire Districts. Further trials of modified J nets are required and perhaps trials of modified T nets in the Yorkshire fishery.

For the above reasons, Options 1 and 4 should be ruled out. Option 2 is vague, so needs clarification. but is preferred from the point of view of allowing further trials to enable more robust data sets to be gathered, especially from the Yorkshire Districts. Without such trials and further consideration of the statuses of individual sea trout stocks, a balanced view of the potential for extending the Yorkshire and North East coastal sea trout netting season cannot be derived.