Minutes: Monkfish Principle 1 and 2 meeting 

Meeting Date: 28 January 2021

Location: Teams

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| Attendees | Organisation |
| AP: Andrew Pillar | Interfish |
| AT: Adam Townley | New England Seafood International |
| CN: Chloe North | Western Fish Producers Organisation |
| EB: Edward Baker | Marine Management Organisation |
| GC: Gus Caslake | Seafish |
| HS: Hayley Swanlund | WWF-UK |
| JP: Jo Pollett | Marine Stewardship Council |
| JPo: Jim Portus | South Western Fish Producers Organisation |
| KK: Katie Keay | Marine Stewardship Council |
| LR: Lisa Readdy | Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science |
| MS: Matt Spencer | Marine Stewardship Council |
| NdR: Nathan de Rozarieux | Falfish |
| SB: Stella Cavicchi-Bartolini | Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs |
| TH: Tim Huntington | Poseidon |
| **External consultant** |  |
| PM: Paul Medley | Consultant |

Purpose of the meeting

This call was an opportunity for the Steering Group to review progress made against each of the actions under Principle 1 and 2 in the Project UK monkfish Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) action plan.

Agenda Item 1: stock status, harvest strategy and harvest control rules

*Black-bellied monkfish stock status*

To score SG80 for stock status, the stocks of both monkfish species need to be at or above a level consistent with maximum sustainable yield (MSY). The black-bellied monkfish (*Lophius budegassa)* is currently an ICES Category 3 species, which means there is a degree of uncertainty in its stock assessment. LR and PM are supporting the Steering Group to understand the implication of these uncertainties for an MSC assessment.

LR informed the group that ICES recently held a workshop to improve stock assessment methodology for Category 3 species. LR cautioned two things were likely to slow the progress of black-bellied monkfish to full assessment status. Firstly, no benchmarking exercise for *L. budegassa* was anticipated before 2022; and, secondly there are currently no plans to develop biological reference points for *L. budegassa*. LR pointed out there was a workshop planned for Surplus Production Model in Continuous Time (SPiCT) assessments – which some Category 3 stocks are assessed by – but black-bellied monkfish is not currently one of them. A SPiCT assessment is a population dynamics model that uses peaks and troughs in catch data to estimate stock size, when minimal biological data is available. As there are no real peaks and troughs in catches of black-bellied monkfish, scientists are unable to measure the intricacies between catch and population size, leaving SPiCT an unsuitable model to use.

*Black-bellied monkfish as a condition in an MSC full assessment*

TH said that waiting until 2022 for the benchmarking exercise has implications for the timeline of the FIP, which only has 16 months remaining. TH asked the Steering group for their thoughts on excluding black-bellied monkfish from the Unit of Certification (UoC) for the FIP and raised the possibility of whether the black-bellied component of the fishery could pass certification alongside white-bellied but with a condition. During the five-year cycle of the certificate the benchmarking excise would be conducted, and a review of the stock assessment methodology undertaken.

PM clarified the MSC Standard requirements for Principle 1. If there is historical evidence that a species is not being overfished then it would be possible to pass the P1 component on that basis, but black-bellied monkfish does not have enough historical data for this. PM estimated this fishery would need at least six years – a generation time for monkfish - to demonstrate enough historic evidence of sustainable fishing pressure. PM cautioned that attempting to certify black-bellied monkfish with a condition would require the fishery to be very cautious with mortality levels in the years during the MSC certificate. As long as the fishery had cautious calculations of exploitation levels and were bound by them, this could be passed on to an assessor as proof of avoiding any overfishing.

TH cautioned against attempting to certify black-bellied monkfish with a condition. The uncertainties related to the stock status could mean this species would not score highly enough against the MSC Standard to pass an assessment. Only the introduction of a full stock assessment would make it more likely black-bellied monkfish would pass an assessment.

*Separation of catch*

TH said another option might be to exclude black-bellied monkfish from the initial assessment and add it in through a scope extension at a later date, once more information is known about its stock status. This approach would require separating the two species - onboard the vessel or at market – to avoid any chain of custody implications.

KK asked for thoughts from the catching sector about removing black-bellied monkfish from the UoC and the practicalities of separating the catch. NdR said it would be difficult as the different species are not always easy to identify and separating the two might not be commercially viable. AP and JPo supported NdR’s views, and JPo added that buyers do not distinguish between the two species. KK offered provide commercial information on the monkfish fisheries at the next Steering Group meeting from the MSC commercial team and this suggestion was welcomed.

CN felt that the point of a FIP was to achieve sustainable fisheries, and not necessarily certification. If separating the species creates too many complications for the market and fishermen, then the focus should be on addressing the stock status of black-bellied monkfish. JPo suggested the group should focus on improving understanding of monkfish stock status through research into breeding patterns and fecundity of the two species.

AT supported including both species in the MSC assessment and that certification should be the goal for this fishery. CN requested a timeline for each of the suggested approaches to certification, including waiting for a full stock assessment or proceeding with certification based on current information. PM offered to provide this timeline, highlighting the potential routes to certification, any risks and an indication of what the scoring might look like. PM said he could do this before the annual review in March.

*Hybridisation*

LR explained that the monkfish genetics report is still some months away from publication, assuming it has been accepted by a journal. TH noted the importance of this report for the FIP to progress. PM said if the hybridised monkfish (hereon referred to as hybrids) were not contributing to the spawning stock then their removal by fishing would not impact monkfish stock status and the individuals would not need to be considered under any inseparable or practically inseparable (IPI) calculations.

PM said it would be useful to know whether hybrids were sterile as it could support a data-limited estimation of black-bellied monkfish stock size, through close-kin analysis. If the genetics report provides an estimate of biomass of the hybrids and provides details of yield per recruit to generate mortality-based reference points, then it is possible to determine a precautionary level management of black-bellied monkfish until a full stock assessment is available. TH thought using close-kin analysis could allow the monitoring black-bellied stock status through an abundance estimate. This information needs documenting in the Fishery Management Plan (FMP), along with the genetics analysis and any other stock data the Steering Group could gather. TH felt this approach could allow black-bellied monkfish to pass the MSC assessment with a condition.

PM recommended that the best approach is to go through ICES for a management strategy evaluation. This request can be communicated to ICES through Defra or Cefas. Alternatively, if the Steering Group independently commissioned more research into black-bellied monkfish stock status then this should be shared with ICES. LR explained this approach was also taken by the MSC Cornish sardine fishery. GC explained that the sardine fishery had approached ICES but due to capacity issues ICES could not deal with their request, so the fishery incorporated the best available science from the Cefas PELTIC surveys into their stock management and that was accepted by the MSC assessor.

Actions from Item 1:

1. PM to draft a timeline for the different options available for black-bellied monkfish certification, highlighting the potential routes to certification, any risks and an indication of what the scoring might look like before the annual review.
2. Secretariat to invite an MSC colleague from the Commercial team to provide an update on MSC monkfish markets at the next Steering Group meeting
3. PM and LR to update the FMP to include a ‘status report’ of all ongoing research related to South West monkfish

Agenda Items 2: secondary species outcome, management and information

Cefas previously undertook a productivity, susceptibility analysis (PSA) on the secondary species in the South West monkfish fishery. Action 4 in the FIP action plan will be complete once this report is summarised in the FMP. CN offered to draft the summary.

GC’s alternative measures report also needs summarising in the FMP. GC reminded the group that the vessels haves already adopted most of the measures in the report, including reducing tow times to 1.5hrs, and offered to summarise the report for the FMP.

MS has been speaking to Cefas for an updated catch composition and will circulate this report to the Steering Group at the beginning of March.

Actions from Item 2:

1. CN to summarise PSA analysis conducted by Cefas and share with the Secretariat.
2. GC to summarise his alternative measures report and share with the Secretariat.
3. MS to circulate the updated catch composition report for Steering Group feedback.

Agenda Item 3: endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species

A review of ETP interaction with the fishery was previously undertaken by a Masters student, and AT had drafted a summary of the ETP management measures in place in the South West. AT’s review of management measures and the full ETP list still needs industry review and sign off. CN highlighted that not all elasmobranchs would be classified as ETP species as some have TACs, and those with zero-TAC or protection are returned to the water.

The Steering Group discussed drafting a code of practice that stipulates what vessels should do when encountering ETPs. CN asked whether the low level of interaction is evidence that the current ETP management strategy is working. TH said that could be and would need embedding in the FMP that there had been no non-compliance issues around ETPs. However, TH said the group still needed to identify mortality levels of any ETP species being returned to the water.

CN suggested it would be useful to have a summary of survivability of ETP species, noting the fact that most have a very high survivability if returned to the water soon enough. GC pointed out that some of the information needed is addressed in Rob Enever’s PhD and GC agreed to share this with the Steering Group if he can access it.

Actions from Item 3:

1. GC to find Rob Enever’s ETP survivability thesis and share with CN and the Secretariat.
2. CN to draft a summary of survivability of ETP species in this fishery and add to the FMP.

Agenda Item 4: habitats and ecosystems

This action focusses on the impacts of beam trawl gear on commonly encountered habitats and vulnerable marine ecosystems (VME). TH said the main issue is demonstrating sufficient management of VMEs to protect them from interaction with gears. The Secretariat is awaiting a response from the MMO, Natural England and JNCC for their thoughts on whether there are sufficient measures in place to protect VMEs.

TH asked for industry views on fishing activity in MPAs and over VMEs. CN said that vessels will abide by the regulations in place, but some MPAs have been designated but are still awaiting management measures to be implemented. It is the role of MMO and JNCC, not industry, to decide whether there is sufficient protection of VMEs.

JPo said where there are no regulations in place it is legal for fishing activity to occur. JPo was previously involved in the initial designations for MPAs, which were focussed on areas with low fishing activity. JPo believed it was the most recent tranches of MPAs that were lacking management measures, because designing, consulting and implementing management for MPAs takes time.

TH explained that the Dover sole preassessment had scored <60 for beam trawl gear, which demonstrates why this FIP needs to take this action seriously. NdR thought the scoring would be low because of the precautionary approach taken by the CAB during the preassessment, whereas the work Project UK has undertaken mean the scores in the FIPs action plan are more reflective of its actual status. CN said she worked for MRAG when the Dover sole preassessment was written and reiterated that it was precautionary as there isn’t the time to dig into the details of a fishery. TH reminded the Steering Group of the habitat report undertaken by Cefas on behalf of the FIP, which showed that coarse sediment habitats were the main concern in this fishery.

CN said it was important to understand the difference between coarse sediment protected as a VME or due to the need to protect 10% of any habitat type. TH said Natural England and JNCC should be able to explain this differentiation. TH said it would be useful for him to speak with Rob Whitely (Natural England) about the habitat action and the Secretariat agreed to organise a meeting.

TH said there was a question around VMS coverage of vessels, in particular the eurocutter fleet, which MS informed the group all had VMS. JPo explained that very few <8m vessels are capable of towing beam trawls. There are a few <12m vessels but NdR thought these would only comprise a small subset of the overall catch of the FIP. NdR felt those vessels would be primarily targeting plaice and lemon sole and recommended getting MMO data for the vessels to close out the action.

Actions from Item 4:

1. Secretariat to:
   1. Follow up with MMO and JNCC on whether there are sufficient measures in place to protect VMEs in the UoA of the FIP.
   2. Arrange a call between TH and Rob Whiteley to discuss the requirements of the habitat action.

Any Other Business

Draft minutes will be circulated as soon as possible but will likely take more than two weeks.

Meeting Closes

12.00hr

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| Actions Arising | Responsibility |
| Actions from Item 1:   1. PM to draft a timeline for the different options available for black-bellied monkfish certification, highlighting the potential routes to certification, any risks and an indication of what the scoring might look like before the annual review. 2. Secretariat to invite an MSC colleague from the Commercial team to provide an update on MSC monkfish markets at the next Steering Group meeting 3. PM and LR to update the FMP to include a ‘status report’ of all ongoing research related to South West monkfish | Paul Medley  Secretariat  Paul medley/Lisa Readdy |
| Actions from Item 2:   1. CN to summarise PSA analysis conducted by Cefas and share with the Secretariat. 2. GC to summarise his alternative measures report and share with the Secretariat. 3. Secretariat to circulate the updated catch composition report for Steering Group feedback. | Chloe North  Gus Caslake  Secretariat |
| Actions from Item 3:   1. GC to find Rob Enever’s ETP survivability thesis and share with CN and the Secretariat. 2. CN to draft a summary of survivability of ETP species in this fishery and add to the FMP. | Gus Caslake  Chloe North |
| Actions from Item 4:   1. Secretariat to:    1. Follow up with MMO and JNCC on whether there are sufficient measures in place to protect VMEs in the UoA of the FIP.    2. Arrange a call between TH and Rob Whiteley to discuss the requirements of the habitat action. | Secretariat |