

REPORT

Focus Group

Skates, Rays and Sharks in VI-VII

Wednesday 26 September 2012

16:15 - 17:45

Dublin Castle, Dublin

Chairwoman: Eibhlín O'Sullivan

Rapporteur: Alexandre Rodríguez

1. Welcome

The Focus Group Chairwoman, Eibhlín O'Sullivan, welcomed the members and the attendees to the meeting. The full list of participants is included as annex I of the report.

- No apologies for absence were received.
- The agenda was adopted with the inclusion of an item for discussions on management measures for sharks.
- The report of the last meeting held in Paris on the 29th of February 2012 was adopted without comments.

- Opening remarks:

The Chairwoman reminded the members of the background to the Focus Group in that 2011 Skates and Rays stocks were classified by ICES as Data Limited Stocks and the fact that this might lead, in most cases, to an automatic reduction within the region of 20-25% in the annual TACs. In order to mitigate this effect, the Irish fishing industry presented a proposal for a multiannual management plan (MAMP) for skates and rays in July 2011, and two Focus Group meetings took place in September 2011 and February 2012, respectively, to further discuss this plan and gather knowledge of the stocks, as well as exchange views on existing initiatives such as fisheries science partnerships, industry-led voluntary technical measures and campaigns carried out by national scientific institutes on a number of elements (no of eggs larvae, abundance indexes, migrations patterns...).

Two successive versions of the management plan were circulated among all Focus Group members in 2012 and a number of comments were received in relation to the original draft MAMP but no agreement had been reached to date¹.

¹ Latest version (May 2012) available in the meeting site:

www.nwwrac.org/admin/publication/upload/2_NWWRAC_REVISÉD_DRAFT_LTMP_SKATES_RAYS_VI_VII_May_2012.pdf

2. Discussion on the NWWRAC proposal for a MAMP for skates and rays VI-VII

The Chairwoman pointed out to those present that it would appear in light of the ICES advice about to be released that Phase I (science/industry collaboration for input into ICES assessments) of the original plan might be overridden. However, phases II (procedure for TAC setting and additional measures) and III (MSY targets and re-evaluation of the plan) might still remain valid and be applicable if agreed by the NWWRAC. In summary, she stated that the Focus Group needed to decide today if they would proceed with the plan or drop it and look for alternative management measures.

2.1. Comments from members and suggested amendments to the plan

Jacques Pichon raised concerns on the MSY targets and the transition scheme included there, whereas Emiel Brouckaert was opposed to interventions on a general TAC based on assessments of data for different species of skates and rays.

Maurice Clarke, acting in capacity of scientific advisor to the Irish industry proposal, said that it was not feasible in the short term to establish a separate TAC for each skate and ray species as there was not sufficient scientific data available to underpin a single assessment.

Dr. Clarke said that, due to the fact that we cannot rely now on individual TACs, we need to look at other management options such as closure areas for spawning and nursery areas for female rays that might help to the stock recovery. The priority attention must be given to protect the most vulnerable species known as “choke stocks”, for example cuckoo rays.

2.2. Proposed way forward

John Lynch, IFO representative, submitted a **proposal on behalf of the Irish fishing industry for the introduction of seasonal closures in April-May and probably June for a number of spawning grounds that have been already well identified and mapped in the Irish Sea. He also invited his counterparts from UK, France and Belgium to identify those spawning areas where the vulnerable ray stocks aggregate or reproduce.** This area is indicated below:



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Jacques Pichon said that closures might be a good tool to manage some ray stocks but, before proposing new areas, this should be done in coordination with the MPA sites proposed and made an example with the case of cuckoo ray fisheries in West of Brittany. To this end, it might be worthwhile to compare the maps where we identify spawning areas with those of proposed MPAs by JNCC (particularly those located in the South East) or those that will be proposed soon by the French Agency for MPAs with the aim of protecting biodiversity of vulnerable ecosystems while minimizing the impact of these closures for relevant fishing areas.

Daniel Lefèvre recalled that the southern part of Britain and the western Channel host a high concentration and presence of undulate rays. He also mentioned that there is a project in place in West Brittany to ensure tagging and monitoring of distribution of rays species. He also expressed his concern in relation to the potentially high level of discards of rays and uncertainty in relation to the discard survival rates.

Emiel Brouckaert said that the idea of protecting juveniles has been always supported, and as proof of same there is a voluntary closure in an area agreed between professionals of the Belgian fleet and North Devon fishermen's association. Any new initiatives of the same kind should also start on a voluntary basis.

Johnny Woodlock said that fishermen are the best placed to know where the ray species and their spawning areas are and should work with scientists to determine the areas to close.

Jacques Pichon said that scientific studies (e.g. STECF) show good discards survival rates for skates and rays but they are neither conclusive nor representative. He acknowledged that the Irish proposal was worthy of consideration, but it was needed to define a clear set of objectives and the specific tools to reach these objectives. He said he is not against the closures but need to know where they are for different species and grounds.

Daniel Lefèvre said that fishermen had already put in practice technical measures such as MLS for certain ray species. Before agreeing on temporary closures, more data will be needed to better frame management measures for these species. Indeed, it is also important to ensure link between ecosystems as ray populations are distributed in wide ranging areas.

The Chairwoman and the Irish industry representatives said that the closed areas had been already identified in Irish waters and working from VMS information available it would appear they would have little impact on non-Irish fleets.

Maurice Clarke advised members to concentrate on those species that are likely to drive the advice downwards. He made a brief overview of the state of the stocks as follows:

- Common skate: depleted over most of its range

- Cuckoo ray: Irish Fishery not important but some discards. Species commercially important for French – main spot on a rocky ground on the West of Brittany. Big females are in the area to spawn, and it would be useful to explore a closure there.
- Small eye ray: Main area of distribution is along the North Bristol Channel, voluntary measures in place by the English-Belgian industry in VIIf, maybe not coinciding with the main stock area, but said to be a spawning area.
- Undulate ray: Any interim measure by the industry would be beneficial for the recovery of the stocks and well received by both scientists and policy makers.
- Blonde ray: Spawning area in the Western Irish Sea (*Kisk, Codling and Arklow Banks*). Seasonal closure in place from April-June similar to that of Portuguese fishermen. Suggest following an alternative approach rather than setting a TAC.

Dr. Clarke encouraged those present to reflect on the introduction and/or use of minimum landing sizes or even maximum landing sizes (the latter would be effective to protect big breeding females) as a management tool. Both would pose problems however, with mixed trawl fisheries (4-6 hours tow) as it would encourage discarding which could be counterproductive given current EC current policies and the foreseeable implementation of a discards ban.

Paul Trebilcock said that the EU industry members need to be very clear from the outset about the nature (voluntary or compulsory), duration (seasonal or permanent) and location (coordinates, extension...) of each of these closures, while establishing links with sanctuary areas and MPAs already in place.

Hugo González asked if we were talking here only about directed or targeted fisheries for rays or these closed areas would affect to all fleets. He also said that they would like to have sound scientific evidence of the presence/abundance of rays in the proposed closures.

Eibhlín O’Sullivan said that the Irish industry has identified three areas with high abundance of rays and a relatively low level of fishing activity. This is underpinned by a scientific study on mixed fishery effort (using VMS data and track records) on the Irish EEZ for all fleets operating in the area that looks at the abundance of rays². Graphics on effort and LPUE are included as Annex II of the report.

The Chairwoman took the opportunity to summarise the discussions to date and to clarify expectations. She made it clear that it was not the intention of the Irish industry to ask the UK, Belgian and French fleets to agree closed areas today, but simply agree in principle to the concept of closed areas for conservation purposes and perhaps in identifying areas for closures.

² **Source:** Samuel Shephard, Hans Gerritsen, Michael J. Kaiser and David G. Reid, “*Spatial heterogeneity in fishing creates de facto refugia for endangered Celtic Sea elasmobranchs*” - 2012
www.nwwrac.org/admin/publication/upload/Study_Elasmobranch_Refuge_SShephard_alii.pdf

There is an objective need for a management plan on the mixed fisheries of VI-VII and what was required was sensible management measures that allow industry to rebuild the stocks while moving away from over prescriptive TACs. She asked if the members if they were happy with this suggested way forward or they would like to make any other proposals.

Decision: The members agreed to follow the way forward as explained by the Chairwoman.

Action 1:

All potential areas for closure will be aggregated in a single map. The UK and French representatives will examine those areas that JNCC is proposing as candidate for designation of closed areas and check with Dr. Clarke the information available on “hotspots” with high abundances of rays and distributions of populations. They will also include the voluntary closures by South Devon FPO, and the Irish proposals on seasonal closures in those delimited areas of the Irish Sea.

Maurice Clarke and the Marine Institute will collate that data or address to ICES the need for more information and inform the NWWRAC about the feasibility of this proposal from a scientific perspective.

The proposal with the map of closed areas will be distributed among the Focus Group members for comments and objections for a period of two weeks. It will subsequently be put forward the Executive Committee for its consideration and, if agreed, formal adoption.

Action 2:

A voluntary pilot closure for 2013 for April-June from Irish Fishing industry and then UK-Belgian initiative might follow for three closed areas of the Irish Sea and Celtic Sea identified in the study.

The Marine Institute will be requested to collate available information on the proposed closures and overlay this together with data on distributions on elasmobranchs; then the Group will look at the effects and outcomes and decide where to go from there.

No objections were made to the above actions by the Focus Group members and the proposal was deemed as adopted.

3. Discussion on management measures for sharks

Maurice Clarke informed that ICES advice was expected to be released on the 5 October but provided a general overview of the following stocks:

- Spurdog: the advice is likely to not change (i.e. TAC zero). The stock is below limit reference levels, it shows some slight recovery but still remain at low biomass levels, requiring a recovery plan and technical measures to reduce discards.
- Spiny dog fish: At very low levels in the present, high degree of commitment and collaboration is needed between scientists and fishermen to rebuild this stock and set at a target in a multispecies framework.

Paul Trebilcock asked if there were any measures proposed by scientists to avoid catching spurdog.

Dr. Clarke said that one solution might be map where spawning and nursery areas are but this would not solve problems of by-catches entirely. It is understood that fishermen could help to identify where these areas are and their migration routes.

Some by-catch might be allowed to prevent unavoidable catches being discarded but at the same time this should not serve to encourage targeted fishery. Potential trade-offs might be discussed between fishermen and managers; ICES could run simulations.

Action 3:

Daniel Lefèvre volunteered to liaise with French professionals targeting spurdog using Norwegian gear that could give a mapping of catches in St George Channel area. He will meet those fishermen to see if they could point out and give information on those areas they know spurdog travels and where they aggregate so this information might be incorporated in maps. Eibhlín O'Sullivan adhered to this initiative and committed to ask her Irish associates to provide this information.

Maurice Clarke found this proposal very helpful and encouraged the industry to provide any relevant info available on spurdog and spiny dogfish (e.g. historical catch rates) not only for trawl fleet but also for longliners.

Daniel Lefèvre raised the question about why there are specific management measures for tope for longliners. The Commission must clarify this point as this proposal is not coming from ICES.

Action 4:

Daniel Lefèvre will draft a letter addressed to the Commission asking for clarification about the reasons why tope has been included in the list of prohibited species for longliners under a footnote of the TAC and quotas Regulation.



4. Summary of actions and concluding remarks by the Chair

Eibhlín O’Sullivan summarised the main actions agreed as referred above and thanked all participants for their attendance, the Irish Government for providing the venue, the staff of Dublin Castle for their assistance and the team of interpreters for their work.

The Chairwoman closed the meeting at 17:45 h

ANNEX I. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

NWWRAC MEMBERS		
NAME	SURNAME	ORGANISATION
Eibhlín	O'Sullivan	Focus Group Chair - Irish South and West FPO (ISWFPO)
Victor	Badiola	OPPAO-CEPESCA
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Richard	Brouzes	OPBN
René-Pierre	Chever	CDPMEM Finistère
Juan Carlos	Corrás Arias	Pescagalicia-Arpega-Obarco
John	Crudden	European Anglers' Association (EAA)
Anthony	Delahunty	National Federation of Fishermen's Organisation (<i>replacing B. Deas</i>)
Caroline	Gamblin	Comité National des Pêches Maritimes (CNPMM)
Marc	Ghiglia	Union des Armateurs de Pêche en France / Président CCR EOS
Sarah	Goddard	World Wildlife Fund (<i>replacing Helen McLachlan</i>)
Hugo	González	ANASOL-ARVI-CEPESCA
Daniel	Lefèvre	CRPMEM Basse Normandie (CRPBN)
Olivier	Le Nezet	CRPMEM Bretagne
Jesús	Lourido	Puerto de Celeiro, S.A.
John	Lynch	Irish Fishermen's Organisation (IFO)
Eduardo	Míguez	European Association of Ports and Auctions (EAFPA)
Francis	O'Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO)
Sean	O'Donoghue	Kyllibegs Fishermen's Organisation (KFO)
José Luis	Otero	Lonja de La Coruña S.A.
Jacques	Pichon	Association National des Organisations de Producteurs (ANOP)
Jim	Portus	South and West Fish Producers' Organisation (SWFPO)
Delphine	Roncin	CRPM Nord/Pas de Calais/Picardie
Dominique	Thomas	Coopératives Maritimes Etploises (CME OP)
Paul	Trebilcock	Cornish Fish Producers Organisation (CFPO)
Caitlín	Uí Aodha	Irish South and East FPO (ISEFPO)
John	Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary (ISS)
EXPERTS / OBSERVERS		
NAME	SURNAME	ORGANISATION
Maurice	Clarke	Marine Institute
John	Daly	Irish Seal Sanctuary - Ireland
Rory	Keatinge	Coastwatch - Ireland
Sean	Murray	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine - Ireland
Brendan	Price	Environmental consultant
NWWRAC SECRETARIAT		
Alexandre	Rodríguez	Rapporteur – North Western Waters RAC Secretariat
Joanna	McGrath	Executive Assistant – Administration and Finances

ANNEX II. LPUE DATA BY IRISH VESSELS (2006-2011)

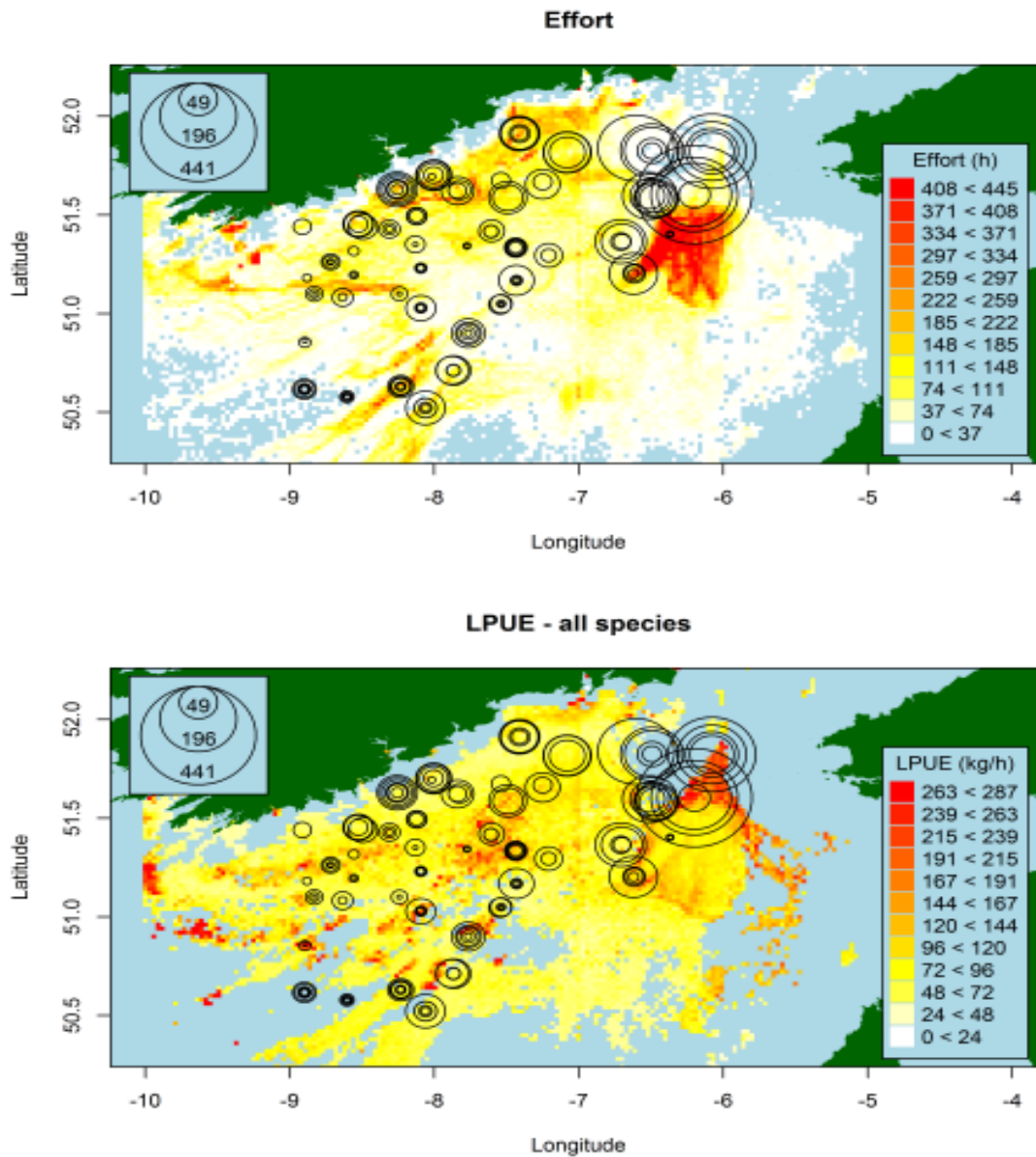


Figure 5. Landings Per Unit of Effort (LPUE) by Irish vessels (2006-2011). Locations of all 632 IGFS trawl samples used in the current study are shown.