MMO Social Baseline Report
Summary of findings - August 2022

Lyme Bay Project social issues and impacts

The document outlines the views of some of the fishers and aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is there spatial conflict, what form does this take? How does this affect stakeholders? What strategies are used to mitigate spatial conflict?
2. How has fishing changed in Lyme Bay since the uplift in quota?
3. What do fishers view as the cause of the problems they are experiencing and what do they see as the solution?
4. How are the different management measures currently viewed by stakeholders?
5. How can we integrate fisher knowledge into management?

Background

Since 2017 an increase in the annual TAC for sole in International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) area 7.e since 2017 meant MMO could, increase the monthly catch limit for under 10m vessels. At the South West Regional Fisheries Group, fishing industry raised concerns that due to the increase in 7.e sole allowance there has been increased effort concentrated in Lyme Bay specifically, which, some fishers report, is negatively impacting the sole stock and causing gear conflict. MMO aims to keep catch limits high to maximise opportunities for the English under 10m fleet. Working with industry, the MMO Quota team set limits in such a way as to allow industry to make the most of opportunities when they arise. These limits are carefully considered to balance stock availability against market trends to maximise economic potential of the catches.

Methodology

Representatives from the MMO spent 3 days interviewing fishers in Axmouth, Lyme Regis, West Bay, Brixham and Mevagissey. MMO data were used to identify those who had caught 7.e sole in Lyme Bay and these individuals were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview and survey. Interviews with 17 fishers were conducted focusing on key themes followed by a survey element, in person and over the phone. Of these, 65% fished from ports in Lyme Bay and 35% were registered to a home port outside Lyme Bay. 88% of those interviewed use fixed nets and 12% of participants used mobile gear. Despite a relatively small sample size (n=17, out of 253 vessels landed 7.e sole in 2022), the insights provided help to better understand the experiences of fishers. However, MMO recognise that certain perspectives may have been missed and further work is needed to include these in any future management considerations.

Results – perspective of social impacts from different fisheries stakeholders

There are two overarching perspectives which are distinguished between those who fish from Lyme Bay ports (Lyme Regis, West Bay, Axmouth and Beer) and those whose home ports is registered as outside Lyme Bay but fish in Lyme Bay (Mevagissey and Brixham). Those who fish from Lyme Bay ports felt the increase in catch limits had created what they termed a 'honey pot fishery'. These fishers explained they saw more vessels, shooting longer nets and felt pushed off their traditional fishing grounds. Those from Brixham, and Mevagissey had a more positive view, they considered that they have a right to fish in Lyme Bay and do not see spatial conflict as a significant issue.

Question 1: Fixed net vessels reported losing the most gear, with 87% of netters having experienced gear conflict in 2022. The ban on bottom towed gear in certain areas of Lyme Bay and the beam trawlers being restricted to outside 6nm, was recognised as having created a safer area for netters. However, as some vessels use long nets (more than 1,000m), it can be hard to see one end from the other, even when these are marked with a flag or dan (which often they are not). This can lead to nets being shot over others gear and gear being lost or damaged. Fishers from the local Lyme Bay ports report feeling that the fishery was 'less enjoyable' than it used to be, and they found netting for sole 'stressful'. 24% explained that due to the changing nature of the fishery they had either

stopped netting for sole all together or were choosing to net less frequently. All the netters explained how they work with the local trawlers and other netters to give other vessels space to work and avoid gear loss. This is done using radio, a WhatsApp group and clear gear marking. Smaller vessel skippers report problems arising when larger visiting vessels begin working in the area and report limited cooperation. 41% of fishers said that triple rigs and scallop dredgers working in and around Lyme Bay has increased. This may mean that gear conflict between mobile and static gear is more likely. 35% reported either directly experiencing gear damage from trawlers on grounds where trawling was prohibited or had heard of incidents from other fishers.

Question 2: There was consensus from all participants that fishing effort had increased. Fishers from the Lyme Bay ports focused on the increase in other under 10m vessels inside the 6nm netting for sole, which they perceived as having a negative impact on the stock. Whereas fishers from Brixham and Mevagissey were more concerned about the increase in mobile gear activity outside the 6nm who catch the majority of 7.e sole quota. Of the fishers from Brixham and Mevagissey none were concerned about the impact of under 10m netters on stocks and they felt that gear conflict was not a significant problem. 18% of fishers explained that the vessels working inside, and outside Lyme Bay changed every year, so they saw the fishery change every season. 35% of fishers reported that the composition catches from Lyme Bay had changed over time in various ways: smaller sole, fewer plaice and dab but an increase in the amount of spider crab when hauling early in the season.

Question 3: Fishers from Lyme Bay ports viewed the main problems the increased effort caused by the higher catch limits. Fishers from Mevagissey and Brixham viewed the trawlers and scallopers as the cause of the problems.

Suggested management solutions
29% of fishers suggested changing the Landing Obligation (LO) for scallop dredgers. The current (LO) introduced in 2019 requires all quota stocks (except skates and rays) caught in scallop dredges to be retained and landed. Previously, rules stated they could not land more than 5% fish in their total catch. This change has led to an increase in fish (including sole) landed by scallop dredgers. Changing the LO could reduce the incentive for dredgers to target quota fish.
Allocate quota by sector, home port or ICES sub-rectangle or based on low impact and social value criteria. 59% said that gill netting is a low impact, more sustainable fishery, which should be given priority for quota over other fishing gears such as dredging and trawling.
Enforcing a net length limit such as a maximum fleet of 1,000m and a maximum of 6,000m as the maximum length for static gear per vessel inside the 6nm. 35% of those surveyed said that for an U10m vessel this should be enough to support a fisher through the sole season.
Reducing the quota. Fishers stated the following would be an appropriate month catch limit: 53% said 0.5 tons, 12% said 1 ton, 23% said 2 tons, 12% said 3 tons.
Increase the MCRS (Minimum Conservation Reference Size) of 7.e sole (41% of participants).

Question 4: A minority of fishers surveyed were satisfied with current management (12%) and felt that although catch limits were high, they could be increased. This was linked to the economic benefits of the high catch limits. 71% of those surveyed thought the quota was too high and should be reduced. There was frustration from 88% of fishers, who were unsatisfied with the perceived lack of action from MMO despite them having raised their concerns with the various agencies involved.

Question 5: There is ample evidence of the benefits of involving industry in the design of new management, for example, increased compliance. There is also a willingness from industry to stay involved in this project, and therefore there may be scope for the MMO to trial a more flexible and participatory approach to fisheries management. The MMO will continue to keep the SW RFG and the Lyme Bay steering group involved in this work and to explore ways of integrating fishers' knowledge into management.