

Our engagement for sustainable management of ray and skate stocks in the English Channel and the North Sea

SUMARIS NEWSLETTER 5 - June 2020



As a retired fisherman and a member of the Kent and Essex Committee for the last twenty-two years, there is a good number of reasons why I accepted to be involved with the SUMARiS project.

Firstly, I got a strong background knowledge of skates and rays particularly in the Channel and the North Sea and there is an obvious number of problems with their management. One of the biggest issues we are facing is that these species are being lumped together as one species when in fact, there are twelve or more different ones.

The SUMARIS project aims to propose a joint cross-border strategy for the management of skates and rays defining a range of concrete management actions for fisheries.





Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

This can be achieved by working with all the SUMARiS partners to evaluate almost every aspect of the species.

The project is looking at biological data, survival rate data and socio-economic impacts. With current collected data, future management measures are being considered with possible greater quotas for certain species.

I believe the SUMARiS project is highly successful because of the cooperation between the fishing industry and the science. Fishermen and scientists have been working closely together with the whole fishing industry to obtain a better understanding of the issues. Analysing the distribution of different species and examining scientific data in the area in which these animals live, is particularly beneficial for the fishing industry. This is an important aspect of the project, which should be taken into account in the future management measures.

John NICHOLS, Vice chairman at the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities for Kent and Essex and a retired fisherman.



Due to their life history traits, skates and rays are vulnerable to overexploitation. They grow slowly, reach full maturity late and have a low reproductive capacity. Currently, in the Channel and the North Sea area, most skate and ray fisheries are managed with a single Total Allowable Catch (TAC) that combines several species of different conservation and exploitation status. This TAC-setting is poorly supported by fishery and scientific evidence.



Towards a new form of management, allowing the protection of the most vulnerable species

In May 2019, <u>Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities KEIFCA</u> held an international conference in Canterbury, to discuss a joint cross-border strategy for the management of skate and ray fisheries. The conference assembled 47 specialists: scientists, fishermen and fishery managers from England, Wales, France, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands.

Together, they identified several management options. After ranking, three solutions have been retained, although the participants agreed that a multi-track approach was needed to develop several management options simultaneously.

Introduce a size restriction

The first option would be to **introduce a size restriction** with a minimum landing size. This option was generally well supported with the potential to build on current regional and PO sizes.

Currently, the SUMARiS project is considering 3 options to introduce a size restriction legislation. The most popular option is to have two different sizes for thornback rays and other species of rays, however options such as using the length of first sexual maturity (i.e. the length for which 50% of individuals of this species have reproduced at least once) or standardising to VisNed (55cm) sizes are also being considered.

?

Change how quota is set

The second option would be to **revise how quota is set**. Current TAC and quota combine different species of skates and rays in one quota allowance. Instead, the TAC could be set according to ICES stock assessment with subTACS for particular stocks or by changing the ICES stock assessment areas currently used. This option was well evaluated as it would provide a more appropriate protection with species specific data.



Following further analysis by the SUMARiS team, three options in how TAC is set, have stood out: 1) Maintain the current global TAC,

- 2) Maintain the global TAC and create a specific TAC for thornback rays,
- 3) Maintain the global TAC and have the industry commit to land 80% thornback rays of this TAC.

Road map – Develop agreed avoidance system

The third option would be to **develop an agreed avoidance system**. It would be based on the identification and avoidance of spawning and nursery areas and on sharing useful information. However, this option was not maintained as a priority by the SUMARiS partners because it would be difficult to measure. Instead, the option to draft a hotspot map of rays and skates is currently being evaluated.

The way forward

There is no simple way forward with not one option that stands out or would solve the issue on its own. A combination of multiple options would create a pathway to further protect some species of skates and rays, while allowing sustainable exploitation of others.

Developing a minimum landing size would require survival data while working with Advisory Council to agree on a standard size. As stocks can evolve quickly, it would be necessary to review species specific sizes every 3-4 years.

To appropriately change how quota is set, further scientific studies with a focus on species specific stock data and thornback rays are entailed. Additionally, running stock analysis on new management measure package to model fishing mortality would be beneficial.



In January 2020, the last sea trips on commercial vessels took place in Belgium, England and France. In total, the SUMARiS observers have taken part in 33 sea trips: 3 on an otter trawler and 7 on a beam trawler in Belgium; 12 trips on gill netter in England, 6 trips on a trawler and 5 on a trammel netter in France.

Many thanks to the fishermen and the observers for their involvement in the SUMARiS project!





In the Channel and the North Sea, fishing is a complex activity with 6,600 fishing vessels from 9 different countries. It is regulated at multiple levels: European, national and local. This may be very challenging for the fishery management system.

European Management Measures

For the fisheries of skates and rays, the European management system is mainly based on TAC, quotas and landing obligations.

Since the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in 2013, fishing vessels have been obliged to land all species that have been caught and include them in their quota as a sub-quota. This measure was applied to skates and rays until 2019 when the fishermen obtained a « survival exemption » for skates and rays caught in the ICES stock assessment area of the Channel and the North Sea. This exemption allows fishermen to release skates and rays that are alive back to the sea if they are under the authorised size or over quota, or that belong to unauthorised species.

Regional and Specific Management Measures for Producer Organisations (PO)

French management measures

In the eastern Channel, the French fishing industry has proposed to use 90% of their quota to land thornback ray and 10% for other species in order to protect less known species through the survival exemption. They also introduced a monthly catch limit for some fisheries and implemented a Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) of 45 cm of Total Length (TL) for all species. In 2017, the PO FROM NORD enforced a weekly limitation to landing of skates and rays. It is based on the size, of the vessel, its fishing gear and fishery it specialises in. FROM NORD collects a tax on all skate and ray landings of 1€ / kilogram. If the vessel keeps the weekly limitation, it receives the money back. If the vessel exceeds its weekly limitation, FROM NORD will keep the money in order to redistribute it to other potential vessels that weren't allowed to fish their "part of the quota" before it was completely reached and thus closed.



Belgian management measures

Belgium applies a MCRS of 50 cm of TL to all species. Since 2016, Rederscentrale set up a PO measure specific for skates and rays in order to protect small rays. Members of Rederscentrale (i.e. all fishing vessels under the Belgian flag) have to pay an extra tax of $4 \notin$ kilogram for every skate and ray that weights below 1 kilo. In 2017, new legislation was approved. It has extended the measure to all landings, including the landing of skates and rays by foreign vessels in the Belgian ports (Rederscentrale, 2017).

English regional management measures

Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities - KEIFCA (succeeded by one of the 10 IFCAs founded by the Marine and Coastal Access Act, 2009), enforce locally a byelaw that requires a minimum landing size of 40 cm disc width for all skates and rays. The byelaw applies to recreational as well as commercial fishermen catching skates and rays within the district and is enforced by KEIFCA officers on land and at sea (with the potential penalty of an unlimited fine).

Currently, the minimum sizes of skates and rays is measured from noze to tail in Belgium, France and the Netherlands, and from wing tip to wing in the UK.



Reports to come

The data collected from the scientific observation of ray catches hosted at ILVO and <u>Nausicaá</u> have been analysed.

A report combining the protocols for collecting data at sea and in a lab will be finalised by ILVO by the end of the project, whereas a report on the ray fecundity and post-natal survival in captivity will be issued by Nausicaá in summer 2020.



Training sessions

Since 2018, three Producers Organisations have held 11 training sessions in Belgium, France and the UK. They were organised for students in fisheries schools, active fishermen and auction staff and aimed at helping the fishery professionals better identify skate and ray species in the Channel and the North Sea and taught them how to handle them on board.

The training tools, such as the identification guide and the training video, are available online here.

Raising awareness of students

On 10th December 2019 and 11th January 2020, Nausicaá presented the SUMARiS project to more than 30 students of the maritime and fishery vocational secondary school, in Le Portel / Boulogne-sur-Mer.

The aim was to improve their knowledge of sustainable fisheries management practices and to teach them how to identify 6 main species of skates and rays that are landed in their region and that can be found on fish stalls.



Raising awareness of the general public

Next summer, a quiz on 6 main species of skates and rays in the Channel and the North Sea will be held in Nausicaá. The quiz will educate the visitors about the skates and rays present in the area and teach them how to recognise and identify ray eggs based on empty egg cases that can be found frequently on the beaches.

Video interviews with skate and ray fishery experts and stakeholders

In the coming months, Nausicaá will also diffuse of a series of videos about expert opinions on three questions.

The experts are representatives of the SUMARiS stakeholder target groups: fishermen, researchers, professional fishery organization and NGO representatives, policy makers and science communicators in Belgium, England and France. The videos are in English, Dutch and French.





Connect with us

The SUMARiS project is online!

SUM A RiS





FROM ~NORD









Photo credits: FROMNord, ILVO, KEIFCA, Nausicaà, Rederscentrale



Cliquez sur ce lien pour vous désabonner