

Cromer crabbers looking for answers

Is potting really causing damage to the Cromer chalk reefs? John Worrall reports on a Blue Marine proposal that could provide some objective evidence



▲ Morven Robertson and Emily Bulled of Blue Marine presenting the NGO's proposal to the assembled North Norfolk crabbers: three closed areas would allow natural weathering of the chalk reef to be assessed.

On St Valentine's Day, when they really should have been doing something more romantic, three dozen fishermen convened in a North Norfolk village hall to hear about an idea which might lift – or at least reduce – the existential threat under which the iconic Cromer crab fishery has laboured for the past few years.

The threat comes from Natural England (NE), whose opaque change of tune now says that potting, which has been going on for 300 years or more, is damaging the chalk reef where Cromer crab is caught, thus hindering the conservation objectives of the Cromer Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ).

Back in 2016, when the MCZ was designated, NE said that potting was 'selective, small-scale and low-impact' – and that was at a time when its lead marine advisor was herself diving the reef. Designation was thus allowed to proceed without meaningful debate on ramifications for the industry.

But then in 2018, 'compelling evidence' of potting damage was submitted by another member of the diving fraternity, which prompted NE, in 2020, to effectively say that either the 'damage' would have to stop, or the fishery would.

Eastern IFCA has since been spending huge amounts of already stretched resources trying to develop 'adaptive risk management' (ARM), which NE says is necessary if potting is to be allowed to continue. The alternative is the precautionary principle, which would mean fishery closure.

And just recently, NE has

doubled down on its position, telling EIFCA that it now needs to see action plans and timescales on the ARM front.

The potentially threat-removing – or at least reducing – idea comes from the Blue Marine Foundation, which has been in discussion with EIFCA on this for some time. The general thrust is to attempt to quantify the effects of natural forces on the reef, and to establish to what extent they could be responsible for observed 'damage'.

Certainly, storm events have, on two or three occasions in the past decade, littered beaches with chalk boulders, and the reef itself carries flints the size of turkeys and bigger which crash around in heavy weather.

The general idea is to attempt to quantify the effects of natural forces on the reef

It's probably fair to say that a meeting called by an environmental organisation – particularly one whose mission statement is 'to see at least 30% of the world's ocean under effective protection by 2030 and the other 70% managed in a responsible way' (laudable enough on the face of it) – didn't carry much promise of romance for the crabbers, particularly once they heard that the plan would involve ground closures.

After all, the diver who came up with the 'compelling evidence' in 2018 had himself been party to an earlier suggestion of a half-kilometre-

square closure – which is a big chunk of ground.

But then, as the presentation by Morven Robertson and Emily Bulled of Blue Marine progressed – punctuated initially by a few prickly interjections which they rode well – it became apparent, first of all, that the new suggested closures would be much smaller.

The idea was that three blocks, each of 150m by 150m, would be chosen out of 16 identified suitable locations – the suitability being that each patch of reef was of a broadly similar nature and at a comparable depth, thus likely to be similarly affected by weather conditions, particularly storm events.

Those three areas would then be closed to fishing for up to three years, with three patches, 20m by 20m, within each being firstly examined in detail to establish baseline condition, and then re-examined annually – but also as soon as possible after any heavy weather. Some examination would be done by EIFCA's BluRov2 underwater drone, but close detail would be gathered by external diving contractors. That latter point is crucial because of the distrust between the industry and the local diving fraternity.

The 16 option sites are in areas not normally visited by divers, which was also welcomed by the meeting because, as someone commented, apart from anything else, it reduced the chance of sabotage. Fifteen of them were spread along a four-mile stretch from just west of Sheringham to the western edge of Cromer, where the 'rugged' chalk – which is deemed most at risk but is particularly productive crab ground – is more concentrated. The 16th is on the eastern edge of Cromer.

Blue Marine then asked the meeting which three sites were considered most appropriate, and consensus quickly alighted on the idea that one at either end and one in the middle would be as good as anything. That is what will now be taken forward.

The next step will be for Blue Marine to attempt to source funding for the work, which would include a PhD candidate to assimilate and write up the results for presentation to NE.

At that, the meeting broke up in slightly lighter mood than it

started, with a ray of hope in the fact that something is actually being done which might help counter the NE diktat. As John Davies, chair of North Norfolk Fishermen's Society and an EIFCA committee member, who has been part of the discussion between EIFCA and Blue Marine, said: "The industry is between a rock and a harder-than-chalk place."

Nevertheless, the underlying question which remains unanswered – and not for want of asking – is that if there is 'compelling evidence' of

potting damage, why did NE not spot it when the MCZ designation was originally under consideration?

Because the net result has been this existential threat to the Cromer crab fishery, and huge amounts of public resources being expended in an attempt to avert it.

Hopefully, the detailed monitoring of what nature does to these closed areas – and by implication to the rest of the reef – will bring some perspective, and eventually save everyone further time and expense.

LETTERS



Medical fitness rules will end careers

Dear Editor,

I am just reading about the new medical requirements for fishermen, and would be interested to know whether the MCA will recognise any other medical certificates in lieu of the ML5?

This is perhaps something you could ask on behalf of working fishermen, because having waited 18 months for a reply from the MCA and having got nowhere, there is no point in me trying further.

I think the Channel skipper quoted in *Fishing News* a couple of issues ago is correct! This new focus on medical fitness will, depending on what's required, put a lot of guys out of business. If Body Mass Index (BMI) is one of the criteria, then many of us will fail a medical. I have discussed this with my own doctor, who detests the concept of BMI – but if it's in the medical then he will have to report it.

What other business can you invest in where you are governed and regulated by so many outside forces that have

little or no idea about the industry? Their suggestions and actions have no effect on them or their income, so there is no incentive for them to worry about outcomes for fishermen affected.

I own an IP23, updated fully 10 years ago, and am now likely to be subject to all sorts of 'issues' that I will be charged £147 an hour to be told about. Applying big-boat rules to small boats, and applying medical requirements written for someone hundreds of miles offshore to a small day-boat skipper – it would appear that this is just another way of ending people's commercial careers, and has little to do with safety.

Please do not print my name and address. I am frightened I will become a target. I have enough issues with the MCA at the moment.

Skipper, Scotland
(Name and address supplied)

We will be addressing the issues around the new medical requirements for fishermen in detail in an upcoming issue – Ed.

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