



## Hand Gathering: A summary of responses from the Call for Information

October 2020

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## 1. Aim of this report

The report aims to review responses to the Call for Information on intertidal collection activity in Northumberland. At the time of writing the Call for Information had been open for 12 weeks, it has been designed as an open-ended consultation which will remain open as a route for stakeholders to communicate with officers on this topic. Information received will be made publicly available to ensure openness and transparency in the process.

The report is intended to review and summarise the thoughts and opinions of stakeholders in relation to bait collection and hand gathering activity. This includes information on current activity levels, whether they have any concerns about these activities, and whether they think management options should be explored.

## 2. Background

The Call for Information relates to the bait collection activities crab tiling, mussel collection and bait digging, in addition to hand gathering for periwinkle and seaweed for human consumption within the NIFCA district.

Bait collection refers to the collection of a variety of types of fishing bait from intertidal areas for use by anglers. Crab tiling is the use of artificial shelters such as roof tiles, guttering, drainpipes, chimney pots and tyres within estuaries, which targets shore crab in the moulting phase (*Carcinus maenas*). Within the district there are no mussel beds collected for human consumption however mussels are collected for fishing bait in some areas, for example the Blyth estuary. Bait digging is widely practiced and occurs in areas of finer sediments (muddy sand) in intertidal areas, mainly targeting blow lug (*Arenicola marina*) and black lug (*A. defodiens*) for use as fishing bait. The main method is using a fork to dig holes or a trench, though some individuals use a bait pump.

Periwinkle (*Littorina littorea*) gathering occurs on rocky intertidal areas on the Northumberland IFCA coast. The target species are harvested from the shore when it is uncovered by the tide, periwinkles are handpicked and collected into buckets or bags. Some seaweed collection also occurs on rocky shores, though little is known about this activity.

### **Current management of bait collection and hand gathering activities:**

Bait digging and hand gathering activities are largely unregulated in the district, though landowner permission should be sought in some places. There is no management of crab tiling activities. There has been a NIFCA voluntary Code of Conduct for mussel collection in the Blyth since 2015 to protect mussel beds and minimise disturbance to birds and other wildlife at the site, though there are concerns the mussel beds are still declining. There are several closures to bait digging throughout the district which are not regulated by NIFCA, including in the Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve (managed by Natural England), an area at Boulmer (Northumberland County Council byelaw) and at Newton (National Trust byelaw). The NIFCA 'Seagrass Protection' byelaw prohibits any kind of hand and mechanical gathering activities in seagrass-covered areas within the Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC.

In terms of hand gathering, in 2020 NIFCA produced a voluntary Code of Conduct for periwinkle gathering to minimise impacts on periwinkles and the rocky shore. There is no management of seaweed collection.

## **Recreational and commercial activities:**

All types of bait collection and hand gathering activities may be either recreational or commercial. Commercial collectors tend to collect more frequently and harvest more of the target species, but it is often difficult to distinguish between commercial and recreational collection in practice leading to a difficulty in any regulation of commercial activities.

## **Rationale for the Call for Information:**

NIFCA have received increasing reports of and enquiries about the use of artificial crab shelters, bait collection and hand gathering activities in the district. This includes communication from concerned members of the public enquiring as to the legality, scale, frequency and health and safety aspects of such activities, as well as perceived effects on the marine environment. NIFCA has a statutory duty to carry out assessments of these activities, where they are commercial in operation, and assess the impacts of any activity within protected areas. NIFCA aim to make any decisions on management within our jurisdiction based on evidence to ensure any management is justified, proportionate and fair, if found to be required. The Call for Information seeks to engage with stakeholders who are involved in or who have knowledge of these activities in order to enhance the evidence we have on the scale of activities in the district, in addition to seeking views on concerns about activities, and opinions on any potential management measures.

## **3. The consultation process**

This is the first time this Call for Information process has been used by NIFCA as a way of interacting with stakeholders. The process involved developing a set of questions which could ascertain the knowledge and opinions of stakeholders who either partake in bait collection or hand gathering activities or see others carrying out these activities. With multiple ways to respond, stakeholders can choose which is the most convenient for them. This was either through an online or postal questionnaire. Respondents also had the option to phone up speak to officers, and/or arrange a convenient time and location to respond face-to-face.

This process was chosen because:

- it gives respondents a variety of options to submit comments;
- it means comments can either be made anonymously, and/or without having to respond face to face meaning respondents can be more open;
- it can reach a wider range of people;
- respondents do not have to take time to travel and attend events to respond;
- it is less resource intensive.

**It is important to note that this is an information gathering exercise to understand stakeholder views. No management measures have been proposed, agreed or taken to any further stage.**

## **4. Response from Stakeholders**

A total of 33 responses to the Hand Gathering Call for Information were received from 29th July – 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020. All responses were received through the online questionnaire. A mix of recreational anglers, bait collectors and local residents responded to the survey (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of responses, split by response group

Response group	Number of responses
Recreational anglers:	
• Who collect bait for personal use*	15
• Who do not collect bait	4
Commercial bait collectors*	1
Undefined bait collectors**	1
Seaweed collectors only	2
Local residents	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>

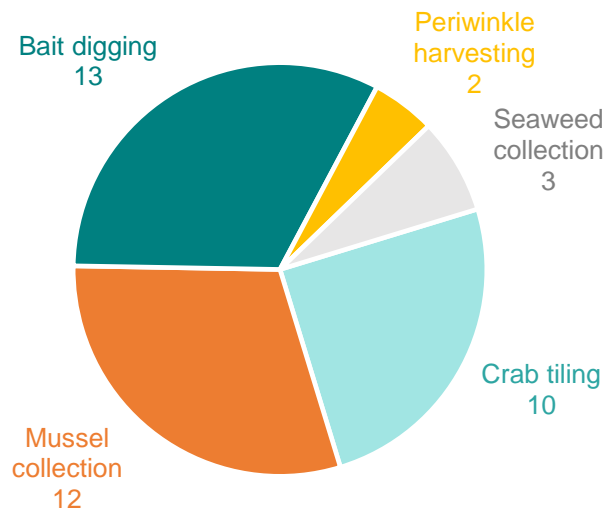
\*Collectors reported carrying out a number of activities, 2 bait collectors also hand gather for periwinkle

\*\*Undefined = unknown if commercial or recreational

## 5. Results

### Bait collection and hand gathering activities carried out by individuals surveyed

A total of 19 individuals (58% of those surveyed) carried out at least one of the collection activities (crab tiling, mussel collection, bait digging, periwinkle gathering and seaweed collection) while 84% of those carried out at least two collection activities. Two individuals only carried out seaweed collection. Bait digging, mussel collection and crab tiling were the most frequent activities (Figure 1). One individual sold bait commercially.



**Figure 1.** Number of individuals surveyed carrying out each bait collection or harvesting activity.

Out of the 19 individuals collecting bait, 16 recorded collection locations. Five collected from a range of locations in the NIFCA district (from the River Tyne to the Scottish border) or northeast generally, with two specifying some collection outside the district. Eight individuals recorded bait collection in one location only, with five of those in Blyth. See Table 2 for other locations.

Table 2. Locations of hand gathering activities carried out by individual respondents.

Location	Number of responses
Berwick-Upon-Tweed	1
Blyth	7
Boulmer	2
Hauxley	2
Seaton Sluice	1
Tyne Estuary	1
Outside the NIFCA district	2
All over the district / northeast	5
<b>Total individuals responded</b>	<b>16</b>

The two individuals only collecting seaweed harvested less than monthly and 2-3 times per month respectively. Of the 17 bait collectors/gatherers, one individual stated their activity varied a lot over the year so they could not estimate, one did not record collection frequency and the remaining 15 recorded activity varying from less than once per year to at least 15 times per month, with most collecting at least 2-3 times per month on average (Figure 2). As noted by some individuals collection activities vary significantly throughout the year depending on what species are being targeted.

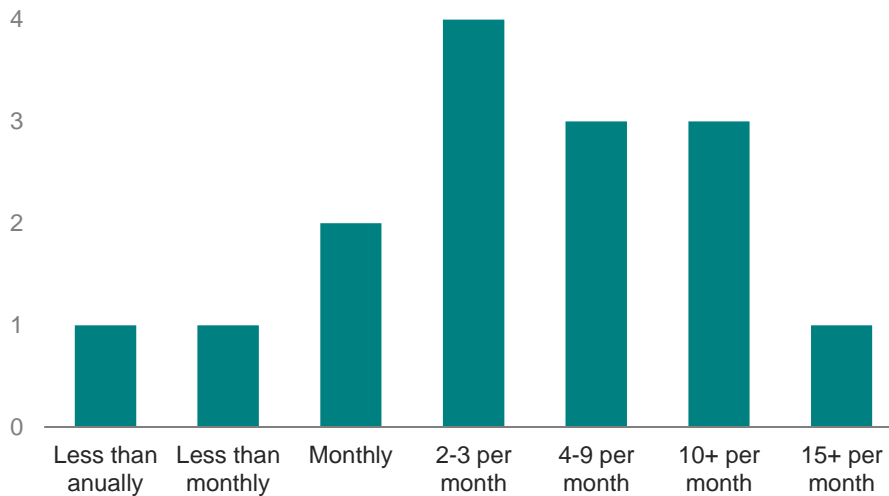


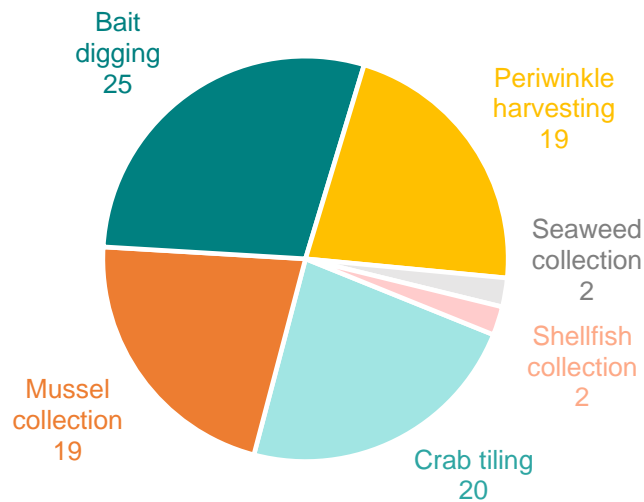
Figure 2. Collection frequency of individuals surveyed.

Both collectors taking only seaweed took an average of 2-5kg per trip. Three mussel collectors including the commercial collector removed between 1-3kg in terms of weight, one individual estimated 10kg, with other individuals removing 100 individual mussels or one bucket at a time. Four bait diggers removed up to 1kg per trip (including the commercial collector) with another stating they took 200 worms. Estimates for crab from two collectors were 0.5kg and 2kg, with another stating they caught 300 crabs per summer.

### Bait collection and hand gathering activities observed being carried out by others

All 33 respondents were aware of collection activities carried out by others in the NIFCA district. Bait digging was the most recorded, followed by crab tiling, mussel collection and

periwinkle gathering while only two respondents recorded seaweed collection (Figure 3). Two respondents also noted the activity of shellfish (lobster/crab) collection from shore for bait collection purposes and as a separate activity to crab tiling.



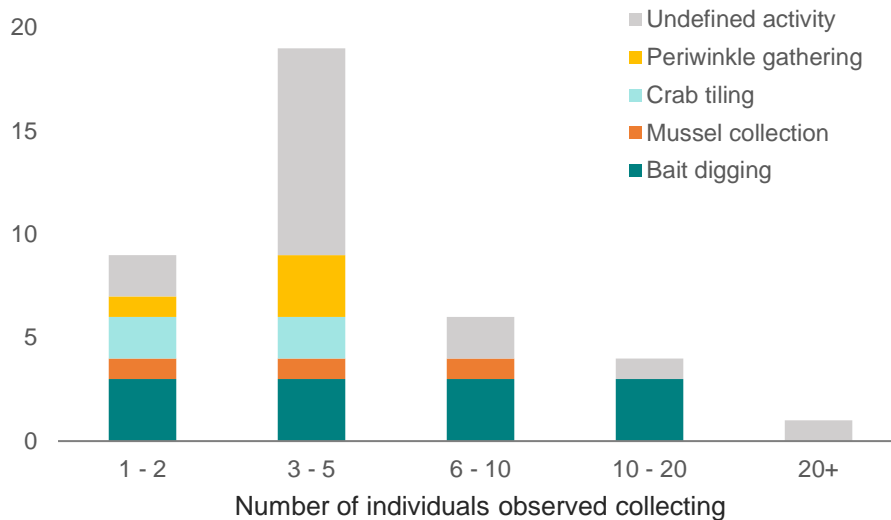
**Figure 3.** Number of respondents who reported bait collection and hand gathering activities carried out by others.

The locations of observed bait digging and hand gathering (Table 3) broadly corresponded with the locations of individual bait collection activities (Table 2). Additional locations were Beadnell, St Mary’s Island and the Wansbeck estuary and there were more respondents who noted collection activities at both Blyth and Berwick.

**Table 3.** Locations of bait collection activities of others

Location	Number of responses
Beadnell	2
Berwick-Upon-Tweed	8
Blyth	10
Boulmer	2
Hauxley	2
Seaton Sluice	2
St Mary’s Island	2
Tyne estuary	1
Wansbeck estuary	1
Outside the NIFCA district	2
All over the district / northeast	5
<b>Total individuals responded</b>	<b>28</b>

In response to the question on how many people were observed collecting, 31 individuals responded and four of those did not estimate numbers as they vary with factors such as the type of collection activity or season. The remaining 27 respondents reported numbers of collectors ranging from lone individuals to over 20 individuals, with most reporting 3-5 individuals (Figure 4). Some reported numbers by type of collection activity. Bait digging had the widest range from 1-2 up to 20 individuals, mussel collection was reported up to 10 individuals and both crab tiling and periwinkle collection were under 5 individuals reported (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Numbers observed collecting at any one time, grouped by collection activity.

When asked if respondents had any more information regarding collection activities, there were a range of responses however the main themes were that collection has been carried out for many years (6 respondents), with one individual noting an observed increase in buying bait from tackle shops over time instead of collecting for personal use. Three respondents said the collection activities they saw were on a small scale, collecting for personal use only, while two noted that well-organised groups of collectors have increased over time. Five noted that commercial collection does occur while one reported an increase in periwinkle gathering specifically.

## Views and opinions

### Concerns about collection activities

Respondents were asked whether they had any concerns about bait collection activities. The responses of 30 respondents are summarised in Table 4. Overall, the majority of respondents were concerned about the impacts of bait collection or hand gathering, including all local residents, 50% of recreational anglers (both those collecting and not) and the only commercial collector. The remaining three respondents had concerns which were not related to bait collection activities specifically: one recreational collector was concerned about anglers being vilified by non-angling groups, while two recreational collectors were concerned about being prevented from collecting by any regulations.

**Table 4.** Respondents with concerns about bait collection/hand gathering activities (Yes) and those with no concerns (No), split by response group.

Response group	Yes	%	No	%	Total
Recreational anglers:					
• Who collect bait for personal use*	6	50%	6	50%	<b>12</b>
• Who do not collect bait	2	50%	2	50%	<b>4</b>
Commercial bait collectors*	1	100%	0	0	<b>1</b>
Undefined bait collectors**	0	0%	1	100%	<b>1</b>
Seaweed collectors only	1	50%	1	50%	<b>2</b>
Local residents	10	100%	0	0%	<b>10</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>30</b>



\*Collectors reported carrying out a number of activities, 2 bait collectors also hand gather for periwinkle

\*\*Undefined = unknown if commercial or recreational

The concerns of the 20 respondents who answered 'Yes' were divided into the following categories: commercial collection, impacts on target species, impacts on the wider environment, conduct of other collectors, and enforcement (Table 5). Equal numbers of bait collectors/hand gatherers and local residents were concerned about the scale or impacts of commercial collection (including the commercial collector who was concerned about the numbers coming in from other areas).

In terms of environmental impacts, collectors tended to be more concerned about impacts on the target species (declines in mussels/periwinkles/lugworms) while residents were more concerned about the impacts on the wider environment and ecosystem. Three collectors noted that they had not noticed negative environmental impacts over their years of collecting. Five collectors highlighted a decline in mussel beds with two attributing this to commercial exploitation.

**Table 5. Concerns about bait collection activities**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Collector</b>	<b>Local resident</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Commercial collection</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>
Scale of commercial collection	5	5	
Illegality of unlicensed operators	1	-	
<b>Impacts on target species</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>
Decrease in mussel beds	5	-	
• As a result of commercial activity	2	-	
Decrease in periwinkle numbers	1	-	
Potential decrease in lugworm	1	-	
<b>Impacts on the wider environment*</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
Impacts on bird populations	-	3	
Impacts within protected areas	-	1	
Visual impacts of digging	-	1	
<b>Conduct of other collectors</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>
Collecting soft crabs	-	1	
Collecting female brown crabs	1	-	
General concerns about crab collection	1	-	
Undersize fish caught	1	-	
Use of unmarked pots	1	-	
<b>Lack of enforcement presence</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

\* Not all respondents gave a more specific answer therefore totals are greater than sub-categories

#### Views on management of collection activities

31 respondents answered the question: "Should bait collection and/or hand gathering activities be managed in some way?" (Table 6). 58% overall thought there should be some form of management including 90% of local residents (one individual was unsure). Only 29% of sea anglers collecting their own bait felt management was needed compared to 75% of anglers who did not collect their own bait. The commercial collector was in favour of management while the seaweed collectors were split 50/50.

Table 6. Respondents who thought bait collection activities should be managed (Yes) and those who did not (No), split by response group.

Response group	Yes	%	No	%	Unsure	%	Total
Recreational anglers:							
• Who collect bait for personal use*	4	29%	10	71%	-	-	14
• Who do not collect bait	3	75%	1	25%	-	-	4
Commercial bait collectors*	1	100%	-	-	-	-	1
Undefined bait collectors**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Seaweed collectors only	1	50%	1	50%	-	-	2
Local residents	9	90%	-	-	1	10%	10
<b>Totals</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>31</b>

\*Collectors reported carrying out a number of activities, 2 bait collectors also hand gather for periwinkle

\*\*Undefined = unknown if commercial or recreational

Locations identified by respondents as places where management is needed are:

- Anywhere commercial bait collection is taking place (4 respondents)
- Berwick-Upon-Tweed (5)
- Blyth estuary (1 generally, 1 for mussels)
- Boulmer for lugworm (1)
- Beadnell to Seahouses (1)
- Spittal to Burnmouth (1)
- 'Estuaries' (1)

Suggestions for forms of management were categorised into: improving current management, general management options, and species-specific management recommendations (Table 7). Licencing was suggested by the most respondents including a mixture of recreational and commercial collectors/gatherers as well as residents, with some specifying licencing for commercial operators only. Limiting the amounts taken on each visit was also suggested by five respondents although two collectors stated that this could be ineffective as they would have to make more trips to collect the same amount of bait (for recreational angling). Complete bans on collection activities were recommended by some residents, though no bait collectors suggested this. Temporary closures (closed seasons) to allow target species and the environment to recover was suggested by one respondent. Species-specific recommendations (all by collectors) are summarised in Table 7.

Four collectors and five non-collectors emphasised the need for management of commercial collection as opposed to recreational. The importance of good enforcement when implementing current or potential management measures was mentioned by two respondents.

Table 7. Suggestions for management of collection activities

Category	Collector	Local resident	Total
<b>Improving current management</b>			
Monitoring of commercial scale collection	1		1
Enforcing current restrictions	1		1
Need for assessment of any detrimental impacts on environment before management measures	1		1
<b>General management options</b>			
Licence or permit for all bait collectors	1	3	4

Licence or permit for commercial collection	1	2	3
Limiting amount taken on each visit	2	3	5
• Limiting amount taken and number of visits	1		1
Closed season (temporary closure to collection)		1	1
Ban (permanent closure to collection)		3	3
Ban on commercial collection only		3	3
Location restrictions (e.g. those outside the NIFCA district needing a permit to collect within)	1		1
<b>Species-specific management recommendations</b>			
Limiting mussel collection to 1 bucket/week	1		1
Licence for bait digging	1		1
Ban on shellfish collection from shore	1		1

## 6. Summary and conclusions

Overall, there were varied responses to the Hand Gathering Call for Information from different stakeholders including recreational bait collectors/hand gatherers, one commercial bait collector, sea anglers and local residents, from a range of locations within the NIFCA district. There was a wide range of individual collection frequencies ranging from less than once per year to at least 15 times per month, though this is an average and varies throughout the year. Most collectors practiced more than one bait collection activity with bait digging, mussel collection and crab tiling the most frequent. Periwinkle harvesting was also frequently seen although only two respondents practised it. Most collection occurs in groups of 3-5 individuals though this ranges from one individual to over 20 and varies depending on activity.

The majority of those surveyed (67%) had some concerns about hand gathering and bait collection activities within the NIFCA district. A key concern of both collectors and residents was the scale of commercial gathering or collecting occurring, with some collectors attributing declines in mussels and periwinkles to greater intensity of collection over time. Collectors were generally more concerned about the sustainability of the target species while residents were concerned with the wider impacts on the environment such as disturbance to or prey reduction for overwintering bird populations, in addition to visual impacts. Locations identified as areas of concern by higher numbers of respondents are Berwick-Upon-Tweed and the Blyth estuary (in addition to anywhere commercial collection is occurring).

Another concern highlighted by collectors is the decline in the mussel beds on the Blyth estuary with some attributing this to commercial-scale collection and the commercial collector surveyed suggesting a limit on the number of mussels taken.

In terms of management, many respondents (both collectors and residents) made it clear they thought there should be a distinction between recreational and commercial collectors. While 50% of recreational anglers collecting bait had some concerns about collection activities, only 29% of them favoured any management measures with three mentioning their concern about any potential limits on their collection activities. Some form of licencing of activities was the most recommended management option, followed by limits on amount taken per trip. Total bans were favoured by some residents but no collectors, while one respondent suggested temporary closed seasons to allow recovery.

Finally, it is clear that this is a topic many feel strongly about and have an interest in. Some collectors surveyed have been collecting bait for recreational use for many years, while two mentioned involvement in sea angling clubs. Three collectors mentioned their wish for sustainable management of the species targeted by bait collection, so that they could

continue to collect in the future. The single commercial collector surveyed was concerned at the level of collection and would potentially be in favour of management or willing to pay a licence. Both collectors and residents enjoy recreational use of the rocky shore and coast, with many citing love of nature or the sea as a reason for their interest in the call for information.

Many thanks to all who responded.