

Agenda Item 8

The Ribble cockle fishery lessons from the past.

The objective of this note is to put forward some ideas that may help should a substantial cockle fishery develop on the Ribble next year.

I have seen the pictures sent in by the industry. It is still far too early to presume that a substantial cockle fishery will develop on the Ribble next year but it would in my opinion be neglectful if "Members" were not to provide in advance the tools our Officers need to do their job. I do not want the Authority to be caught off guard.

The worst case scenario that we were presented with a few years ago was a previously unknown (because we had no access to it) bed so full of cockles that displacement was well under way. Worse still the bed was in the most part marginally undersize. We faced losing both a very large tonnage of cockles through displacement and as a result polluting the bed. This of course could also have a very negative effect on the bird life in the estuary.

At the time the relevant Byelaws in place were so badly worded that they were totally unfit for purpose. Hopefully the new permit scheme is strong enough to take the strain.

A "thinning" operation was rapidly improvised under the then Byelaw 13a. Within a short time the bed both recovered and regenerated into a very good fishery resource until the lifecycle of the cockles was complete. Despite every attempt to manage the bed in such a way that it would become self-sufficient this was not achieved. As with all other previous attempts to manage the Ribble cockle fishery the simple fact that any major Ribble cockle fishery is most likely seeded from outside sources became very apparent.

We therefore have three contingencies to prepare for.

A very large and unstable bed in a displacement situation on Foulnaze.

A lucrative size cockle fishery in the Foulnaze area that could conceivably last up to four years.

An easily accessible cockle fishery in the Penfold Channel and South Gut areas.

Clearly without sensible precautions the development of organised criminal gathering is a real possibility.

My suggestion is that over the next few months plans are made and consents provisionally in place so that should it be necessary a thinning operation could be carried out under 13a or the new Cockle Mussel Byelaw. The purpose of this would be to keep permit holders in work, reduce unauthorised gathering and improve the quality of the bed. Within a short period of time the second situation could quickly develop.

We finally have the nightmare scenario of ongoing fisheries both on Foulnaze and in the Penfold/South Gut areas at the same time often during the hours of darkness. Trying to keep on area open with the adjacent one closed proved to be impractical during past events.

Just in case please read up on the Southport Tractor Wet Dredge Trials report produced by Bill Cook. Most people were unaware that during the entire Morecambe Bay Cockle Incident that the then

Committee ran a parallel wet dredge fishery in the Ribble that was entirely successful in its aims. When Mandy read the report she was amazed at what had been achieved. What is more in the run up to the subsequent Ribble cockle fisheries local Councils and Environmental lobbies demanded to know why this method of fisheries management was not employed again.

I know the answer to this question but it would be inappropriate to commit it to paper.

Without getting embroiled in a totally separate subject please be aware that Mandy and I had serious discussions on how this extremely efficient and environmentally friendly method of gathering cockles could be incorporated into the existing permit scheme should the need arise.

While not appropriate for all areas it is an Ace Card in our back pockets.

I have never been a Boy Scout but their moto in the present circumstances is most appropriate, "Be Prepared".

Steve Brown.