**OUTER HEBRIDES COCKLE FISHERIES**

**Background**

Hand raking for cockles has been an integral part of life for some communities in the Outer Hebrides for the last 50 years. The emerging EU markets for live shellfish in the early eighties opened new marketing opportunities for cockles and offered hand gatherers a seasonal income by selling to the vivier lorries.

As many mainland cockle beds where coming under increased pressure and increased prices local saw the opportunity mechanical harvesting the beaches at Barra, North Uist, Seilibost in Harris and Tong in Lewis. The presence of tractors on beaches raised many local concerns with local stocks being over-exploited, resulting in a ban being imposed on mechanical harvesting for cockles in Scotland.

A number of stock surveys have been undertaken at most of the cockle beaches with the last survey completed in 2014 at 6 beaches in North Uist, Harris and Lewis.

Two other surveys have been undertaken at the Cockle Strand in Barra.

Meat surveys have been undertaken at several beaches in the Uists, with the only beach currently being commercially harvested in the Uists returning the highest yield. This seems to indicate that yields seem to increase as the cockles are thinned out on the beaches, with beaches with large volumes of small cockles yielding the lowest meat yields.

Following meetings with local cockle gatherers, in Harris, in 2009, when it was alleged that mainland gatherers had been gathering undersized cockles, the minimum landing size for all cockles in the Outer Hebrides was increased from 22mm to 30mm. This increase was introduced through a Statutory Instrument following proposals submitted by the Outer Hebrides Inshore Fisheries Group. This increase has resulted in cockles only been collected for supplying the live market which is paying £4,000 per tonne.

**Management Options**

The OHRIFG has considered the future long term sustainability of local cockle stocks which are currently managed by hand gathering only and a minimum landing size of 30mm.

The increase in cockle prices has made the fishery more attractive, in particular, for gatherers who may be attracted to the fishery on a seasonal or part-time basis, by working both tides. The preferred management options to control effort has been to prohibit harvesting on all beaches from 6pm to 6am, this would conserve stocks and would improve health and safety by reducing the likelihood of fatalities during hours of darkness. In addition, a prohibition on harvesting from 6pm on Friday until 6am on Mondays (weekend ban) would also control effort onto the fishery. This management measure is already in place in the Clyde and has worked well and is easy to enforce.

**Barra Cockle Strand**

The Barra Cockle Strand has been harvested by locals for many years. However, Castlebay Community Council (CCC) has highlighted concerns over the perilous state of the stocks and has asked for the fishery to be closed for a period.

Despite correspondence having been sent on two separate occasions to the CCC suggesting a local meeting to discuss range of management options available no response has been received.

CCC had been asked a number of questions in relation to what closure period was being proposed, what local evidence existed that stocks were under pressure, was current 30mm minimum landing size being adhered to, numbers of gatherers and whether those had increased or working longer periods over both tides. Local issues may have arisen with an influx of ex EU fishermen having moved to Barra with families and are now on benefits and harvesting cockles.

Main buyers in Barra are vivier lorry buyers and Barratlantic Ltd, however, no returns are being made by the buyers.

A local stock survey would determine state of stocks and whether stocks have declined since last survey done possibly 10 years previously.

**South Ford South Uist**

The South Ford is the only beach being commercially harvested in the Uists, with up to 6 locals hand gathering. The beach has an A water classification for 7 months of the year, with most of the cockles being sold to Kilbride Shellfish Ltd for £4,000 per tonne. The gatherers restrict the number of days they harvest by supplying good quality cockles for sale each weekend. The buyers confirm that the sizes landed are well in excess of the current 30mm minimum landing size. The beach yielded the best meat yields of all Uist beaches when the last survey was completed.

This beach has never had a stock survey undertaken and it would be prudent that the South Ford is included in any future stock surveys.

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**North Ford North Uist**

The last stock surveys undertaken on 6 beaches in North Uist indicated that 5 of the 6 beaches had commercial volumes of cockles in excess of the current 30mm minimum landing size. SNH and Food Standards Scotland were not keen to have any unrestricted commercial fisheries on those beaches due to SPA designations on the machair lands of North Uist. After discussions with both SNH and Marine Scotland Science it was suggested that commercial harvesting should only be considered at the North Ford beach. The beach is furthest from the North Uist SPA machair lands and it was considered that there would be sufficient cockles on the remaining 5 beaches to adequately leave sufficient cockles stocks for feeding birds.

As a pre-cautionary measure MS Science could support a harvest ratio of 20 -25% of cockle stocks larger than 30mm. Based on the last survey a harvest of up to 100 tonnes could be taken from the North Ford.

In addition to the current minimum landing size of 30mm, no harvesting would be permitted from 6pm Friday until 6am on Monday and no harvesting during other weekdays from 6pm until 6am.

**Seilibost**

Seilibost beach has been commercially harvested by up to 6 hand gatherers over the last 20 years, with some of those being mainland based in the earlier years. However, all the local Harris gatherers have either retired or moved to the mainland. Current harvesting is undertaken by a team of up to 3 from Lewis who seem to operate year round when beach has an A Classification plus another 2 brothers from Lewis who harvest on a seasonal basis. The team from Lewis live in a camper van beside the beach for several days and harvest the beach at night during the winter periods. The leader of the Lewis team has been in conversation with organizations to consider obtaining a Several Order on the beach to prevent anyone else from harvesting the beach. The OHRIFG would not support the granting of a Several Order to an individual having exclusive rights to what is a common resource.

West Harris Trust was formed nearly 10 years ago and secured public funding to purchase the Estate on behalf of the Community. The Trust has been very active in promoting development within the community with an aim to see population growth, in particular, make West Harris an attractive area for younger people to live and work there.

Murdo MacKay, Chairman, West Harris Trust attended a meeting of the

OHRIFG on 27 April 2018 and they were keen to investigate available options for

the future sustainable management of cockles on Seilibost beach. However, their

main interest centered on them gaining income from charging levy on cockles

gathered from the beach. It was explained to Mr MacKay that the only available

legislation for future management of cockle fisheries was either a Regulation or

Several Order. Fees collected from a Regulation Order would have to be used for

stock surveys and for future enhancement of the fisheries. Several Order

approach was to transfer ownership of the stock to an individual for their

exclusive use.

Based on previous meetings in the Harris area there had been strong support for:

* Introduce a weekend ban in the fishery from 6.00pm Friday until 6.00am Monday
* No fishing between 6.00pm and 6.00am

Mr MacKay seemed supportive of such management measures but indicated that according to the legal papers obtained by the Trust in taking over ownership of the Estate that they owned the cockles within the inter-tidal area.

Mr MacKay was made aware that according to previous discussions that had been

held with Estate owners in North Uist and Barra, the Estate only had royalty rights

to seaweed and mussels, with cockles being a common resource similar to other

shellfish.

As a pre-cautionary measure MS Science could support a harvest ratio of 20 -25% of cockle stocks larger than 30mm. Based on the last survey a harvest of up to 100 tonnes could be taken from Seilibost Beach.

A weakness in the current recording system is that although all cockles from Seilibost are being landed to registered buyers the current IT system in Marine Scotland is unable to record those landings. Therefore, volumes of landings of cockles are escaping the current landing statistics and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Conclusions**

The following conclusions should be considered for the future management of sustainable cockles fisheries at beaches in the Outer Hebrides:

* West Harris Trust be made aware that they do not have title to cockles
* Neither a Several Order or Regulating Order is suitable for any of the beaches in the Outer Hebrides
* Stock surveys to be undertaken at Seilibost, North Ford, South Ford and Barra
* Funding sources to be identified for undertaking cockle surveys
* Identify possible local contractors for future cockle surveys
* Harvest ration of 20% of cockles larger than 30mm
* Cockle harvesting to be prohibited between 1800 Friday and 0600 Monday
* Cockle harvesting to be prohibited each day on all beaches between 1800 and 0600
* IT systems in Marine Scotland to be enhanced to allow entry for cockle landings
* Investigate how above management measures can be accommodated within legislation, as current cockle legislation prohibits the use of mechanical harvesting and has a MLS of 30mm for all cockles harvested from beaches in the Outer Hebrides
* A well-managed, sustainable cockle fishery could return an estimated £1M to the local economy and it would be in the interests of communities in Harris, Barra and the Uists to support the above proposals and for Marine Scotland to take forward measures to support the sustainable development of this important local fishery.
* FLAG funding is available for cockle surveys as detailed above, however, the OHRIFG is not constituted to submit an application. Therefore, either CNES or SNH could be the body that could apply for funding from the local FLAG.