



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Proposed Fisheries Management Plan for Whelk in English Waters

Executive summary

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Executive Summary

Context

Our sea fish and shellfish stocks are an important natural resource. We aim to work with the fishing sector and wider stakeholders to ensure these stocks are harvested sustainably and supported by a healthy marine environment so that they continue to provide benefits into the future.

Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) are a requirement of the Fisheries Act 2020 (the Act), the UK Joint Fisheries Statement and a commitment in the England Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. FMPs assess the status of stocks and must set out policies to restore stocks to or maintain them at sustainable levels.

The whelk draft FMP has been prepared for the purpose of meeting the requirements set out in the Act. It has been prepared in partnership with the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish) in collaboration with the Whelk Management Group (WMG) that brings together industry, government, and scientists. Feedback from the WMG and from the wider sector, during stakeholder engagement events, has shown that there is a need for better management of the whelk fishery in England.

What is an FMP

An FMP is an evidence-based action plan that charts a course to sustainable fisheries. Once published, the FMP will last for six years. It will set out both a longer-term vision and goals for the fishery (or fisheries), together with the policies and management interventions necessary to achieve these goals in the shorter-term. As well as focussing on sustainable stocks, Defra intends to use FMPs to help tackle environmental, social, and economic issues associated with our fisheries, significantly enhancing our ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management and securing the economic and cultural benefits we gain from fish and from fishing. Plans will be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they respond to new evidence and practical experience to remain effective.

Why an FMP for whelks

The whelk industry recognised in 2019 that action was needed to better manage the stocks. With support from Seafish and Defra, the WMG was formed in 2020 to consider specific actions. This early work and engagement allowed the decision to be taken to channel the work into an FMP. Whelks have been prioritised for an FMP due to the stock's vulnerability to over-exploitation, the economic value of the fishery and a lack of evidence to properly assess and monitor the state of the stock. Whelk fisheries contribute culturally, socially, and economically to coastal communities

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through employment and recreational fishing interests. Improved management action is therefore needed to protect whelks and secure their future and the future of the industry that depend on them. Feedback from the WMG and from the wider sector, during stakeholder engagement events, has confirmed the need for better management of the whelk fishery in England.

Summary of the state of stocks

The plan collates the evidence on whelk stocks and the whelk fishery around England, identifies existing management measures and sets out short- and long-term policies and actions to manage the whelk fishery.

Evidence on the state of the whelk stocks is poor. There is no stock assessment for whelks in English waters, no delineation of stock boundaries, and no Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) reference points or proxies. Consequently, there is no assessment of likely stock health and abundance. Furthermore, in recent years there has been an increase in whelk fishing effort because of the expansion of export markets for whelks alongside reduced fishing opportunities for other species (see Annex 1). Whelk stocks are particularly vulnerable because whelk is a sedentary species with limited mobility and short larval dispersal. They are particularly susceptible to localised depletion because the life history and life cycle of the species means that stocks are unlikely to quickly recover from overexploitation.

This FMP presents an opportunity to take a precautionary proactive and adaptive approach to long-term management to create sustainable English whelk fisheries.

Current management framework

Whelks are non-quota stocks meaning that fishing of these stocks is not currently subject to catch limits. Access to whelk fisheries is largely unrestricted and there are limited management measures in place. A national Minimum Landing Size (MLS) of 45mm applies.

Within the 0-6 nautical mile zone, whelk fishing is regulated by the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs). Several IFCA jurisdictions enforce additional whelk specific management measures including larger MLS, permitting schemes, flexible byelaws with conditions, and pot limits (see details in Annex 1). However, the overall lack of evidence on the state of the whelk stocks, in general, means that there is no conclusive evidence on the effect of these measures. This means that much of the information that would be required to develop a whelk harvest strategy is not yet available. A key action in this FMP will be to improve the evidence base.

Key goals and proposed actions

Stakeholders noted that a 'one size fits all' approach to management is not appropriate for a fishery characterised by local stocks and fleet variation. So regional or local based management is needed together with better species and fishery data to ensure the long-term sustainability of these important fisheries. The FMP sets out Whelk Specific Objectives that address specific requirements for the whelk fisheries in English waters.

Specifically, the FMP sets out the following actions:

- **Improving the evidence base:**

Whelk stocks are currently classed as data limited because there is insufficient scientific information available to assess stock abundance. Going forward, a strong data gathering system will be required to assess abundance and health of the stocks and make informed interventions. The whelk research plan (Annex 2) details available science and evidence. It highlights where knowledge and evidence gaps exist and what is required to fill those gaps to provide the necessary protection for stocks now and in the long-term. These evidence gaps include the development of data collection programmes, defining stock boundaries, and developing stock assessments. The aim of the research plan is to build on existing research and data for whelks so that management is driven by a comprehensive harvest strategy, reliable stock assessments and a consistent ongoing data collection and research programme.

- **Initial management measures:**

These are designed to address immediate sustainability concerns in line with the precautionary objective. The key proposal is the introduction of a permit scheme or licence entitlement with conditions. The purpose of this scheme is to allow adaptive management to reflect the local characteristics of the whelk stocks and fleets with the aim of controlling effort in whelk fisheries over the long term. A further proposal is to allow the development of measures to protect whelk spawning stocks through seasonal closures. Protecting stocks during spawning will allow spawning individuals a greater chance of reproducing successfully and should improve stock viability.

- **Longer term measures:**

Over time, as both the evidence base and monitoring of management effectiveness improves, the process of implementing more targeted measures will be developed through the lifetime of and future iterations of this FMP. The FMP proposes an adaptive, iterative management approach in which management decisions are implemented, reviewed, and refined with new data, to deliver long-term sustainability. Future measures will focus on ensuring stocks are not excessively targeted. Minimum Landing Size (MLS) variations, pot and catch limits and gear design measures are some of the

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interventions under consideration which will be developed in collaboration with the WMG and relevant partners.

Wider issues and environmental impacts

All FMPs are subject to legal obligations for environmental protection arising from the Habitats Regulations, Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 and the Environment Act 2021. These requirements are in addition to the FMP contributing to the environmental objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020,

The Whelk FMP will contribute to commitments to improve our marine ecosystem set out in the England Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 and the UK Marine Strategy.

The Whelk FMP includes objectives that will ensure that the environmental impacts associated with whelk fishing are understood. The whelk pot fishery potentially poses two environmental risks of a) bycatch of Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) species and unwanted marine species and b) marine litter from abandoned, lost, and discarded fishing gear. Both risks are currently considered low in the whelk fishery based on available evidence. Where whelk pot fisheries are considered to have an adverse impact on the marine environment, the FMP sets out commitments to taking action to avoid, remedy or mitigate such impact.

Implementation and monitoring

The actions and measures contained within the Whelk FMP will undergo an implementation phase where appropriate mechanisms will be required to deliver them. Such mechanisms could include voluntary measures, license conditions, national and regional byelaws, and statutory instruments.

The Whelk FMP must be reviewed when appropriate and at least every six years. This formal review will assess how the FMP has performed in terms of delivering against the objectives of the Act.

To conclude

The Whelk Fisheries Management Plan has been prepared for the purpose of meeting the requirements set out in the Fisheries Act 2020. This statement and the contents of the plan meet the obligation set out in section 6 of the Act.

The Whelk FMP has collated existing management measures and available science and evidence to assess the status of Whelk stocks around England in 2023 and determine a sustainable level of exploitation. At the time of publication, there is insufficient evidence to determine a maximum sustainable yield for the whelk fishery around England. The FMP highlights where knowledge and evidence gaps exist to

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be able to establish sustainable whelk fisheries. The management objectives and associated evidence and research plan guide those seeking to fill those gaps over time. The proposed management interventions seek to apply a precautionary approach to managing harvesting whilst our evidence improves. This Whelk FMP aims to deliver a step change in moving us towards the long-term sustainable management of whelk fisheries in English waters.