

COQUET TO ST MARY'S MARINE CONSERVATION ZONE (MCZ) MOBILE GEAR MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION

Northumberland IFCA are developing new management measures for Coquet to St Mary's MCZ. These new measures aim to enhance protection of designated features within the MCZ.

1. Background

1.1 Coquet to St Mary's MCZ

Coquet to St Mary's Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) covers approximately 192 km² of intertidal and subtidal habitats, stretching from Alnmouth in the north to Whitley Bay in the south, and from mean high water out to approximately 7.5km at its seaward-most extent.

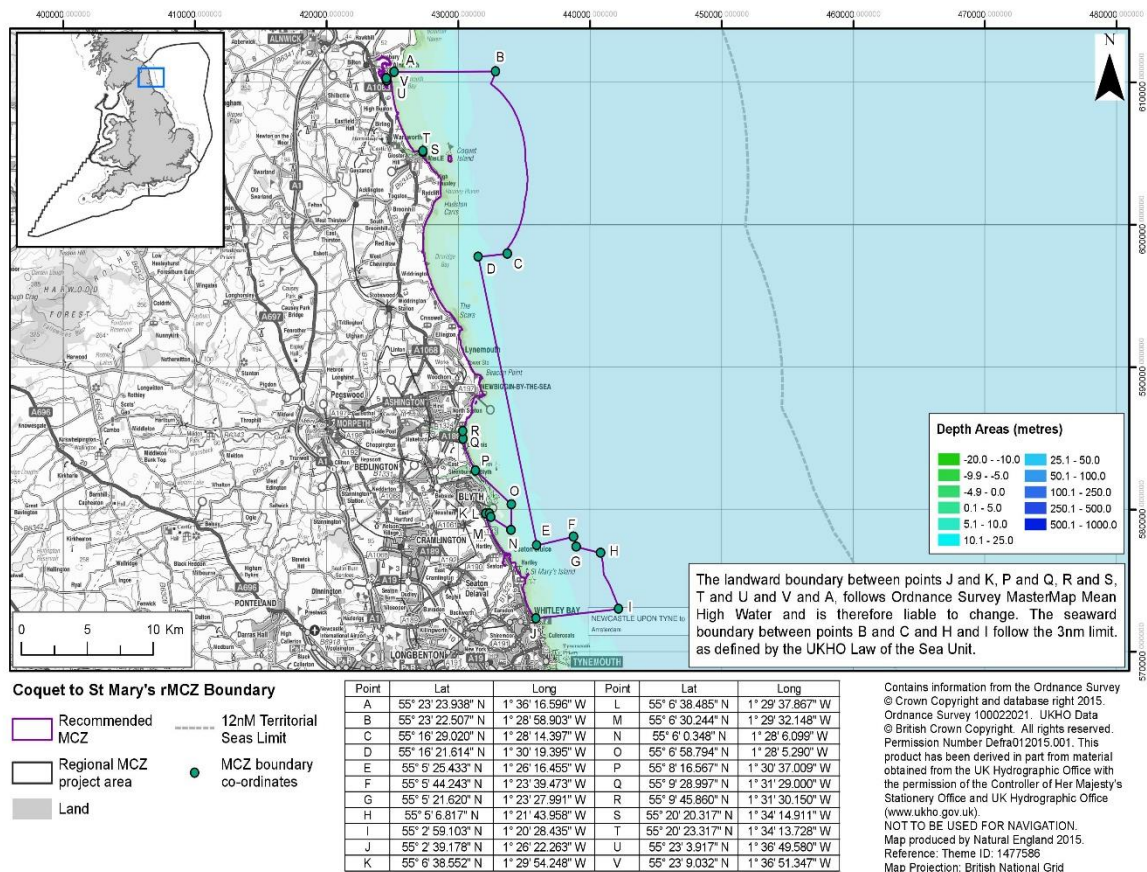


Figure 1. Map of Coquet to St Marys MCZ.

Coquet to St Mary's MCZ contains a mosaic of sediment and hard substrate benthic habitats, which in turn support a wide range of diverse communities. These benthic habitats are the protected features of the MCZ and are listed below. The proposed management measures aim to increase protection to the features [highlighted](#).

- Intertidal coarse sediment
- Intertidal mixed sediments
- Intertidal mud
- Intertidal sand and muddy sand
- Intertidal under boulder communities
- Low energy intertidal rock
- Moderate energy intertidal rock
- High energy intertidal rock
- Peat and clay exposures
- [High energy infralittoral rock](#)
- [Moderate energy circalittoral rock](#)
- [Moderate energy infralittoral rock](#)
- [Subtidal coarse sediment](#)
- [Subtidal mixed sediments](#)
- [Subtidal mud](#)
- [Subtidal sand](#)

Click [HERE](#) for more information on Coquet to St Mary's MCZ and its protected features.

1.2 Mobile Gear Fishery

1.2.1 Demersal Trawls (light and heavy otter trawls)

Low levels of otter trawling occur within the site. Only NIFCA trawl permit holders can trawl within the inner area of the NIFCA district (0-3 nm), there was a total of 26 registered Trawl Permit holders in 2018. Not all permit holders fish within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ. The results of a questionnaire sent to all NIFCA trawl permit holders in early 2019 showed that 5 vessels claimed to have fished within the site in the last year. NIFCA sightings data (which provides a snapshot of trawling activity observed by NIFCA officers whilst on sea patrols) has recorded two vessels fishing within the MCZ and shows the majority of the trawling activity within the site occurs on the mud feature in the north east of the site. Two sightings show trawling on the boundary of the reef feature and respondents to the questionnaire also referred to the use of a hard ground gear (rock hopper footrope and large rubber disc footrope). The main trawl grounds within the inner area were removed from the boundary of the MCZ before designation (Figure 2).

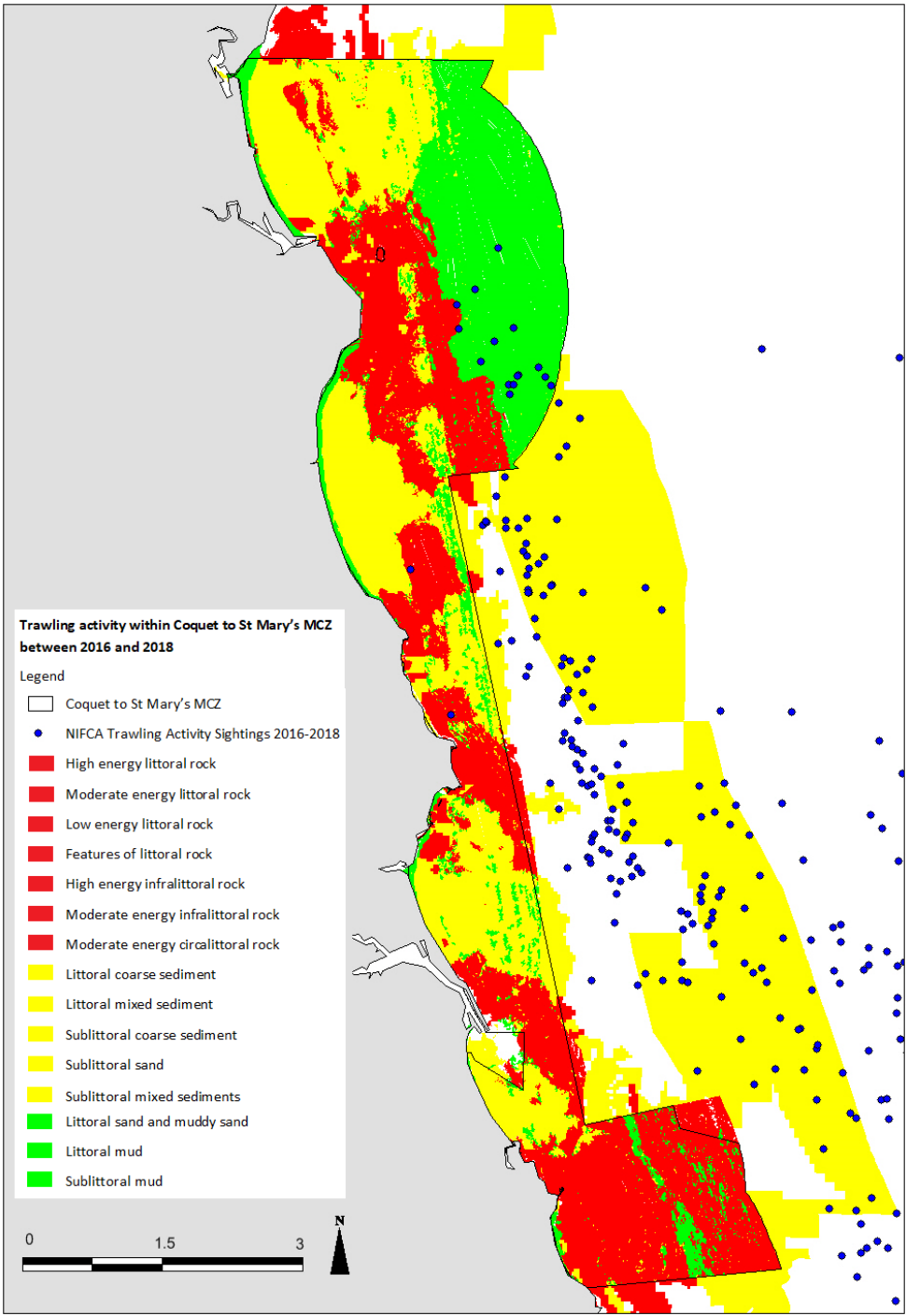


Figure 2: Trawling activity within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ between 2016 and 2018 in relation to Broad Scale Habitats.

1.2.2 Dredges (scallop dredge)

Scallop dredging occurs sporadically, by a small number of boats within the NIFCA district. In 2018, there was a total of five Dredge Permit holders registered to fish with up to 10 dredges within the NIFCA district. All of these permits were registered to visiting fishing vessels and no local vessels applied for permits. Scallop dredging activity occurs primarily in the North of the district at around 5-6 miles offshore. Scallop dredging was not observed

within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ in 2018 but has occurred on an infrequent basis in previous years (Figure 3).

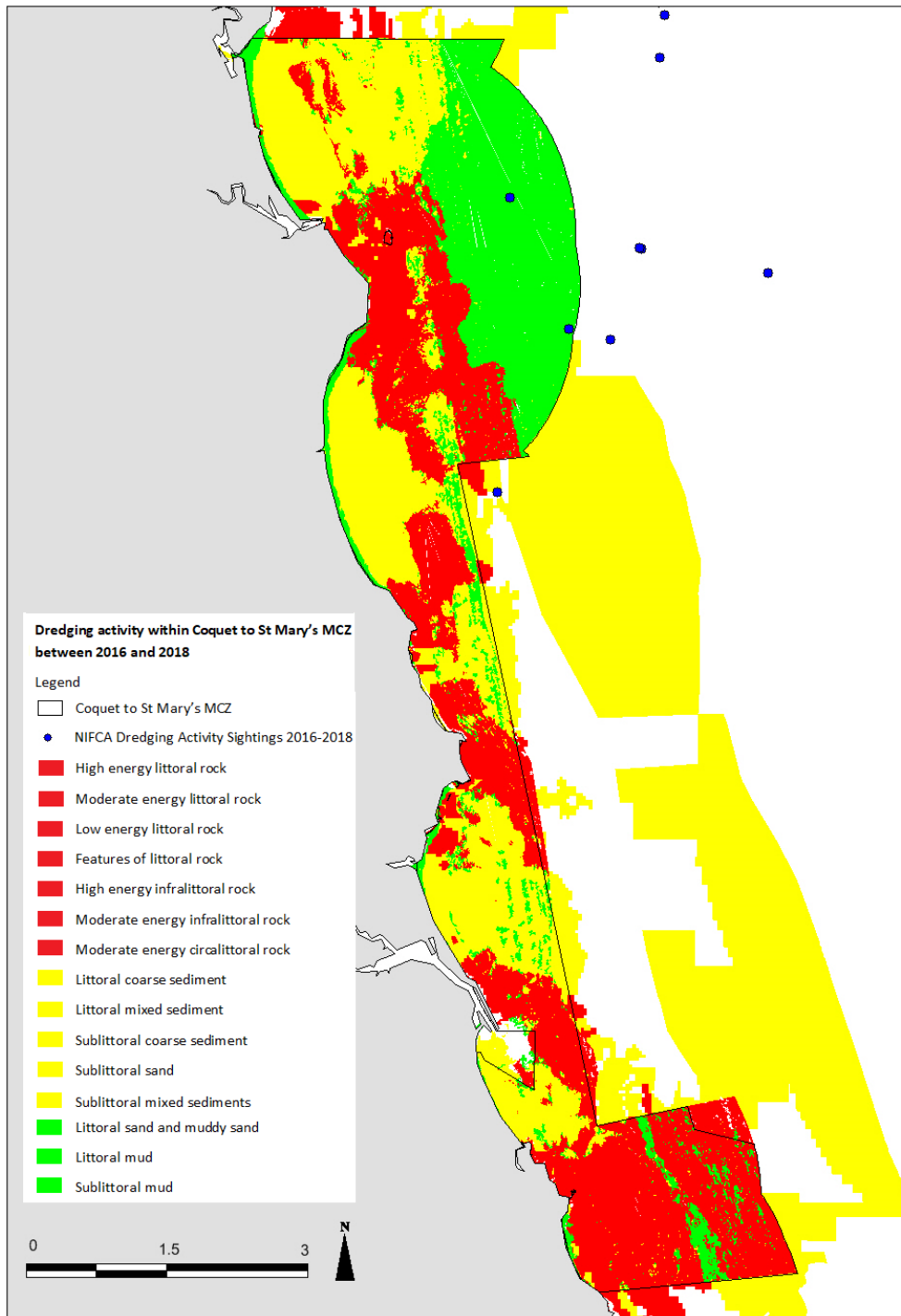


Figure 3: Dredging activity within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ between 2016 and 2018 in relation to Broad Scale Habitats.

1.3 Potential Impacts of the Feature/Fishery Interactions

Bottom towed fishing gear can have significant impacts upon marine habitats and associated species. For example, fishing with bottom towed gear can cause species living on the surface of the seabed to be dislodged when the gear is in contact with the seabed. Studies have recorded decreases in species biomass, species richness, production, diversity and alterations to species composition and community structure associated with bottom towed gear.

The local otter trawl fishery is primarily carried out over subtidal mud as the target species (*Nephrops norvegicus*) forms burrows within this habitat. Impacts from bottom towed gear are more pronounced in low energy, stable environments where benthic organisms are less resistant to disturbance events and may be more vulnerable to abrasion and disturbance pressure, such as subtidal mud.

The impacts of dredging on subtidal mud are more severe than otter trawls given the nature of the gear with the toothed dredges physically penetrating the seabed. A single tow of this gear can cause an adverse impact to faunal assemblages and recovery can take almost two years. Although a single pass from a vessel creates less of an impact than that of repeated disturbance, an isolated 'single pass' may result in a high level of impact to which later passes only add a marginal degree of additional impact. This is both in terms of the structure of the feature but also impacts to the organisms that live in that benthic environment. There is evidence that scallop dredging alters benthic communities and that the closure of areas to commercial dredging may allow the populations of some species to increase and some communities to become more diverse.

Reef features can be severely damaged if heavy bottom towed fishing gear is towed across them. Generally, light otter trawling is unlikely to occur over the rocky reef features listed above as there is a risk of gear getting snagged and damaged. However as highlighted above both heavy otter trawl gear and dredges are used occasionally in the area. Due to the sensitivity of the subtidal mud and subtidal reef features a single pass of some types of bottom towed gear (such as heavy trawl gear with rock hoppers attached or scallop dredges) may be enough to significantly impact features and associated species.

1.3.1 Impacts Summary

Both Trawling and Dredging currently occur at relatively low levels within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ, but there is no management in place to prevent activity levels increasing in the future. Both activities can cause abrasion and disturbance to the subtidal reef and subtidal mud features, with the impacts of dredging and hard otter trawling gear more severe than the impacts of light otter trawls. In summary, there is a potential risk from both dredging and bottom towed gear hindering the achievement of the conservation objectives stated for this MCZ for both the subtidal rock and subtidal mud features.

1.4 Existing Management Measures

There are a number of management measures already in place that relate to mobile gear fishing within or within the vicinity of the NIFCA district.

- [NIFCA Byelaw 1](#) Trawling.
- [NIFCA Byelaw 2](#) Dredging.
- [NIFCA Byelaw 7](#) Prohibition of the use of mobile Fishing Gear within the English section of the Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC).
- Farne Deeps Technical Conservation Measures

Northumberland IFCA have carefully considered available data and information on mobile gear within the MCZ and have determined that some use of mobile gear (trawls and dredges) is not compatible with the site's conservation objectives despite existing management listed above. In order to ensure that the conservation objectives of Coquet to St Mary's MCZ are furthered Northumberland IFCA has developed a management proposal which aims to balance economic, social and environmental needs.

2. Proposed Management

Northumberland IFCA have used the knowledge and information shared with us by stakeholders and partner organisations including information collected from permit holders (through a questionnaire to Byelaw 2 permit holders), from analysis of data collection (sightings data from routine patrols), scientific data and surveys (scientific literature review) to develop a proposal to protect the features which are underlined in section 1.1 above.

The following proposal is put forward by NIFCA for consultation: -

Prohibition on the use of mobile gear within Coquet to St Mary's MCZ. An exemption may be issued to a vessel which can produce evidence of fishing within this site in the past 3 years. Exempt vessels can only fish with specified gear (light otter trawling gear only) within the site.

The specified gear as referred to in the proposal above is defined as "a single trawl fitted with a single cod-end and one pair of otter boards rigged for fine ground fishing using either: (i) grass rope with lead rings; (ii) light chain ground gear; or; (iii) rubber leg ground gear with rubber discs less than 70mm in diameter".

Have your say

We would like to speak to as many interested parties as possible about the development of this byelaw. We need to know how the proposals in this byelaw will affect your interests. You can complete online or downloadable questionnaire (links below), or if you prefer you can call our office to discuss your concerns. If you would like more information or would like to talk to an officer face-to-face, we can arrange a meeting.

This consultation closed on 30th September 2019.