

Topic 5: Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes – Grey Mullet Species and Gilthead Bream

Officers' Recommendation

That a MCRS for grey mullet species is introduced in Salcombe if the estuary is open to fixed netting

Background

This paper should be read with Annex 4 – Officers' report on sexual maturity of grey mullet species and gilthead bream. Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes (MCRS) is a common management measure that is applied to many species. The general principle of applying MCRSs is to ensure that a proportion of the juvenile stock is protected and cannot be removed from a fishery. Some MCRS are set at the length at which 50% of the stock reaches sexual maturity and can reproduce at least once before it can be removed from the fishery.

Consultation Response

Very few responses contained comments on this subject, and even less provided suggestions for specific sizes to apply. Officers have produced additional information for consideration by the B&PSC. Regarding mullet species, there were differing views from commercial fishermen. One suggested a size for grey mullet of 30cm and provided other suggestions for species that were not mentioned in Topic 5 of the formal consultation. Another commercial fisherman said that his support for the introduction of a MCRS for mullet species would be dependent on the decision relating to Salcombe Estuary. Regarding suggested sizes for the different species of mullet, this would be best in his view if it was 42cm for all species for Salcombe Estuary only. The same fisherman was not supportive of a MCRS for Gilthead Bream in either an estuary or the District as a whole. The lack of support from this fisherman was due to a lack of evidence for stocks, a further potential impact on fishing opportunity for small inshore commercial fishing vessels and the fact that, initially at least, the new D&S IFCA measures would only apply to the netting sector. Responses from others offered alternative views, based around D&S IFCA having available evidence, and if so D&S IFCA could use it under a precautionary approach for district wide management. The L50 approach was mentioned and implementing a 47cm MCRS for slow growing thick lipped grey mullet. The Bass Angling Conservation Group supported the introduction of a MCRS for both grey mullet and gilthead bream but would have preferred these sizes to be harmonised and considered via the involvement of the Association of IFCAs. They stated that *"For sustainability reasons, MCRS should be set as to allow fish to breed at least once before being killed. That means setting the MCRS at the length that allows 95% of fish to have matured and survived one spawning season"*.

Officers' View

The proposal to introduce MCRSs for grey mullet species and gilthead bream was in connection with the proposed net fishery in Salcombe. It was recognised that currently the prohibition on netting in estuaries provided much greater protection for these species than would be achieved by applying MCRSs in the estuary or District wide.

If MCRSs were introduced for grey mullet based on the size of sexual maturity, then it would potentially be necessary to apply three different sizes as each species matures at different

lengths. Alternatively, one MCRS could be applied to all three species of grey mullet. Annex 4 sets out how this would relate to the protection afforded to each species.

Officers advise that a single MCRS of 42cm is applied to all three species of grey mullet if the fixed net fishery was approved in Salcombe Estuary.

Currently little evidence relevant to the UK is available to determine a MCRS for gilthead bream. If a net fishery in Salcombe was approved, then Officers advise that D&S IFCA assesses the Size of Maturity of gilthead bream and implement an appropriate size once the evidence has been collected and analysed.

MMO landings data shows that grey mullet and gilthead bream are generally caught at sea as a bycatch in nets targeting other species. The National Mullet Club in their response to the pre-consultation were not overly concerned with the current netting at sea identifying that, **'currently, mullet caught by gill nets are most likely caught in a mixed fishery, as such would be far more sustainable and more profitable as the fish is worth more money.'** Until the prospect of Salcombe being open to fixed netting, no concerns over the level of exploitation of these species at sea was raised by stakeholders.

Applying a MCRS for grey mullet will likely lead to capture of fish that cannot be landed and generates a level of bycatch mortality and is not aligned with the Bycatch Objective.

The Officers' view is that it is not necessary to introduce a district wide MCRS for grey mullet.

The Officers' view on whether to apply a MCRS for grey mullet is determined by the Authority's decision regarding whether to open Salcombe to fixed netting.

If the decision is to open Salcombe then Officers feel that the Precautionary Objective and Sustainability objective supports their view that a MCRS of 42cm for grey mullet should be introduced for Salcombe. Reopening Salcombe will increase exposure of these stocks to fishing pressure, and limiting the fishery to a proportion of the catch is justifiable whilst acknowledging that this approach will lead to discarding of undersize fish.

Background Papers

B&PSC papers and minutes from meetings (D&S IFCA website Resource Library)