

MCZ Consultation: Replies from the Boat Owners' Response Group, author

Dr Michael Simons

Sites:

The Needles rMCZ 20

Yarmouth to Cowes, rMCZ 23

Norris to Ryde rMCZ 19

Bembridge rMCZ 22

Q.3 Do you have any comments on the proposed conservation objective(s)? Please provide evidence to support your comments as necessary.

Seagrass beds (eelgrass, *Zostera marina*) occur in all four of these rMCZ's. Important recent developments are protection measures put in place by Southern IFCA to prevent use of towed bottom fishing gear in known areas of seagrass beds. These are voluntary at present but will become statutory if the voluntary code is not observed (SIFCA Seagrass Management Strategy publ. by Southern IFCA 2012). Thus seagrass beds already enjoy protection from this potentially damaging type of fishing gear.

As for the conservation objective of Recover, no evidence has been presented to show that the eelgrass beds in these areas are in less than Favourable condition. (We refer to the definition at the end of answer 9). The JNCC/NE Final Advice report assigns moderate confidence in the Recover objective for seagrass in **Norris to Ryde** on the basis that the beds have exposure to fishing (trawling). However, in view of the SIFCA Seagrass Management Strategy which is now implemented, this exposure is now being removed and so the justification for the conservation objective as stated is also removed. It is out of date.

We note that the JNCC/NE Final Advice report assigns **low confidence** in the Recover objective for seagrass in **Bembridge, Yarmouth to Cowes**, and the **Needles** rMCZ's

As for the conservation objective of Recover for Subtidal Mud, in Norris to Ryde, this seems like something straight out of Monty Python: an evidence-free speculation that anchors are damaging the mud. Doing what? Creating a non-aesthetically-pleasing lumpy surface? Causing it to dematerialise?

Q.4 Are there any significant reasons for alteration of this site's boundary? Please explain and provide evidence to support your views as necessary.

Taken together, these four recommended sites comprise over half (57%) of the total coastline of the Isle of Wight, and crucially, over four fifths (83%) of the coast between the Needles and Bembridge, adjoining one of the most important sailing and recreational boating centres in the world, the Solent area. Restrictions on boating activity along this most important stretch of coast would have significant adverse impact on recreational

boating and on the economies and employment in the region and particularly the Isle of Wight. Many businesses and activities in the area have an international reach, but they do depend on a robust home base.

If, at the end of the day, these proposed MCZ's were adopted and the management measures for them did not impact recreational boating, i.e. anchoring, mooring, laying of race marks, etc., could carry on as at present, this would not be a problem from the boating perspective. If on the other hand management measures were to impact such activities, careful consideration of the areas involved would be required to avoid a negative impact on recreational boating with associated socio-economic costs.

Important anchorages in the area include Priory Bay and Seaview, Osborne Bay, Newtown (both within and outside the Harbour), and Alum Bay, although there are others. These often play an important part in a day out on the water, as many boaters, both power and sail, will cruise from their home port to an anchorage and stay there a few hours before cruising back to base. Newtown Harbour is an important sheltered haven, which has been in use for centuries, and today provides a safe overnight harbour for boats on passage, both on moorings and at anchor, as well as a much-used daytime stop: restrictions on its current use would be regarded as quite unacceptable by the sailing and boating communities. Anchoring restrictions in these areas, and in other areas where race marks and safety boats are anchored, would have adverse socio-economic effects (see answer 7).

It should be noted that in Newtown Harbour the National Trust has already been operating an excellent conservation plan for a number of years which is more than adequate to provide protection for the FOCl identified by NE. This includes protection for oyster beds and extensive areas reserved for birds, and the restrictions are well observed by visiting boaters and are overseen by National Trust staff on site.

Q.5 Is there any additional evidence to improve data certainty for features within this site? If yes please provide evidence.

Recent studies, some involving the eelgrass beds in Studland Bay, have failed to demonstrate that anchoring of recreational vessels causes significant damage to the eelgrass habitat, in fact the conclusion drawn by BORG is that the eelgrass habitat is sustainable in the presence of anchoring by recreational craft. This is discussed in more detail in our submission for the Studland Bay rMCZ, where references are listed. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, these conclusions are expected to apply to eelgrass beds in general, including the ones in the Solent under consideration here. It should be noted that Studland Bay has been subjected to relatively high anchoring pressure over decades, and so provides a challenging test of eelgrass resilience.

The Seastar Survey report concluded that that there was no consistent evidence of boat anchoring impacting the seagrass habitat at Studland Bay; the as yet unpublished (but seen in draft) MAIA report showed a historically high level of high density eelgrass cover in the Bay in 2008, despite ongoing anchoring in the Bay over the last 50 + years; a literature survey by Simons describes a number of studies worldwide which found efficient recolonisation of eelgrass beds after different types of short-term damage, suggesting a

robustness to disturbance by anchors of the size used by leisure vessels; there still appears to be no valid report of anchor damage to eelgrass in the worldwide scientific literature; and an audit by BORG of the basis for the Vulnerability Assessment (VA) for Studland Bay used by Natural England in their Advice to Government found that it was essentially baseless, being the opinion of an unknown group of unidentified “experts” whose alleged expertise was not substantiated in any way, and whose opinion was unsupported by any sort of relevant cited evidence.

We have drawn attention to a terminological confusion that has led to a perception by the unwary that eelgrass (or *Zostera marina*, the species present in our subtidal waters) is more vulnerable to anchoring than it is. Some other types of seagrass, particularly the species *Posidonia oceanica*, found in warmer waters such as the Mediterranean, have been shown to be vulnerable to anchoring. This species is however from a different plant family, and has structural and regeneration characteristics very different from those of eelgrass, which make *Posidonia* much more vulnerable. Because both species are referred to as seagrass, and because our eelgrass beds are often referred to by the generic term seagrass beds, the known vulnerability of *Posidonia* has sometimes been falsely associated with *Zostera*.

Details of this, and other points in this section, are published in a fully referenced overview at http://boatownersresponse.org.uk/Workshop_presentation6.pdf and at

http://www.marinemanagement.org.uk/protecting/conservation/documents/studland/12112_6_eelgrass.pdf

Q.7 Do you have any new information on costs to industry not covered in the Impact Assessment, that would be directly attributable to MCZs as opposed to costs stemming from existing regulatory requirements, or evidence that suggests the need for changes to the methodologies or assumptions used in estimating costs (including in relation to fishing displacement)? If yes please provide evidence.

It may be useful to offer an estimate of the value of recreational boating to the Solent area economy to give an idea of the economic issues at stake.

There are some 20,000 berths plus moorings in the Solent area (Solent Forum, State of the Solent 2011) including 8500 marina residents berths (Reeds Nautical Almanac 2009). Applying reasonable estimates of the annual charges paid by these boats (details at end of this section) we estimate total annual revenues from boat owners simply for the upkeep of their boats in the region to be around £67 million.

This estimate does not include sale and purchase of boats and equipment, nor of specialist marine services, many of these businesses are based in the Solent region and involve very large sums of money. Yachting training and chartering services are a very significant sector, while a multitude of yachting and boating events bring large revenues to the area, and are particularly important to the Isle of Wight. There is in addition a considerable number of boats kept on trailers and launched as required which are not included in the above.

Boating is a very significant contributor to the economy and employment in the region, a fact underlined by the current investment of £10 million in a new marine business park at East Cowes.

If conservation measures, such as restrictions on anchoring, which significantly reduced people's freedom to enjoy their boating, were to be imposed, we would expect a proportion of them to withdraw from boating. It might be a small proportion, but even a 1% loss of participants would mean a loss in upkeep revenues alone of £670,000 per annum, 2% would mean £1.3 million, 4% would be £2.7 million, and so on. Adding in the loss of other revenue streams mentioned above, the losses to the region's economy would be much greater than these basic boat upkeep figures.

[Basis of estimates: Marina based boats: assuming an average boat length of 32ft: Marina berthing charges for a 32ft boat are about £4900 p.a. Add £600 for other marina services and maintenance, plus harbour dues, £5500 per boat per annum, and £5500 x 8500 = £46.75, say £47 million. Vessels on moorings: assume £1000 for the mooring, £500 maintenance, £80 harbour dues, £120 access, or £1700 in all, for 11,500 vessels this comes to about £20 million. Total, £67 million.]

Q.9 You may wish to provide comments on other aspects of this consultation such as evidence requirements, identification and treatment of high risk sites. Where you disagree with the approach taken please provide evidence to support your views.

While one of the drivers of the MCZ process is to establish an “ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas”, we believe that the costs of doing so should be weighed against the actual conservation benefit likely to be achieved in each area. We would suggest money would be better spent in areas where it would make an actual difference. This would need more than a simple “Maintain” or “Recover” classification of sites – the “Recover” designation does not discriminate between a mildly flawed feature whose restoration to pristine condition would give little or negligible measurable benefit, and a gravely damaged feature whose restoration would make a big positive difference. Clearly the former would not be worth spending much time or money on, the latter would.

However, we agree that the definition of “Favourable Condition” given in the Example Designation Order at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/consult/files/mcz-annex-g-121213.pdf> is a more practical basis for classification, which does not require extremes of ecological perfection, and we welcome this.

For reference, it is quoted here:

“—favourable condition means—

(a) in relation to a geological or geomorphological feature within the area designated—

(i) its extent, component elements and integrity are maintained, subject to being able to evolve through changes brought about entirely by natural processes; and, when

(ii) its structure, integrity and functioning are unimpaired and it remains unobscured other than through natural processes; and, when

(b) in relation to a habitat or habitat FOCI within the area designated—

(i) its extent and area are stable or increasing;

(ii) its structures and functions are such that it can maintain itself over the long term; and

(iii) the biological diversity of its characteristic communities is maintained such that the quality and occurrence of habitats and the composition and abundance of species in those communities are at least as favourable as those characteristically found in the prevailing physiographical, geographical and climatic conditions;

—FOCI means a feature of conservation importance that is rare, threatened or declining in the UK marine area.”