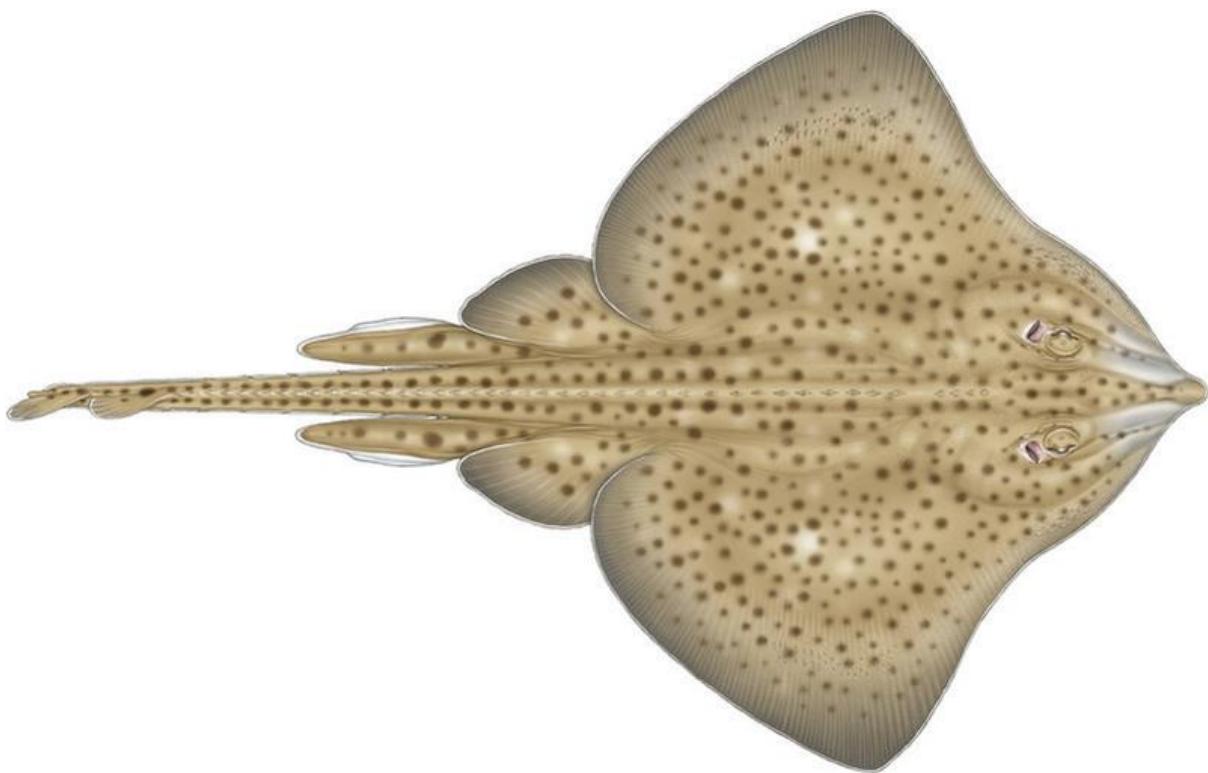


# Fisheries Research & Management Plan

Summary of Recommendations and Next Steps for



Skates and Rays

in the North of Devon & Severn IFCA's District



Inshore Fisheries and  
Conservation Authority



European Union  
European Structural  
and Investment Funds

## **Fisheries Research & Management Plans**

As part of the [North Devon Marine Pioneer](#), the Devon and Severn Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority (D&S IFCA) and the North Devon Biosphere have produced an initial series of innovative Fisheries Research & Management Plans (FRMPs) for five commercially important species/ species groups in the north of D&S IFCA's District.

The FRMPs use existing information and stakeholder engagement to investigate whether a localised, ecosystem-based approach to management is possible and beneficial for each species. Each plan makes a series of research and management recommendations that need to be addressed to facilitate a transition to the most appropriate management approach for the fishery.

### **Skates & Rays**

*Please note: all of the species described in this FRMP are species of skate (Rajidae). As many of the common/English names for skate species include the term ray (for example, thornback ray, or blonde ray) they are referred to as 'skates and rays' by the fishing industry. This plan will use the term 'skates and rays' for consistency.*

Skates and rays support a number of important commercial fisheries around the UK, especially in North Devon. The targeted skates and rays trawl fishery in the Bristol Channel is one of the largest in the UK, with landings valued at up to £1 million annually. In FRMP stakeholder interviews some fishers described the skates and rays fisheries as essential for keeping their fishing viable. This FRMP focuses on the most commercially important species: thornback ray, blonde ray, small-eyed ray, spotted ray and cuckoo ray. Recent surveys indicate that several populations of skate and ray species in the Bristol Channel are growing. This is supported by fishers' anecdotal reports of strong catches in recent years.

Correctly assessing and sustainably managing skate and ray stocks in the Bristol Channel is an urgent priority because they are so popular with commercial and recreational fishers. This must be done on a species-specific basis because populations of different species can live and change independently of one another.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations have been grouped into 'research' and 'management'. Many of the recommendations are interconnected and would need to be delivered as a whole for them to be effective. In general, it is likely that funding will need to be sought by relevant parties to enable the research. Specific details should be discussed early in project development.

The detail of each recommendation and the supporting evidence are available in the full FRMP. The research recommendations are also available on D&S IFCA's website and will be shared periodically with interested parties to encourage collaborative research between fishers, scientists and managers that is relevant to management and policy.

## RESEARCH

### **Establish detailed knowledge about the ecology, range and movement of skate and ray stocks – *High Priority***

Species-specific management of skates and rays requires detailed understanding of their distributions. There is information about the distribution of skates and rays in the Bristol Channel on a multi-species basis, however this needs to be documented separately for each of the commercially important distinct species.

#### **Next steps:**

- Any future monitoring or research should be designed in collaboration with Cefas and ICES to ensure the data is suitable for input to stock assessments.
- Findings can help inform future Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs), and contribute to delivery of the ecosystem and scientific evidence objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020.

### **Involve fishers in the planning of future research – *High Priority***

Fishers' expertise and local knowledge has been invaluable in investigating local fisheries and arriving at the recommendations in this FRMP. Managers and researchers should work with fishers to co-plan and co-deliver future research.

#### **Next steps:**

- D&S IFCA is well-placed to facilitate fisher/researcher collaboration and will investigate what is needed to make this standard practice (for example, collaborations will require standardised protocols and terms of reference, including for shared use of vessels and research equipment).

### **Investigate reported nursery grounds off Minehead – *Medium Priority***

The possibility of nursery habitat near Minehead needs to be investigated. Fishers have reported catching large amounts of egg-carrying female rays and juvenile fish in the area. This raises immediate concerns regarding nearby aggregate dredging, water abstraction and coastal development activities. If found, this essential fish habitat must be mapped thoroughly and the implications of human activity on the habitat need to be incorporated into the management of fisheries and other activities.

#### **Next steps:**

- D&S IFCA will explore collaborative research opportunities with relevant stakeholders to investigate the reported spawning areas near Minehead.
- D&S IFCA will support appropriate investigations of essential fish habitat in undersampled coastal and estuarine areas. This information would inform regional Marine Plans, marine licencing and permitting processes.
- Findings from this research could inform future FMPs and contribute towards delivery of the ecosystem and scientific evidence objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020.

## **MANAGEMENT**

### **Improve integration between fisheries management and marine planning – *High Priority***

Fisheries and environmental management need to be better integrated and more appropriately considered within marine spatial planning, licencing, and permitting processes. This is particularly important in the Bristol Channel and Severn estuary due to high levels of commercial interest, for example in aggregate extraction and renewable energy development.

#### **Next steps:**

- Findings from the recommended research in this FRMP should be incorporated into regional Marine Plans through discussions with D&S IFCA and the MMO.
- This would aid delivery of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan and Fisheries Act 2020 objectives, including utilising an ecosystem approach and prioritising sustainability.

### **Improve landings data collection for skate and ray species - *Medium Priority***

As a result of national management measures, not all skate and ray catches in the north of D&S IFCA's District have been recorded in the past. Reliable catch data is needed from both recreational and commercial fishers to assess of the effects of fisheries on local skate and ray populations. Progress has been made regarding the development of the <10 metre vessel catch recording app, and there are similar options for recording catch for recreational fishers (e.g. Cefas Sea Angling Diary), however, more detail is needed, particularly in a local context to properly understand the impacts of fishing on bass populations.

#### **Next steps:**

- The IFCAs are well-placed to facilitate improvements in landings data to help establish species-specific understanding of skate and ray distribution and abundance at local to national scales. Additional data requirements should be evaluated in collaboration with those who are best placed to use them for stock/distribution assessments (e.g. Cefas and ICES).
- When specific data needs are identified, such as mandatory species-level recording of skates and rays catch, a pilot or trial study should be undertaken in collaboration with local fishers as part of D&S IFCA's Annual Plan.

### **Improve communication and engagement with fishers to establish stronger fisheries enforcement presence in the north of D&S IFCA's District – *Medium Priority***

To enable enforcement officers to better tackle non-compliance and illegal fishing in the north of D&S IFCA's District there needs to be comprehensive reporting of illegal activity from fishers in the area and improved communication between officers, fishers, and other local stakeholders.

#### **Next steps:**

- D&S IFCA will improve collaboration and engagement through activities such as virtual roadshows for ports, sectoral meetings and future FRMP interviews. More information about planned activities is available in the D&S IFCA's Annual Plan and Communications Strategy, accessible via the D&S IFCA website.

### **Transition towards single species stock assessment and management for skates – *Low Priority***

Once detailed information about the populations and distributions of individual skate and ray species is available they should be assessed and managed on a species-specific basis. The feasibility of local-scale approaches to management should then be evaluated for each species.

#### **Next steps:**

- This recommendation can only be progressed once the information on distinct species of skates and rays is available. This transition should be delivered in close collaboration with local fishers, Defra and the MMO.
- Future FRMPs, FMPs or wider Cefas and ICES stock assessments focusing on skates and rays should be conducted on a species-specific basis to meet sustainability and ecosystem objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020.

### **Introduce robust monitoring of small-eyed ray populations in the Bristol Channel – *Low Priority***

Robust monitoring of local populations of small-eyed ray is needed to accurately assess the stock and ensure exploitation is sustainable in the Bristol Channel. Small-eyed ray is an important species for fishers in the Bristol Channel and previous restrictive management at a European level has been extremely damaging to the inshore fishing industry.

#### **Next steps:**

- Effective monitoring and management would require collaboration across local fishers, D&S IFCA, Welsh Government and Defra in order to be effective, with involvement of Cefas as outlined above to achieve robust monitoring methods.

## **Additional Information**

You can download the full FRMP here –

<https://www.devonandsevernifca.gov.uk/Environment-and-Research/Fisheries-Research-Management-Plans/FRMP-Documents>

If you would like to speak to someone about the information in this plan, please get in touch using the details below:

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D&S IFCA is developing a second series of FRMPs for a range of species across the D&S IFCA's District. More information is available from the Fisheries Research and Management Plan Officer, or at <https://www.devonandsevernifca.gov.uk/Environment-and-Research/Fisheries-Research-Management-Plans>

Cover image – Spotted ray (*R. montagui*)  
(Seafish, 2019, <https://seafish.assetbank-server.com/assetbank-seafish/action/viewAsset?id=12302&index> [unedited]).