



Marine  
Management  
Organisation

# Small-eyed ray in the English Channel: Synthesis of available data (MMO1297)

## Executive Summary



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### Background

Small-eyed ray (*Raja microocellata*; RJE) is a commercially important species that occurs in coastal waters from the British Isles southwards to northern Morocco. It favours inshore sandy habitats, and has a patchy distribution across its geographical range with some areas of local abundance.

In 2016, small-eyed ray was listed in European Union fishing regulations as a species that could not be retained in some areas subject to quota management, including the Bristol Channel and English Channel. In March 2016, this non-retention regulation was removed for the Bristol Channel and the eastern Channel, but maintained in the western Channel.

The basis for introducing the original non-retention policy is unclear. International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) had previously indicated that there should be a precautionary 20% reduction in landings, but did not indicate that there should be no fishing opportunities.

The non-retention policy for small-eyed ray in the western Channel was raised as a concern by several inshore fishers attending meetings of the south-western Regional Fisheries Group (RFG) in 2021.

Given the concerns raised at the RFG, Cefas undertook a desk-based review of available data, funded by the MMO, to (a) collate available data on small-eyed ray in the English Channel and (b) develop a potential work plan for future monitoring of small-eyed ray. The full report is provided as an Annex.

### Reported landings

Reported UK landings of small-eyed ray from the western Channel in the years 2010–2015 averaged 31.9 tonnes per year, with this declining to 7.0 tonnes per year for the period 2016–2021. Corresponding data for the eastern Channel, where there was the removal of the non-retention policy, have shown an increase from an average of 2.5 tonnes per year (2010–2015) to 12.4 tonnes per year (2016–2021).

Small-eyed ray was found to be a proportionally more important component of the skate and ray landings in some areas close to shore, in particular Start Bay and Lyme Bay (western Channel), around the Isle of Wight and off Brighton (eastern Channel).

Based on ICES estimated landings for skates and rays, landings of small-eyed ray in the English Channel were broadly stable over the years 2010–2015, averaging 66.2 tonnes per year. After the non-retention regulation in the western Channel more recent landings (2016–2019) have averaged 40.5 tonnes per year.

### Observer data

Data from the discard observer programme confirmed that there had been an increased discarding rate of small-eyed ray in the western Channel, due to the non-

retention regulation. These data also confirmed the coastal nature of small-eyed ray, with Start Bay, Lyme Bay, Isle of Wight, Brighton all areas with high catch rates.

### **Scientific trawl surveys**

The UK beam trawl survey of the western Channel caught small-eyed ray in Mount's Bat, St Austell Bay, Start Bay and Lyme Bay, with occasional captures around the Channel Islands. Catch rates were too low and variable to provide an index of stock size. This survey samples randomly selected sites, and so a species with a patch distribution, such as small-eyed ray, may not be sampled representatively and in a standardised way.

The UK beam trawl survey of the eastern Channel caught small-eyed ray in Poole Bay and areas to the west of the Isle of Wight, Pevensey Bay (off Eastbourne) and close to the Baie de Veys (the western part of the Baie de Seine on the French coast. Whilst catch rates were also low and variable, small-eyed ray appeared to be observed more frequently in recent years.

All available survey data highlighted the coastal and patchy distribution of small-eyed ray. The absence of the smallest sizes is considered to relate to recently hatched individuals occurring in very shallow water.

### **Status**

Earlier studies of the skates and rays in the western Channel by Steven (1932) led him to conclude that small-eyed ray occurs in "*a few sandy bays and estuaries. It is because of their very restricted distribution that [small-eyed ray] do not appear regularly in the landings. When the grounds on which they do occur are visited they seldom fail to appear in the catches*". Given the similarity in historical and contemporary occurrences, the restricted and patchy distribution of small-eyed ray is more likely to reflect the specific habitats of the species rather than a decline in extent.

No scientific evidence could be found to indicate that small-eyed ray have declined in the English Channel, and there is seemingly no scientific evidence available that would have provided the evidentiary basis for the non-retention regulation.

### **Future monitoring**

Given the localised distribution of small-eyed ray in the English Channel, dedicated field studies would be required to provide a more robust indicator of stock size. However, the degree of sampling required to provide a robust stock-size indicator is uncertain.

Options for further work to improve our understanding of the state of the stock could include (a) increased effort on existing fishery-independent trawl survey to allow for more representative sampling, (b) conducting scientific survey(s) on chartered fishing vessels, (c) establishing a 'reference fleet' whereby additional at-sea observer

coverage is undertaken on participating vessels, (d) fishery-dependent data (e.g. using log-books and/or Remote Electronic Monitoring and fisher self-sampling). There could also be consideration of a 'mixed approach', with the different approaches used in different parts of the stock range. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages, and there needs to be consideration of both the resource required and the robustness of the subsequent data.

### **MMO Comments**

This was the first project to come from an RFG. Inshore fishers in the Southwest Regional Fisheries Group raised the local abundance of small-eyed ray in area 7.e and questioned the rationale behind the non-retention policy in 7.e when it can be retained in 7.f-g. The non-retention policy is the result of a political decision at EU level, it was not based on ICES advice. Currently the Defra negotiations team are taking the results of this report to the EU at the annual negotiations in December 2022 with the hope of getting an allowance. MMO would like to thank Cefas for this work and hope the close working with local industry through RFGs continues to develop.