



Developing Recreational Sea Angling Opportunities at Skerries Bank

Consultation Report

A Summary of Responses from the Call for Information on Developing Recreational Sea Angling opportunities at Skerries Bank

(9th November 2022 to 9th December 2022)

April 2023

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Version Control

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1. Aim of Report and Process

The report demonstrates how a call for information distributed in November 2022 (to develop recreational sea angling opportunities at Skerries Bank) was conducted and summarises the responses received that relate to the questions as set out in the questionnaire.

This report provides information that will be used to compare against the [baseline report](#) and help establish whether the Skerries Bank Angling Zone now coupled with the Netting Permit Byelaw (and the associated Permit Conditions) provide any benefit to the RSA Sector and if the Code of Conduct is still an appropriate form of management for the site.

2. Background Information

The Skerries Bank Angling Zone was one of three sites selected as a pilot study to introduce appropriate fishery management that would proactively develop the Recreational Sea Angling (“RSA”) sector. A [Voluntary Code of Conduct](#) was developed which aimed to balance the different sectors’ needs. Data collected in 2015–2016 were used to produce a [baseline report](#) which highlighted there is much overlap, both spatially and seasonally, in the use of the site between commercial fishers, recreational anglers and charter boat users.

Between data collection and the writing of the baseline report, the Netting Permit Byelaw was introduced in 2018. This Byelaw and associated Permit Conditions replaced legacy measures and introduced additional restrictions for netting within the District. The Netting Permit Conditions prohibit the use of any net in a significant section of the site except where:

- (a) The headline of the fixed net is set at least 3 metres below the surface of the water at any state of the tide;
- (b) The net used is a seine net; or
- (c) The net used is a drift net.

The [Netting Permit Conditions](#) and subsequent [Netting Annexes \(1-5\)](#) include additional restrictions for recreational netters, that include a limit on the number (1 net at sea) and length of nets (25 metres). Both commercial and recreational netters must mark their gear in accordance with the Netting Permit Conditions.

Due to the length of time that has passed since the original data were collected (in 2015) and the subsequent introduction of the Netting Permit Byelaw, D&S IFCA identified that more up to date information and evidence was needed on how the Skerries Bank Angling Zone is currently being used across all fishing sectors. This information will then feed into a review of the Authority’s RSA Strategy.

3. Executive Summary of the call for information and its findings.

In November 2022, D&S IFCA determined that a “Call for Information” consultation should be undertaken in order to establish whether the Skerries Bank Angling Zone has been of any benefit to the RSA sector and whether additional formal management is potentially required. The consultation began on 9th November 2022 and ended on 9th December 2022, though several additional responses were received in early January 2023 and have been taken into account. Stakeholders from the commercial, charter boat and recreational sectors were directly contacted about the call for information and were invited to respond.

The consultation consisted of a questionnaire for each sector. The first half of the questionnaire focused on awareness of D&S IFCA and the Angling Zone, as well as the

amount, location and type of fishing being conducted, whilst the second section of the questionnaire focused on management and compliance.

A total of 15 responses were received across all three sectors. There were mixed responses to the questions but some main themes/topics were highlighted.

There are some similarities in the temporal and spatial use of the Angling Zone between the three user groups. Fishing takes place during most of the year for all sectors, with the recreational and charter sectors apparently being less active here in the winter months. Across the Bank itself is a popular hotspot for all sectors, with the commercial and recreational sectors also operating close to the shore and in the north-western section of the Zone. The locations fished do not appear to have changed much since the baseline report (see comparison in Annex 2), apart from self-reported expansions in areas fished, with charter boats apparently fishing across more of the Bank and recreational anglers apparently fishing the entire site at some points in the year.

Plaice and rays are still the main species targeted by the recreational and charter boat sectors, while rays, spider and brown crab and lobster are important for the commercial sector. Bass was identified as an important species for all sectors. All sectors raised concerns that the size of plaice has declined over the years.

The site is socially important for all three user groups and is reportedly economically vital for some in the commercial sector. The amount of charter boats that visit the Angling Zone has declined over the years due to many operations closing down as a result of COVID-19. One respondent also advised that the decline in charter boats was due to the reduction in available fish stocks.

Despite the introduction of certain restrictions on netting via the Netting Permit Byelaw since the baseline report, the amount of netting taking place in the Angling Zone still seems to be an issue for the recreational and charter boat sector, with some respondents suggesting that netters are not marking their gear correctly in accordance with the Netting Permit Byelaw Permit Conditions. Another concern raised was the issue of some potential illegal trawling within the Angling Zone that is occurring at night. In addition, there were also concerns that recreational users do not adhere to the bag limits as set out in the Voluntary Code of Conduct and that they catch and retain bass during the closed season. Unlicensed boats fishing and selling fish was also highlighted as an issue.

In terms of management, it was highlighted that there may be a lack of awareness of the Angling Zone Code of Conduct and therefore more education and promotion of the Angling Zone may be required. Most sectors advised that there should be more patrols of the area to check compliance with the code of conduct and the Netting Permit Byelaw Permit Conditions. Some of the respondents feel like the Angling Zone doesn't really prioritise the RSA sector as there is still too much commercial activity taking place inside the Zone. Respondents' suggestions for management included: seasonal closures for netting, dedicated Zones for recreational anglers where no commercial activity can take place, reducing the amount of plaice that can be kept under the Voluntary Code of Conduct, increasing the plaice landing size from 27 cm to 30 cm, and mandating the use of circle hooks, which are thought to prevent plaice from swallowing the hook.

Overall, the responses suggest that there is still conflict between the groups, particularly between the commercial and recreational sector in terms of fishing gear, spatial access, and fish stocks.

4. How the Consultation was conducted

The consultation began on 9th November 2022 and ended on 9th December 2022.

The consultation was in the form of three separate questionnaires, one for each sector (commercial, recreational and charter boat users) that provided background information as to why the information was needed and how the information will help D&S IFCA. The questionnaires were split into two main sections. The first section asked questions about the stakeholder and their fishing habits and locations. The second section asked questions about the management of the Skerries Bank Angling Zone and whether there is any conflict between the various user groups of the site.

A mail chimp was used for the direct circulation of the questionnaire to the commercial and charter boat sector.

The Angling Trust included the recreational questionnaire in their monthly newsletter that was distributed to all Angling Trust members and newsletter subscribers. The information and all three questionnaires were also posted on D&S IFCA's website and facebook page as well as the Angling News and the Engagement & Have Your Say website display pages. The information circulated for the consultation can be viewed here ([commercial operators](#), [recreational fishers](#) and [charter boat operators](#)). Options were provided for engagement as via e-mail, postal mail and telephone.

4.1 Rationale for Consultation

It has been six years since monitoring surveys were conducted on the Skerries Bank Angling Zone. Due to the length of the time since the data collection occurred and the subsequent introduction of the Netting Permit Byelaw (and associated Netting Permit Conditions), D&S IFCA decided to obtain up to date information on all fishing activities currently undertaken in the Skerries Bank Angling Zone. The information supplied will allow D&S IFCA to compare the current usage of the site to the baseline report (Annex 2, figures 2 & 3) and determine whether the creation of the Angling Zone has provided any benefit to the RSA sector and if the Code of Conduct coupled with the Netting Permit Byelaw are sufficient forms of management for the site.

5. Consultation Responses

A total of 15 responses were received, three of which were after the closing date of 9th December 2022. The last response was received on 15th January 2023. The responses were split across the three sectors as follows;

Table 1. Number of responses received per fishing sector.

Sector	Number of responses
Charter boat	3
Commercial	4
Recreational	8

Responses have been summarised per sector and any recurring themes have been highlighted. The summary includes some quotations from the individual responses. Alphanumeric grid cell references refer to the map that was sent out with the consultation.

5.1 Charter Boat Sector

From the responses received, charter boat operators take out between 6-10 anglers per trip. They fish mostly across the central areas of the Skerries Bank. Cells C5, D5-D7, and E6 (see grid overlay in Annex 2, figure 2), seem to be hotspots that were highlighted across all respondents in this sector. Fishing starts as early as February and lasts till October with trip frequency ranging from 2-8 times per month. Spring and Autumn appear to be the preferred seasons.

Anglers on charter boats mainly target plaice, rays, and turbot in the area. However, one respondent advised that *'turbot, ray, bass and whiting are nearly extinct'*. The anglers onboard the charter boats fish for both sport and food. The site is reportedly vital to the charter boat sector economically as well as being important socially.

Two out of the three respondents advised that the average size of plaice has decreased, and it is a lot harder to catch a plaice of decent size to keep for the table (with around 75% being returned due to being undersized). One respondent said *'the reduction in available fish stocks has meant a massive decline in the fishing clubs that used to exist and book charter trips. Clubs and charter boats are in decline country wide'*

The respondents advised that there is a lot of netting for rays and plaice in the area and netters don't always put their PLN on their dahn or mark them with a cane and flag. It has been highlighted that there are some concerns of potentially illegal trawling including over the Bank at night, with trawlers towing gear along the edge of the Skerries Bank / Start Bay no trawl Zone.

In terms of the effectiveness of the Code of Conduct, concerns were expressed that the no trawl Zone under the Mobile Fishing Permit conditions isn't big enough to stop towed gear doing damage and that the Bank itself and the holes on the eastern edge should be out of bounds to all commercial activity.

One respondent advised that under the Voluntary Code of Conduct, anglers should be limited to keeping 6 fish rather than the current 10 plaice and 3 rays. In addition, it was expressed by another respondent that the Code of Conduct is not working as it is not policed.

Question 15 asked the respondents whether there is any conflict between the various user groups of the site. All respondents advised that there is conflict, with one stating;

'Commercial are all about quantity for profit. The majority of the recreational sector and charter angling fraternity will respect Voluntary Codes of Conduct. Towed gear destroys seabed habitats and should be banned anywhere near the Bank'

Only one respondent confirmed they would like a workshop to discuss the matters further.

5.2 Commercial Sector

The commercial fishing sector use a variety of different gears including pots, nets and lines which is split per respondent as per Table 2.

Table 2. Gear used by commercial sector respondents to the call for information.

Respondent	Gear type	Amount of gear used
1	Fixed tangle nets Longlines	300-yard nets (shoots 3-4 nets) 60-70 hooks
2	Trolling lines	Two lures
3	Pots Nets Lines	100 2000 meters 200 hooks
4	Fyke nets Tangle nets Gill nets Rod and line	15 sets 1500 yards 1000 yards One

One respondent advised that they fish the whole site at some point in the year, with another advising they fish on the boundary of the no trawl Zone. Hotspots identified from all respondents are A4-A8, B8 and C7-C8 (Annex 2, figure 2, the areas around Beesands and southwest of the Bank).

Fishing appears to take place during the whole year depending on what species are being targeted and what gear is being used but two respondents fish for spider crabs from April to September and Autumn/Winter seems to be a popular time for other species and when using rod and line. The main species targeted are bass, rays, spider and brown crabs, lobster, mullet, mackerel, bream and cuttlefish.

The respondents advised that they fish the site due to it being safe for gear as it is a no trawl Zone and it is sheltered from the westerly winds so fishing there is possible when the weather prevents going elsewhere.

The site is reportedly economically vital to some of the commercial sector as respondents suggested they would not have a business without it.

In terms of whether there have been any changes or patterns in any specific fish species caught, respondents advised that crayfish have returned in good numbers and ray stocks remain good (in particular it was highlighted that there are more undulate rays there now), but the size of plaice has declined.

The main concerns raised from the management section of the questionnaire were:

- Recreational users not adhering to the bag limits and catching and retaining bass during the closed season.
- There needs to be more checks/ patrols carried out in the area as the RSA sector are not complying with code of conduct and there are some unlicensed boats fishing and selling fish.

Respondents highlighted that there isn't much conflict between the commercial and charter boat sector due to the lack of charter boats visiting the area now, but that there is still conflict between the recreational and commercial sector.

One respondent advised *'Recreational users think the commercial sector take everything and don't fully understand the different types of gear used and what little impact some of it can have on the habitat and bycatch. More education is needed for recreational users'*.

In contrast another respondent said *'No I don't think there is any conflict. The main commercial activity in the area is potting and that doesn't really affect anglers. There is very little netting activity in the area now. An occasional visiting boat might turn up very occasionally, but they usually shoot nets once and then leave never to return after having experienced the spiders and weed. The only other boat from Dartmouth that shoots ray nets on the Skerries regularly has now given up on the area completely and now shoots his nets off Salcombe where the ground is clearer. I do occasionally get stares and glares off sea anglers even when just passing through the area. They probably think I have been stripping the Skerries Bank of all it's fish with my "wall of death" monofilament nets. I'm flattered that they think a single-handed fisherman in a 30 foot boat has such fishing power and ability but nothing could be further from the truth!'*

Two out of four respondents advised they would like a workshop to discuss the matters further.

5.3 Recreational Sector

Seven out of eight respondents confirmed that they fish from a vessel (maximum size of 7m); one respondent fishes from both a vessel and the shore. Across the central part of the Bank itself and areas A4-A8 (see Annex 2, figure 2) are important locations for the RSA sector.

Two respondents fish all year round but spring through to November/December are the preferred times to fish the site. Anglers use a maximum of two rods per trip and on average fish 2 times a month. Target species include bass, gurnard, plaice, and rays. Anglers fish for both sport (catch and release) and food.

Respondents fish the site due to the variety of species found there and it being protected from westerly winds.

All respondents advised that the size and quality of fish has declined, in particular the size of bass and plaice appears to be smaller each year.

The site appears to be socially important to the RSA sector, with one respondent advising *'it is one of the few beaches where angling clubs can meet and fish together safely'*. Another respondent said *'It's the most valued angling area in Devon'* and *'is the only place you can reliably target some species'*.

Three out of eight respondents are members of a sea angling club and four are members of the Angling Trust. All but one respondent would like a workshop to discuss the matters further.

The general theme that emerged from the management section of the questionnaire is that netting appears to be an issue for the RSA sector, as it excludes them from certain areas due to loss of gear. The Netting Permit Byelaw (Permit Conditions) does restrict some netting activity in the area (see Annex 1, figure 1) but doesn't cover all of the Bank. It was also highlighted that there is some suspicious fishing activity occurring at night. Several respondents said they would like to see dedicated angling areas where no commercial activity is allowed. One respondent suggested having a seasonal closure for netting over the summer months.

In terms of the Code and Conduct and Angling Zone, respondents feel like there is still too much commercial activity taking place with the 'Angling Zone'. One angler commented *'There are too many pots within the Angling Zone which has excluded me and others from certain areas. Feel like the Angling Zone should prioritize anglers access and put more restrictions on commercial activity'*. Another one commented *'The commercial pressure within banks and outskirts of the Zone are having the biggest impact. There should be Zones for commercial and recreational users'*.

In addition, one respondent thinks the Code of Conduct is not relevant due to stock levels of species being good. Other suggestions included increasing the landing size to 30 cm, reducing the bag limit of plaice and incorporating circle hooks into the Code of Conduct as it is believed that they prevent plaice from swallowing the hook, which will improve catch and release survival.

One respondent also raised a concern that some anglers take more fish than they should and possibly sell them illegally.

Annex 1. Location of coastal area 3 in the Netting Permit Byelaw Conditions and restrictions on demersal mobile gear in accordance with paragraphs 3.5 and 4.5 of the Mobile Fishing Byelaw Permit conditions

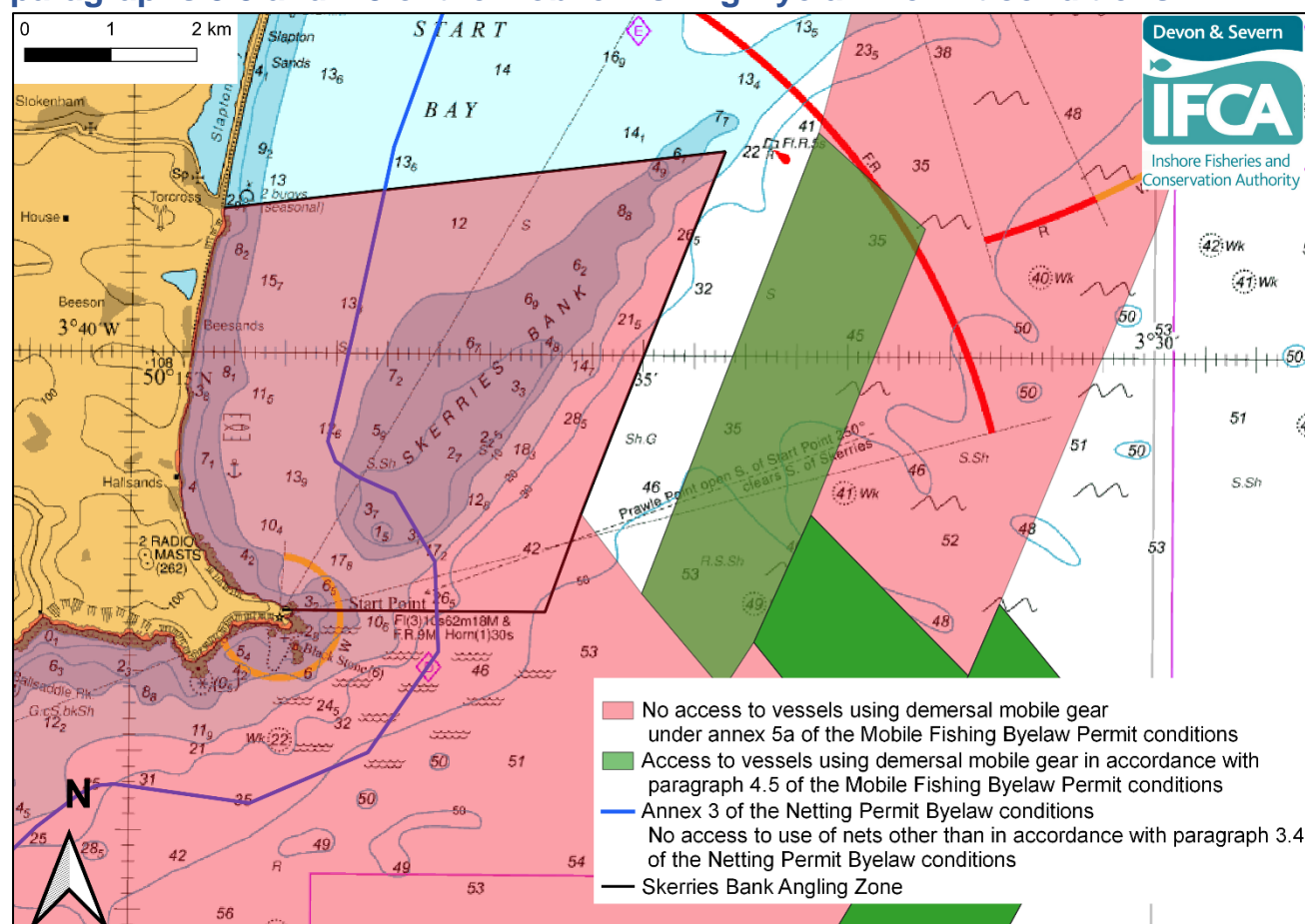


Figure 1. Map of Skerries Bank showing the Angling Zone (Black line). The blue line indicates the area within the Angling Zone where the use of the nets is prohibited under the Netting Permit Byelaw (Permit Conditions), except where the headline of the fixed net is set at least 3 metres below the surface of the water at any state of the tide, the net used is a seine net or drift net. The red area indicates the no access to vessels using demersal mobile gear in accordance with paragraph 3.5 of the Mobile Fishing Byelaw Permit conditions.

Annex 2. Comparison of sector use per grid square

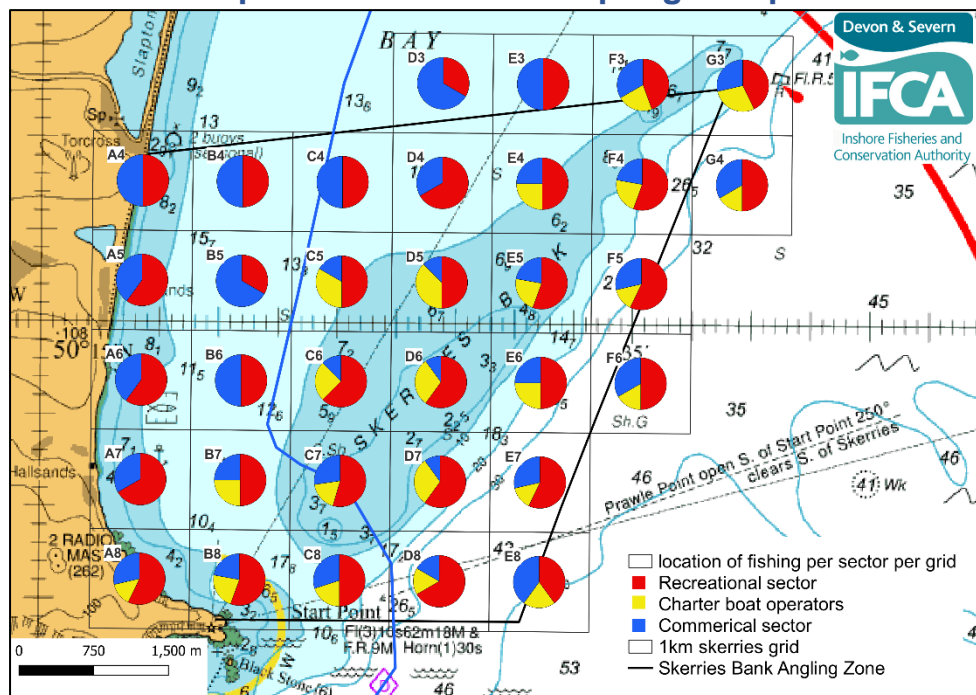


Figure 2. Breakdown showing the use of the Skerries Bank Angling Zone across all three sectors (recreational, charter and commercial) from the 2022 call for information. The pie charts only represent whether a sector fishes in that location; it is not an indication of levels of effort, catch or landings.

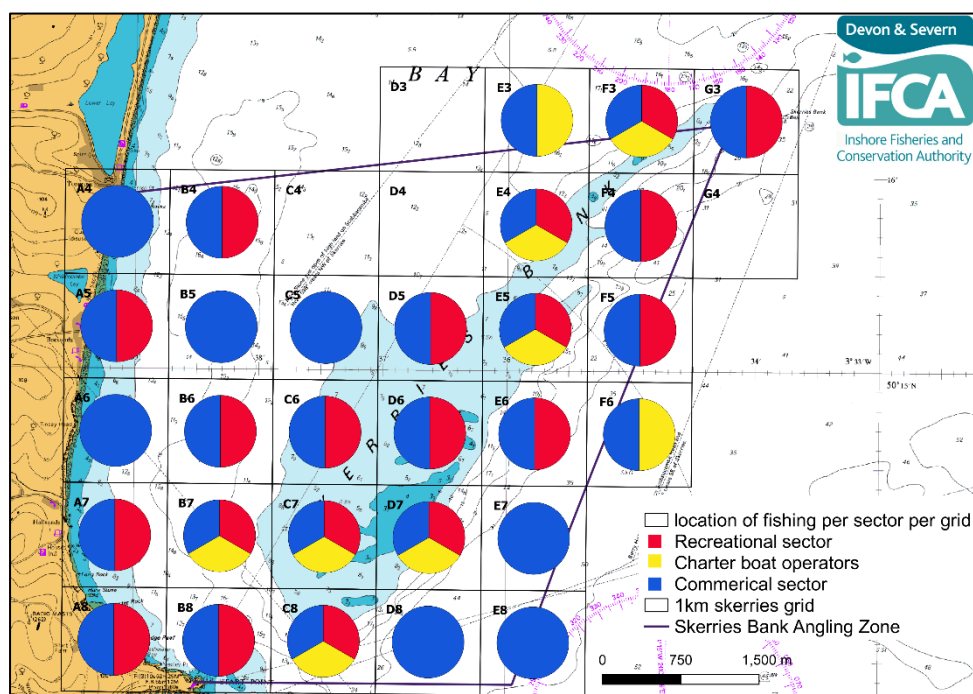


Figure 3. Breakdown showing the use of the Skerries Bank Angling Zone across all three sectors (recreational, charter and commercial) from the baseline report 2019 (data used to create this collected in 2015/2016). The pie charts only represent whether a sector fishes in that location; it is not an indication of levels of effort, catch or landings.