

Date: 15 January 2024
Our ref: 463262
Your ref: Public Consultation: Review of Netting Permit Conditions



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Dear Mat Mander,

Re: Natural England's Consultation Response: Review of Netting Permit Conditions

Thank you for inviting Natural England to respond to the formal public consultation on proposed amendments to existing commercial and recreational Netting Permit Conditions. We note that this consultation includes six topics relating to commercial and recreational fishing. In our remit as a statutory nature conservation body, Natural England will only be responding to Topic 1: The opening of a fixed net fishery in the Salcombe Estuary.

Natural England's purpose is to help conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. Our vision is 'Thriving Nature for people and planet'. We aim to achieve this through building partnerships for nature recovery.

Commercial fisherman using nets: The opening of a six-month fixed net fishery within Salcombe Estuary (subject to a range of measures).

Natural England does not support the opening of a six-month fixed net fishery within Salcombe Estuary. We believe this would be a regressive step and would not align with management measures in place within other estuaries in Devon and Cornwall. Salcombe Estuary is a special place for biodiversity. It is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is a Local Nature Reserve. Beds of dwarf seagrass (*Zostera noltii*) occur as part of the estuary's littoral sediment, which are vulnerable to abrasion. It is Natural England's view that management should aim to maintain good sediment quality, due to the sensitivities of seagrass, and abrasion caused by fixed nets could impact the condition of the SSSI. Salcombe Estuary is a bass nursery area and is likely to provide a nursery habitat function to other fish and shellfish species. We are concerned that the potential bycatch of bass would be unsustainable, and difficult to regulate. Grey seals are known to frequent this estuary and are vulnerable to entanglement; Sea Mammal Research Unit data shows 85% of UK seal bycatch occurs in the South West mostly in fixed nets. Defra Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code recommends reducing disturbance to seals. It is also an offence to injure or kill a seal.

Netting within estuaries has been recognised as detrimental, for example by the Cornwall IFCA River and Estuarine Fishing Nets Byelaw 2017 which recognises 'the impacts of netting on sea fish, salmon, and sea trout, including juvenile and spawning stocks. The introduction of such a fishery in Devon would be at odds with the existing approaches in other estuaries and general direction of conservation. Opening of Salcombe Estuary to netting could set a precedent and pose a future risk to other estuaries and the important biodiversity and ecological functions that these sites provide.

Drivers such as the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP), the strengthened 'biodiversity duty' in the Environment Act 2021 and UK Marine Strategy, aim to halt the decline of our biodiversity. The EIP outlines that we need to increase protection in MPAs and remove pressures to help the marine environment to recover. The proposed opening of the estuary to increased levels of netting seems to be contrary to these aspirations.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute further to discussions around these proposals and other measures proposed in this consultation during the next BPSC meeting on February 22nd, where a Natural England representative will be attending. We are generally supportive of the science and evidence-based initiatives that D&S IFCA continue to pursue, to improve the sustainability of local fisheries. Please be advised that should D&S IFCA go ahead with the opening of a six-month fixed net fishery within Salcombe Estuary then formal consultation with Natural England may be required, due to the designation of the area as a SSSI. We would be happy to discuss this with you at such time as may be appropriate.

For any queries relating to the content of this letter please contact me using the details provided below.

Yours faithfully,

Liz Bailey and Jasmine Rix

Devon Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Area Team

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