

SOLENT OYSTER FISHERY REMAINS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

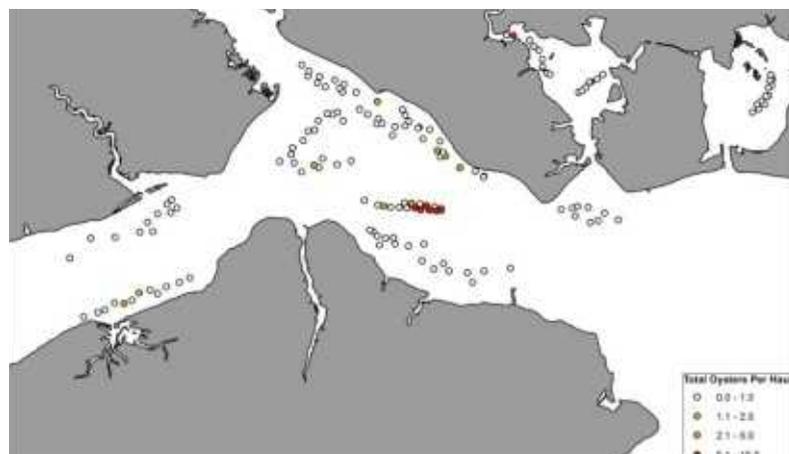
Since the partial closure of the Solent oyster fishery in 2013, due to the collapse of the oyster stock, local fishermen have found it increasingly hard to make a living. The situation is further compounded by closures for the protection of the habitats in the Solent and due to water quality, with the classification of the fishing grounds sometimes fluctuating between B (workable) and C (non-workable). This can happen at short notice if the readings, which are averaged to smooth out spikes, rise above acceptable levels.

With the fleet reduced from 39 to now just 16-17 boats, and the window for oyster dredging last year only open for two weeks in November – out of the four months allowed for by the Oyster Season byelaw – a group of Solent oystermen have formed the Southern Oyster Fisherman's Association (SOFA), in order to have their voices heard with the local IFCAs (Southern and Sussex).

At a meeting in July, between SOFA and the Southern IFCA, feelings ran high and it was clear that the fishermen are worried, and increasingly frustrated, about their futures.



▲ The July meeting between SOFA and the Southern IFCA resulted in clarification of the situation for oyster fishermen in the Solent.



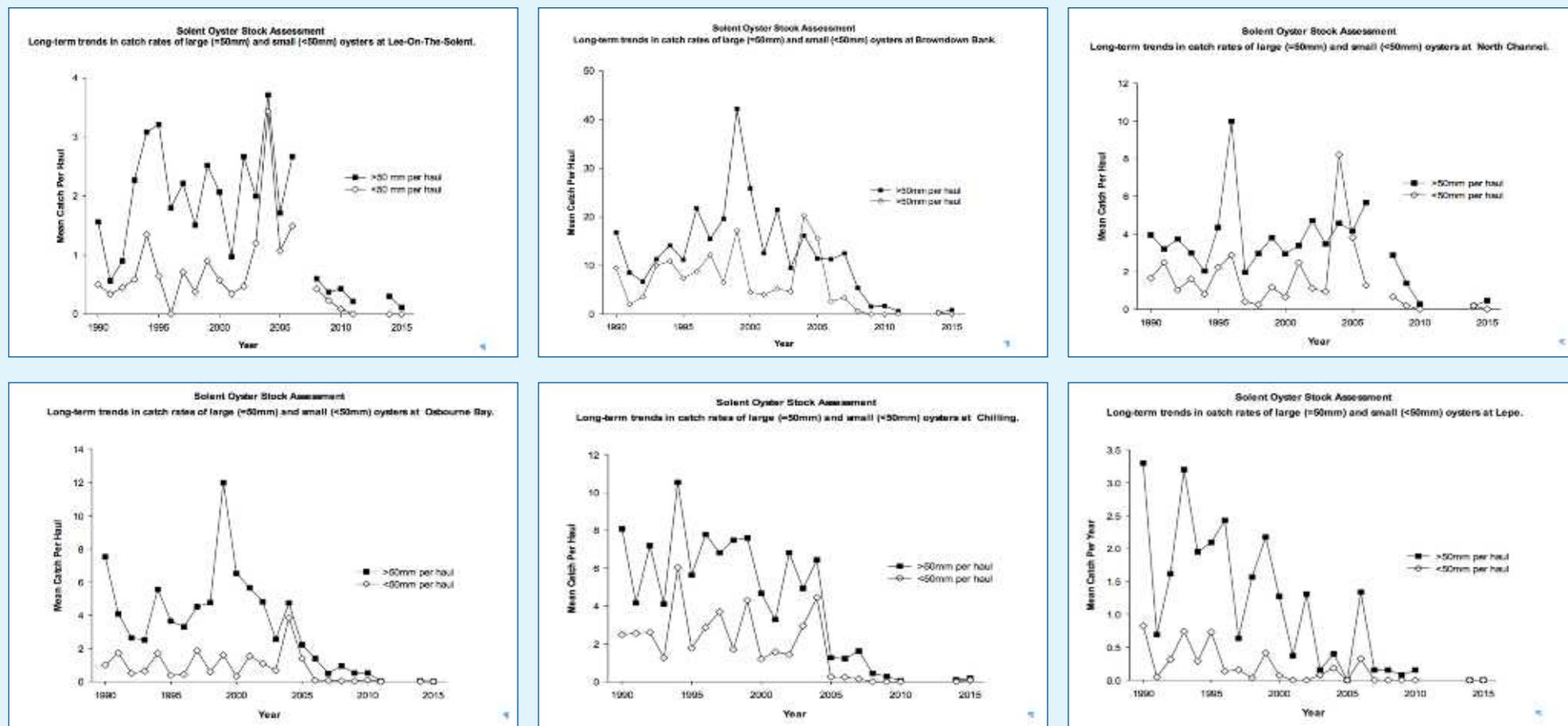
The 2014 stock survey of the native oyster fishery in the Solent was undertaken for five days in July 2014, using a chartered local fishing vessel, Angelle Marie (length 11m, engine 158kW). Southern IFCA officers undertook the survey with the assistance of researchers from the University of Southampton, Natural England, CEFAS, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Trust and the Langstone Harbour Board. KEY Total number of oysters caught per haul at each station location

Confusion around the separate legislations that are being implemented in the area didn't help matters, with SOFA claiming that it had been told that certain areas currently open to dredging were to be closed later in the year. Robert Clark, chief officer of the Southern IFCA explained that the IFCA has a duty to introduce measures for the Solent marine

protected areas and was consulting on these measures, and additionally that further decisions would be made on the necessity, or otherwise, to apply the Temporary Closure of Shellfish Beds byelaw once the annual stock assessment had concluded. SOFA members voiced their frustration at the sustained closure of the grounds, despite the measure

being 'temporary' in 2013. The constraints currently on the grounds are:
 ● A closed season from 1 March to 31 October inclusive.
 ● A Sussex IFCA permitting byelaw that manages the activity of towed gear in Chichester Harbour to ensure sustainability of both fishing and the marine environment (implemented in Oct 2013). This requires oyster

Oyster numbers across the Solent area have fallen dramatically in recent years.



fishermen to buy a £200 permit and to operate specific gear; pricing many fishermen out of the market, SOFA claims, hence the reduction in fleet size.

● A Southern IFCA Temporary Closure of Shellfish Beds Byelaw (considered annually and implemented in 2013, 2014 and 2015). The byelaw closed the wider Solent oyster fishery, including Southampton Water. However, a compromise was reached, allowing fishermen temporary access to the grounds for several weeks in Langstone and Portsmouth Harbours. The fishery remained open for four weeks, but it was unviable for the majority after a few days. In 2014/2015 this window was reduced to two weeks, again

because the fishing catches were so low. This closure was featured in *Fishing News* (22 November 2013).

- The areas of seagrass in marine protected areas being permanently closed.
- Southern IFCA's position

act. Good communication is key if stakeholders are to believe that their opinions and circumstances are contributing to any consultations.

During the meeting, the SOFA chairman, Matt Varndell passed a document to Robert Clark, outlining the fishermen's views on possible compromises and solutions, and also mentioned its support for the Blue Marine

Foundation's plans for re-stocking the Solent.

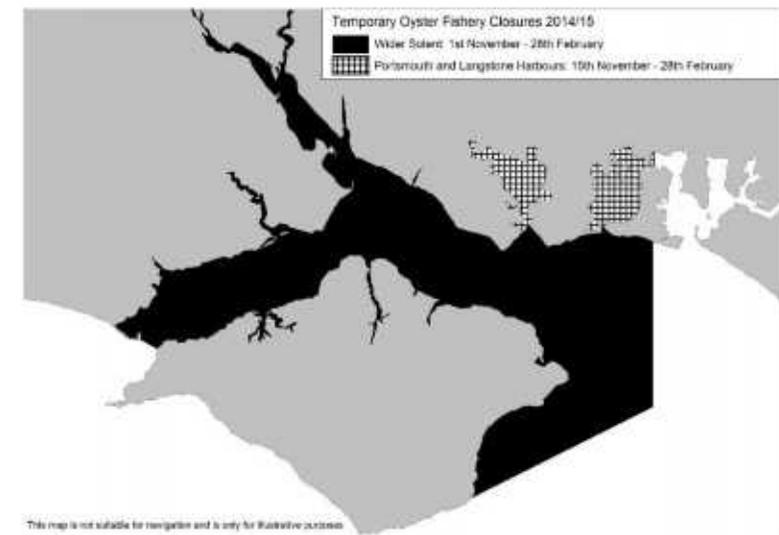
The Blue Marine Foundation Plan, which is a partnership with the IFCA, is an ambitious undertaking and follows a study proving the viability of restoring the oyster stocks in the area. The plan aims to supply 10 million juvenile oysters to the area, has initiated a breeding programme, and will also relocate mature brood adults to help recreate natural oyster beds.

However, the location for these new grounds has yet to be decided, and SOFA offered an option of dividing the Solent into two areas, one of which, the Western Solent, could be a nursery area for Blue Marine. The other could be opened for fishing.

SOFA's belief is that working the grounds cleans them, stimulates new recruitment and

SOFA members voiced their frustration at the sustained closure of the grounds

is unenviable. Striving to fulfil the DEFRA Policy brief to protect the marine environment (many areas in the Solent are designated as Marine Protected Areas) while taking a long-term view to restore stocks, and also keeping the fishermen viable and as happy as possible, necessitates a fine balancing



The areas affected by the Temporary Closure of Shellfish Beds Byelaw. Due to a noticeable decline of the fishery the byelaw was used during 2014/2015 and the fishery restricted to two weeks, in the harbours.



▲ The Baird Dredge being retrieved following a 100m tow, where...
◀ ... oysters are conspicuous by their absence.



helps protect against predation.

Fishing the grounds would also allow its members to undertake a detailed stock report.

An added factor in the decline in oyster fishing has been a substantial decrease in stock numbers (see graphs). Year-on-year this has fallen, although, as yet, no single cause has been identified, and it is thought that the decline is due to a number of factors. This reduction in numbers can be seen working its way from west to east along the coast, and is naturally a cause

for concern among the fishermen who rely on oyster fishing for a living.

As things stand, the Southern IFCA is entering a second consultation phase, on the management necessary to protect the marine environment in the Solent, and welcomes input from SOFA and other stakeholders. The annual Solent oyster survey is also underway, which uses local fishing boats. What the situation will be for this year's oyster season, however, remains to be seen.

For more information on the Byelaws see southern-ifca.gov.uk or to contact SOFA, email Ron Varndell at: ronalbert@talktalk.net

