Octopus Update

Officers' Recommendation

That Members note the contents of this Officers' paper which gives an update on the influx of octopus into the South of the D&S IFCA's District and the work being undertaken.

Background

D&S IFCA Officers produced a paper (Agenda Item 11) on the influx of octopus into the South of the D&S IFCA's District and the South West at the B&PSC meeting on 26th June 2025. Members of the B&PSC noted the contents of the paper. At the B&PSC meeting on 16th October 2025, a further update was provided under Agenda Item 11 for Members to note.

Update since October 2025

D&S IFCA Officers have been analysing landings data provided through a Data Protection Request from the MMO. These data are from vessels operating in the south of the D&S IFCA's District under a D&S IFCA Commercial Potting Permit. The analysis of the landings and value of landings is ongoing and a further DPA request has been submitted to the MMO for further data for 2024. T

D&S IFCA Officers provided an assessment of some of the data for 13 vessels and a summary impact paper to Caroline Voaden MP and Alistair Carmichael MP so that it could help inform discussion at the Fisheries Debate held in the House of Parliament on 22nd January 2026. Beshlie Pool, Chief Executive of the South Devon and Channel Shellfishermen instigated the exchange of knowledge with the MPs and was briefed and supportive of the content.. Both these MPs and others raised the issues, through discussion in the debate, of the impact of octopus on crustacea landings and the livelihoods of fishermen impacted. Beshlie Pool shared the information provided to MPs with the South Devon and Channel Shellfishermen. The data analysis and summary impact paper has also been shared with the Fisheries Minister, Dame Angela Eagle MP.

Since January further analysis of the data has been undertaken. To date crab, lobster and octopus landings data for 18 inshore potting vessels operating out of the ports of Dartmouth, Salcombe and Plymouth for 2023 and 2025 have been analysed. These vessels are a selection from these ports and operating in the areas where the influx was recorded.

The octopus influx occurred on the South Coast of the D&S IFCA's District only and mainly stretched to an easterly limit of Brixham, and therefore those vessels operating out of the ports of Dartmouth, Salcombe and Plymouth are those that were impacted more by the octopus than those fishing further east. The data analysed can be seen in Annex 1. This Annex provides an insight into the changes in landings and value of landings between 2023 and 2025 for the 18 vessels and highlights the impact of the octopus influx on South Devon potting fleet.

A summary of the findings of this work on the impact of the octopus influx on the South Devon pot fisheries and fishermen is provided below.

What are the Impacts on fisheries, fishermen and their businesses?

- Data have identified the devastating impact of the octopus influx on the crab and lobster fisheries in South Devon on fishermen from the ports of Dartmouth, Salcombe and Plymouth.
- The degree of impact of the influx depends on different areas worked by the fishermen and the diversity in the environment of those areas worked such as marine habitat type, sea depth, and closeness to shore. These differences have resulted in many fishermen seeing significant negative impacts whilst others have benefitted both in octopus landings and value.
- Data from the landings of commercial potting vessels from three main ports have been analysed. From D&S IFCA's permit list (February 2026) indicates that 20 vessels operate out of Dartmouth, 19 vessels operate out of Salcombe, and 23 vessels operate out of Plymouth. The majority of the vessels from these ports operate in the Inshore Potting Agreement Area (see Annex 1 for chart). Analysis to date has been undertaken on 18 of these inshore potting vessels out of three ports.
- From the data, there has been a significant decline in crab landings of between 16.32% and 95.59% in 2025 compared to those landings in 2023 for 16 out of the 18 vessels, which caught crab. Ten out of the 16 vessels vessels have seen declines greater than 70% with three vessels having a percentage loss in crab landings over 90%. The mean percentage decrease in crab landings for the eleven vessels 71%. Only two vessels showed a slight increase in landings in 2025 (3.44% and 0.45%), although landings were small in both years.
- For lobster landings, 15 out of the 18 vessels had landings significantly lower in 2025 than in 2023. Declines ranged from 34% to 79.26%. Twelve vessels had a decline of over 50% of the landings in 2025 compared with 2023, and six of these vessels had a decrease in landings of lobster over 70%.
- Whilst most vessels did land some octopus in 2025, there were marked difference between vessels, and the data analysed clearly show that there was a limited season for catching octopus. The majority of landings were between March and July with peak landings between April and July. After July very low landings of octopus were recorded. This indicates a four-month peak season for the inshore vessels. Very low autumn catches of octopus were recorded for the inshore fleet unlike the peak landings of octopus for the nomadic offshore fleet recorded by the MMO.
- Whilst the landings of octopus may have helped to supplement overall landings for a many of these vessels, the short season meant that after the octopus disappeared only a few vessels were able to land other species such as crab or lobster due to the high level of predation by octopus on these species. For the many vessels landings of crab were depleted throughout the 2025 bloom and was significantly reduced thereafter. This is particularly evident for half the vessels whose data was analysed - vessels 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11 14, 15 and 17 (see Annex 1 – Table 2). For those vessels that did see some crab in their autumn catches the level of landings were much reduced in these months and across the year compared to 2023.
- Analysis of the value of landings for the 18 South Devon Potting Permit Holders has been undertaken, and the results can be seen in Annex 1.
- Twelve out of the 18 vessels showed an increase in the value of their landings due to the octopus landings. It is important to note that some of the vessels whose data were

analysed are small vessels with low earnings and therefore any increase in landings will be seen as large percentage increase. The presence of octopus did supplement two thirds of the vessels studied but there were six vessels whose value of landings were significant less in 2025 than in 2023 – vessels 1, 2, 8, 11, 16 and 17. These vessels saw losses in value of their catches between 34.61% and 72.24% which is almost certainly due to the octopus predating on crab and lobster and not being caught in these vessels' pots.

- Table 2 in Annex 1 also shows the percentage change in the value of crab and lobster landings alone. The data show significant declines in the value of these species that the fishermen traditionally target and land. In terms of the value of crab landings 14 out of 16 of the vessels had significant decreases in the value of crab landings (two vessels did not land crab) and eight of these vessels saw a decline in the value of crab landings greater than 50%, and five of these showed decline in landings value of over 70%. The value of lobsters landings to these vessels followed a similar pattern with 15 out of the 18 vessels having a decline in their value. Nine of the 18 vessels showed a decrease in lobster landings of over 50%.
- The outputs from data analysed shows that two thirds of the fishermen studied benefited from the octopus influx having landings of octopus that temporarily mitigated for the loss of crab and lobster to octopus predation, but not all. One third of the vessels' data analysed showed a large decline in their total landings.
- In 2025 where fishermen were able to catch octopus to supplement their wages and to some degree mitigate for decreased crab and lobster landings, they were not aware the season would abruptly end in July/August resulting a limited season and economic benefits.
- A significant and important impact is the uncertainty for fishermen and fishing businesses – not knowing that the octopus season was so short; the level of devastation caused to crustacean stocks; the 'not knowing' if the octopus will be around in 2026 and beyond, and how the businesses can survive after a short season of octopus catches.
- Some fishermen have experienced difficulty maintaining crew after the octopus catches dropped off in July and the low level of crustacea catches thereafter resulting in very reduced income. There is an identified severe lack of crew for inshore vessels, and in order for vessels to keep going to sea and businesses to remain viable, some fishermen/fishing businesses have been paying crew over the autumn and winter months (out of the business rather than earnings from landings) when there have been very low catches to try and maintain the crew.
- Some fishermen in South Devon have identified that they will be unable to annually refit their vessels due to low catches since July 2025 and the lack of financial resources.
- At a recent meeting between the MMO and fishermen in Salcombe, several fishermen reiterated the negative impact of the octopus bloom on their businesses, and some have resulted in tying up their vessels because the cost of going to sea is too great compared to the value of the landings of all species.
- Whilst potential diversification options have been mentioned at local and national meetings, fishermen are wondering what they can diversity into especially when the octopus catches reduce to pre-2025 and the species they have traditionally targeted have been decimated. After the summer, some fishermen undertook netting (if there vessel was able to move to this activity) but moving to a different fishing activity will put additional pressure on other stocks
- Vessels are starting to leave the fleet due to the impacts and the uncertainties as to whether octopus will come back, remain, and whether crab and lobster stock will recover.

This will lead to a reduction of inshore fleet and in so doing loss of the heritage factor of coastal towns and communities built up on fishing

- The impact of the octopus has not been limited to edible crab and European lobster stocks. Other commercial fisheries have also been impact including Spiny lobster and scallops. Potting fishermen have and are continuing to see the remains of eaten crab, lobster, spiny lobster and scallop shells in their pots.
- The uncertainty around the octopus stock, ongoing presence on the inshore ground and the ability of the inshore fleet to maintain landings at or beyond the 2025 levels, mean the whole fleet is vulnerable. The economic impact may not have been severe to all vessels, but the loss of crab and lobster stocks and their value to the potting fleet, and the evidence from a third of the fleet studied whose value of landings was greatly diminished, raises concerns for the future of the potting fleet.
- In 2025 there have been winners and losers in relation to the octopus influx, but the ever-threatening concern is the loss of the traditional fisheries for crab and lobster that may or may not be replaced by octopus in the long term.
- Dynamic monitoring of the octopus landings is needed at a vessel level to show early indications of changes in catches and therefore predict economic viability in 2026, also to establish an understanding of the octopus stocks and to plan when suitable interventions need to be introduced to support the inshore fleet.

What are the impacts on Coastal Communities?

- Most coastal communities have been built up from fishing. This is definitely the case in South Devon. The loss of fishing and fishing vessels from these communities will have a social and economic impact.
- Loss of vessels from ports may results in loss of businesses supporting fishing and therefore loss of local employment. Supporting businesses include marine engineers, mechanics, electricians, ship wrights and bait suppliers.
- The decline in crab and lobster stocks means less locally sourced crab and lobster for local processors, supply businesses, restaurants which may result in sourcing elsewhere if possible and increase in costs to these businesses and their customers.
- The potential loss of the heart of coastal communities, especially those that attract visitors interested in seeing fishing vessels and the history of the coastal towns, would be significant.
- Inshore fisheries have an ageing fishing fleet in terms of vessels and fishermen. Fishermen rely on fisheries for their incomes but also for their future pension plans and for their families. Loss of crab and lobster stocks due to the octopus influx and the likely prolonged recovery time of these stocks will likely result in loss of traditional fisheries from the ports, loss of fishing vessels, loss of the experienced fishermen and their knowledge.

What do the South Devon fishing industry, which has been impact by the octopus influx, need?

- Financial assistance is key to help them through the influx and the uncertainties it has caused, and long-term impacts due to the decline in crab and lobster stocks. At a recent inshore fisheries conference and at the Salcombe meeting with the MMO and fishermen, the Fisheries and Coastal Communities Fund was discussed. Many felt it that this fund should focus on fishing and help support fishermen and their communities through difficult times and a changing fishing environment. Concern was raised that this fund would be targeted by larger firms, academic institutions and NGOs who have members of staff that are versed in submitting funding applications. Fishermen pointed out that this is not their

expertise and wanted to understand if the fund would really be accessible to them and for what it could be used. The MMO pointed out that these factors are still being discussed prior to the fund opening for 2026.

- A financial process could be applied similar to that applied to pollack fishermen and during Covid and this has been raised by fishermen. The other option is something similar to that applied to Jaguar /Land Rover where the principles of financial support was applied by Government to mitigate for an unanticipated 'out of the blue' incident affecting their business. This has definitely been the case with the octopus influx which was unexpected and its immediate and long-term effects on South West fisheries and fishermen. Fishermen have suggested that there could be funding available as safety net for those that have been impacted so far or who may be impacted in the next few years once a true understanding of the octopus presence and the impact on crustacea landings in the future.
- There are many older vessels still operating in the inshore fleet, some of which are over 50 years in age and decommissioning might be an option for these or the businesses that have significantly suffered as a result the influx of octopus. Decommissioning might be attractive to those working older vessels as selling these vessels will be very difficult due to the modernising of the potting fleet since they were built.
- Support for the fishermen's ability to diversify might be an option. The question is what do they diversify to? Potting vessels are setup to fish using pots. Financial support to move to netting might be an option but this may cause displacement effects and added strain on inshore fish stocks. Other diversification opportunities that could be offered to the inshore fleet could be an increase in bass authorisations or blue-fin tuna permits.
- A Government backed Policy and Action Plan for the English Fishing fleet is needed which helps support the industry strategically, economically and socially and provides options for scenarios such as the octopus influx.

MBA Research

The MBA published its research report on Work Package 1 on 27th January 2026 titled: **Common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) blooms off the Southwest of the UK: History, trends, causes and consequences.** The MBA has also published a non-technical summary, which can be viewed here.

The conclusion of the full report states:

The current UK octopus bloom has had a very mixed effect on the fishing industry. The largest negative effects were on those fishing for brown crabs (Cancer pagurus), lobsters (Homarus gammarus) and king scallops (Pecten maximus) due to high levels of predation by octopus in fishing gear and likely also in the natural environment. Some of these fishermen, but not all, were able to adapt to catching octopus instead of crabs and lobsters and therefore do well economically for a period of time. But overall, 57.6% of the crab and lobster fishermen we surveyed said the octopus bloom has had a negative effect on their business from January to August 2025. In comparison, only 27.3% said it had been positive, and the other 15.2% said it had a neutral effect. While some of the fishermen we surveyed had benefited from the octopus bloom, most were worried about the future. Octopus catches dropped off dramatically from August to October, peaked again in November, but then started to decline again. If octopus catches continue to decline this year, but have damaged stocks of crabs, lobsters and scallops (Pecten maximus), as it appears, then fishermen fear they will have little left to catch.

The final report provided a summary of recommendations:

Predicting and detecting future octopus blooms and establishing the full effects of them on other species such as crabs, lobsters and scallops will require further research and monitoring. We recommend the following priorities and actions:

- *Continuation and expansion of the MBA trawl surveys and University of Plymouth Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV) surveys to monitor the current and future octopus blooms. Both surveys have demonstrated the ability to detect a range of cephalopod species, including common octopus. Further information on the effectiveness of these surveys will be delivered in our report on Work Package 2.*
- *Enhancement and earliest possible publication of the crab, lobster and scallop stock assessments run by Cefas to gain a better understanding of the effects of common octopus on those species.*
- *Ongoing support for the continued collection of the environmental data used in this study to understand the current and previous octopus blooms.*
- *Development and support for predictive models based on the above data and larval dispersal modelling (such as 'OctoPulse') to better forecast future octopus blooms.*
- *Increased efforts to detect larval octopus off UK coasts to ground truth the above models and serve as an early warning system. Methods could include analysis of existing survey material, increased plankton / small fish surveys and the use of eDNA analysis.*
- *Increased collaboration between scientists and other stakeholders working on octopus population dynamics in the UK, Channel Islands and France to better understand connectivity between regions and to share scientific methods and understanding*
- *Acoustic tagging of common octopus. Large-scale movement or migration of common octopus has never been definitively detected, therefore its role in creating blooms is unknown. However, fishermen's observations indicate that movement was an important factor in the evolution of the 2025 UK octopus bloom. Acoustic tagging of octopus has not been done previously in UK waters, but could be very revealing, especially given the widespread array of acoustic receivers now present throughout the English channel*
- *We also recommend developing easier and more efficient ways of gathering observations of octopus catches and effects from fishermen, for example, through a user-friendly App or incorporation into existing catch reporting systems and the use of species ID guides.*
- *Beyond fisheries effects, there is a further research need to understand how the sudden influx of a previously rare species (in this case octopus, but you can draw parallels with bluefin tuna) affects marine ecosystem function and resilience, especially in light of ongoing climate change and other increasing human pressures.*
- *Should the current octopus bloom continue or re-occur and / or other shellfish fisheries not recover, it is likely that the fishing industry would benefit from support to help adapt fishing gear and methods. Likewise, if the octopus do not return and other shellfish fisheries remain depressed, then the fishing industry would also benefit from support.*
- *We therefore also recommend an urgent investigation into the social and economic impact of the 2025 UK octopus bloom on the affected fishing industry and communities.*

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers

B&PSC Meeting Paper: Agenda Item 11 – Influx of Octopus into Devon and the South West 26th June 2025.

B&PSC Meeting Paper: Agenda Item 11 – Octopus Update 16th October 2025