

# Sussex IFCA Annual Conservation & Research Report 2023-2024

Dr Jen Lewis and Dr George Balchin  
Conservation and Research Managers



There was a wide range of conservation and research work undertaken between April 2023 and March 2024. Workstreams are described in the Annual Conservation and Research Plan, drawn from the strategic Four-Year Conservation and Research Plan 2020-2024. For this report, each workstream sits under one of three themes: Fisheries, Habitats, or Species (changed in the 2024-2028 Four-Year Plan and current annual plan). Progress against each workstream is detailed below.

The continued hard work of all staff is evident in the breadth and quality of the conservation and research work produced in this financial year. Collaborative working with partner organisations is a great strength, providing mutual benefits in the sharing of resources, experience, skills and data. In addition, volunteers and work experience students have also made a valuable contribution, and Sussex IFCA has been able to provide valuable experience to students and early career scientists. Research has been directly applied in providing evidence for the development of new byelaws, which aim to protect the marine environment, balanced against the social and economic benefits of fishing.

The highest priorities for the year were:

- Development and submission of management proposals for Beachy Head East MCZ
- Continued support of the Fish Intel project, including receiver deployment, maintenance and support of any subsequent funding bids
- Continued active involvement in Sussex Kelp Recovery Project, supporting various monitoring efforts and leading on annual towed video surveys
- Engagement with the development of Fisheries Management Plans
- Development of new strategic Four-Year Conservation and Research Plan 2024-2028

## Fisheries

### *Intertidal resource gathering*

Initial conversations with Niall Burnside from Scottish Association of Marine Science (SAMS) about developing a protocol for monitoring hand gathering activity using drone imagery.

### *Fishing vessel effort*

Updated fishing effort grids were produced and published for 2019-2023 ([Fishing-Effort-2019-2023.pdf \(toolkitfiles.co.uk\)](#)). Sussex IFCA collect data on observed fishing activity whilst on sea patrols, fishing vessel effort is then calculated for each 5-year period, by dividing the number of sightings by the area patrolled by FPV Watchful for each km<sup>2</sup> grid.

### *Potting activity*

Potting surveys conducted with Blue Marine Foundation (BMF) in Selsey and Brighton, as part of SKRP. Potting surveys measure the abundance, size, weight, sex and condition of edible crab, European lobster, and spider crab caught in pots at sites inside and outside the Sussex Nearshore Trawling Byelaw area. The first three annual reports (2021-2023) have now been written and can be made available to Members on request.

### *Trawling activity* (see *Kelp restoration*)

### *Ecosystem approach to fisheries*

In September, one more Research Officer completed an online training course on using an Ecosystem Based Approach to fisheries management. Other officers will complete it in due course.

### *Fish telemetry*

Sussex IFCA Officers worked with the University of Plymouth (UoP) to deploy new receivers from Watchful on the 10-11<sup>th</sup> May. The existing array was also maintained, and data was downloaded from each receiver. Dr Pete Davies gave a presentation during Q3 Committee Meeting to present some initial findings. A full year of data is now available, with some interesting results. Officers are now working with UoP and other partners in the project to progress scientific publications using data from the Sussex array, focusing on black seabream and European seabass ecology in relation to fisheries management, as well as a broader methodology paper to highlight the value of using acoustic telemetry to monitor and inform fisheries management. A terms of reference document for the working group has been drafted and is awaiting sign-off by the University of Plymouth's legal team.

### *Stakeholder engagement*

Rampion 2 consultation: Sussex IFCA has been engaging with the Rampion 2 Environmental Statement Consultation. The proposed array falls outside (but closely borders) the Sussex IFCA District, and the cable route passes through. Therefore, the construction and maintenance phases of the array and, in particular the cable route will affect Sussex IFCA fishers, fisheries and habitats within the District. The Examination process is ongoing until August 2024, however Sussex IFCA have already commented on several interactions of these environmental statements and have represented the possible implications and suitable mitigation for inshore fishers.

### *Fisheries Management Plans*

Sussex IFCA have been extensively engaging with the development of Fisheries Management Plans. Highlights from the year include:

- Responding to FMP consultation surveys and follow up interviews on the effectiveness of the consultation process for the Crab and Lobster, Whelk, and Skate and Ray FMPs
- Contributing to Sarah Coulthard's study of the role of IFCA's in the development and delivery of FMPs and co-management more broadly. This will form part of the contribution made by the Association of IFCA's to the FMP process
- Attending an AIFCA workshop on the development of the frontrunner FMPs in Poole, which was also attended by Members of the Sussex IFCA Committee

- Providing presentations, data, and Authority reports to the AIFCA for their FMP review project and which have been incorporated into collective IFCA responses
- Compilation and summary of all data held, and all current data collection activities and monitoring for the AIFCA to be fed into the evidence gap identification process
- Attended Working Group meetings for the Skates and Rays FMP. This led to the recognition of the Sussex district (7d) as a hotspot for the critically endangered undulate ray and its association with their reproductive behaviours, and a commitment from Defra to investigate the value of spatial management of this species
- Attended several Defra presentations on the next round of FMPs in development, including Cockles, North Sea and Channel sprat, Queen scallop, Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays, Southern North Sea demersal non-quota species (NQS)
- Attended a Defra workshop to identify and prioritise evidence gaps and work out the best ways to fill these
- Kent and Essex IFCA organized a meeting to coordinate IFCA's involvement in the Whelk FMP. An in-person workshop is planned in April in London to further discussions the possible introduction of a permit/entitlement for English whelk fisheries and to explore options for whelk stock delineation

## Habitats

### *Beachy Head East MCZ management development*

After reviewing the outcomes of the informal consultation process and receiving advice on the proposed management options from Natural England, Sussex IFCA formally consulted on management proposals in September 2023. During this formal consultation, new evidence on the location of *Sabellaria spinulosa* within Beachy Head East MCZ was submitted by Natural England. In the context of the new evidence, Sussex IFCA developed a set of updated management proposals. During the Principal Committee Meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2023, the Authority agreed to proceed with Sussex IFCA's recommended management option with the support of NE: Extension of Zone 1 – Extending the bottom towed gear management zone such that areas *S. spinulosa* detailed in NE's new evidence are covered with a 200m boundary, as per the boundary afforded to the features throughout the site. After the byelaw was made, the Impact Assessment for Beachy Head East MCZ was also updated to reflect the new management proposals, economic assessment, and relevant updates to the evidence base. A secondary statutory consultation then took place from 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2024 with the closing date the 19<sup>th</sup> April 2024, and following an analysis of responses was initiated.

### *Kingmere MCZ management monitoring*

In 2023 there were 15 targeted patrols within Kingmere MCZ during the closure period (April 1<sup>st</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>). Boarding inspections were conducted to collect catch data for vessels targeting black seabream inside the MCZ when the bag limit applies for rod and line fishing in Zone 2, and there is a complete prohibition on all fishing methods inside Zone 1. Compliance to the regulations was good, with no warnings issued to fishers. Anecdotal evidence from charter skippers and members of the public suggested that many were choosing to fish outside the MCZ this year as black seabream were abundant. Regular patrols continued throughout the year to monitor the MCZ for towed and fixed gear.

### *Pagham Harbour MCZ and SPA management monitoring*

The management review for Pagham Harbour MCZ/SPA was completed and the associated decision item was approved at the Q1 2023-24 Quarterly Committee Meeting. The next review of Pagham Harbour MCZ/SPA is anticipated in 2027-28.

### *Kelp restoration*

Towed video surveys were successfully conducted for the fifth consecutive year in all 24 sites, including a trial of towing the ROV (over soft ground). Sussex IFCA are in talks with Zoological Society London to analyse the videos to date and work this up into an academic manuscript.

A flying array was purchased from Devon and Severn IFCA which is planned to replace the current sled used in the towed underwater video surveys. The new array will capture images that are more optimal for analysis, and significantly reduce its interaction with the seabed. Sussex IFCA have been in talks with ZSL regarding how the methodology and survey design could be slightly adapted to better suited the evolving requirements of Sussex IFCA, included better coverage of the diversity of habitats in the district and exploratory habitat surveys.

The Sussex Kelp Recovery Project 2023/24 Impact Report has been finalised and published (see <https://sussexkelp.org.uk/>). The C&R Team was involved in developing and reviewing the report and contributed updates on the towed video surveys, shellfish permit catch return analysis, MMO landings data analysis, the presentations section, and the Enforcement team provided a 'day in the life' piece summarising relevant compliance and enforcement activities.

Officer's facilitated fisher engagement for Madison Bowden-Parry, a PhD student at the University of Exeter studying Marine Historical Ecology including a study on historical perspectives from fishers of their experience of the extent and ecology of kelp in Sussex.

### *Solent EMS*

An IFCA Officer attended the Autumn Solent Forum Meeting, which was held at the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton. The event included presentations regarding several projects occurring across the Solent area, including an update from Southern IFCA on their Bottom Towed Fishing Gear Byelaw 2023.

### *Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay EMS and Solent and Dorset Coast SPA*

Solent and Dorset Coast SPA and Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay SPA HRAs were progressed for the 2017 tern foraging extension. Demersal trawling, fixed netting, drift netting, potting, and dredging were taken to the appropriate assessment stage. The impact of each gear method will be assessed whilst also considering current fisheries management relevant to the site.

### *Interactive map*

Sussex IFCA liaised with Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre about taking ownership of hosting and updating the interactive map and began training to do this.

### *Wild Coast Sussex*

The Wild Coast Sussex project ended on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. Sussex IFCA has supported the project by attending meetings and supporting events.

## Species

### *Shellfish permit monitoring*

The 2023 Shellfish Catch Return Report was made available on the Sussex IFCA website and shared with relevant partners (Cefas, Blue Marine Foundation) and partnership groups (Whelk Working Group, CHASM). This report summarizes trends over time for key shellfish fisheries found within the Sussex IFCA district (lobster, edible crab, cuttlefish, and whelk).

### *Lobster & Edible crab*

(see also *Potting activity*)

Sussex IFCA supported the Crustacean Habitats and Sediment Movement (CHASM) group by attending quarterly meetings. Sussex IFCA also continue to collect size data to be fed into the national annual Cefas stock assessment.

### *Whelk*

Sussex IFCA attended Whelk Working Group (WWG) meetings.

### *Elasmobranch evidence*

Sussex IFCA developed a voluntary elasmobranch Code of Conduct in collaboration with the Shark Trust that is intended to be published alongside resources produced following confirmation of the Minimum Size Byelaw. This Code of Conduct was presented at the European Elasmobranch Association (EEA) Conference.

### *Oysters*

Due to the declassification of the oyster beds in Chichester Harbour by the Environmental Health Organisation, there is no active fishery, and no stock assessment was conducted. However, Sussex IFCA continue to be engaged with project partners, such as Sussex Seascape Project, to explore options for the future revitalisation of the fishery.

### *Minimum/ maximum size limits*

Officers worked on byelaw communication materials, in anticipation of the Minimum Size Byelaw being confirmed.

### *Small fish surveys*

Sussex IFCA assisted the Solent Seascape Project with their surveys in Chichester Harbour over the year. Officers also attended a survey led by the Environment Agency on the Adur River. Surveys in partnership with Sparsholt also occurred in October. Sussex IFCA continues to communicate with Pagham RSPB to organise the resumption of SFS in Medmerry and Sussex Wildlife Trust around resuming the surveys which historically took place in Rye.

Data from all small fish surveys went into an annual juvenile fish survey report and metadata has been uploaded to the MEDIN data portal.

### *Marine mammals*

Sussex IFCA submitted sightings of dolphins and porpoises whilst on routine sea patrols to the Brighton Dolphin Project.