



The Wash Fisheries - **Eastern Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority**

Fishing within The Wash is known to date back to the 1100s when a subsistence fishery supplemented local diet, supplied local markets and provided livelihoods for many families. The key species include cockles, mussels, shrimps and whelks, with historical harvesting of oysters and sprats.

The arrival of railways in Boston and King's Lynn in the 1840s expanded shellfish markets but the increase in demand quickly became out of control resulting in over-fishing. This led to the near collapse of the industry which prompted new management, with Boston and Lynn town councils gaining regulatory powers, leading to the formation of the Eastern Sea Fisheries Joint Committee (ESFJC) in 1894. Management evolved through Regulating Orders and byelaws, and traditional fishing shifted to larger, multi-purpose vessels and modern processing. By the late 1980s, The Wash shellfisheries were among the largest in England and Wales.

Nowadays vessels are versatile, adapting their rigs to suit the type of catch. Cockles are the main catch during the summer, although this can extend through to autumn or even winter in some years. Between 1986 and 2008 cockles were harvested via suction dredging but are now hand-worked at low tide. This involves fishing vessels steaming in tight circles as the tide ebbs (a practice known locally as 'prop washing') in order to blow cockles out of the sand and when the vessel has dried out the crew disembark and gather the cockles' using rakes and nets. Suction dredging continues in the private le Strange fishery on the eastern side of The Wash, which is typically harvested by two vessels.

The winter months are usually the time for mussel hand-working or dredging, however low mussel stock biomass since 2008 and poor market conditions have contributed to a decline in this fishery. Brown shrimp caught with beam trawls are also an important fishery in The Wash, producing circa 90% of the UK's brown shrimp landings. Since the 1980s, vessels from N. Norfolk have also pot-fished for crab and lobster in The Wash and since circa 2014, whelk fisheries have also become more important.

Formed in 2011 under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, the Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority (IFCA) succeeded the ESFJC with enhanced powers to modernise fisheries management. The new IFCAs also had additional responsibilities for conservation that are intended to ensure that fishing activity within Marine Protected Areas takes place within acceptable environmental parameters and where this cannot be achieved, that the activity does not take place. This typically involves discrete areas being closed to fishing activity that interacts with the seabed in order to protect particular habitats.

Eastern IFCA undertakes compliance activity, engagement and education and the Authority's management balances sustainable fishing with environmental protection as well as maintaining strong ties with the local fishing community. The Authority also manages fisheries in The Wash under a set of byelaws alongside national legislation. The cockle and mussel fisheries are managed under the Wash Cockle and Mussel Byelaw 2021, which replaced the expired Wash Fishery Order 1992. The Shrimp fishery is managed under the Shrimp Permit Byelaw 2018, and Whelk fishing is managed under the Whelk permit byelaw 2016.

Management of the cockle and mussel fisheries includes undertaking annual stock assessments, stakeholder consultation, collaboration with Natural England via a Habitat Regulations Assessment, and other organisations to develop management measures that deliver sustainable fisheries. In particular, stocks are managed via a Total Allowable Catch which is set annually and is informed by annual stock assessments and careful consideration of the feeding requirements of over-wintering birds. Noting that the Wash is a highly important Marine Protected Area, with several over-lapping designations, management also serves to protect against impacts to conservation objectives including in relation to designated bird and seal species and their supporting habitats.

Shrimp fishery management primarily relates to protecting the habitats of the Wash from bottom-towed-gear and includes closed areas for particularly sensitive habitats and fishing effort restrictions in relation to other parts of the Wash to ensure fishing activity does not have a significant detrimental effect. The shrimp fishery is accredited by the Marine Stewardship Council as a sustainable fishery, with stock management measures in place under voluntary codes developed and implemented by the fishing industry.

Fishing in The Wash remains important to local communities, supporting livelihoods and a variety of business models. An average of 48 vessels operate annually from Wash ports, and others visit from other ports including from the North Norfolk Coast. Three processing factories

situated in Boston and King’s Lynn are key suppliers of shellfish to UK and international markets, generating wider employment and trade.

Table 1 Average Landing metrics per year (2019 to 2024) for the Wash Fisheries using (MMO landings data, Shrimp returns data, Whelk returns data, Cockle returns and price data received from processors) NB. Please note these are estimations based on the percentage of weight landed into Wash ports.

	Landed Weight (Tonnes)	First Sale Value* (£)
Cockle	3033.47	£2,044,639.73
Shrimp**	356.33	£1,749,660.66
Whelk	316.90	£381,588.83
Crab and Lobster***	403.54	£1,084,012.26
Combined Average	4110.25	£5,259,901.47
<p><i>* First Sale Value represents the value paid to fishermen at the time their catch is sold. The values here are estimates generated using more than one data set, typically using an average price per kilo combined with the landed weight of catch from within the Wash.</i></p> <p><i>** Shrimp returns average are estimated from data for 2022, 2023 and 2024</i></p> <p><i>*** Includes fishing activity from ports other than Wash ports and may therefore represent an over-estimate.</i></p>		

The first sale value of the Wash Fisheries is estimated at an average of £5,259,901.47 per year (Table 1) however this does not reflect the wider economic, social and cultural value of the fisheries. The Wash fisheries support a variety of ancillary jobs, (including factory workers and lorry drivers, etc) heritage and tourism through the sale of shellfish, sold directly to the public from independent fish shops. Shellfish sales, both global and local, are vital to the region’s identity and sustainable practices, supported by Eastern IFCA `s careful management, are essential to preserve this vital resource for future generations.

References

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