



RECREATIONAL SEA ANGLING

NIFCA STRATEGY

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Contents

Summary.....	1
Main areas of focus:	1
Overview of Northumberland IFCA	2
Recreational sea angling	3
Purpose of this strategy	5
The IFCA Vision.....	5
Aims:	5
Outcomes:	6
How to achieve the RSA strategy aims.....	6
Previous actions completed	8
Main RSA Concerns	11
Outcomes.....	11
NIFCA Species Challenge	14
Bass scale project.....	18
Monitoring and measuring success.....	19
Next steps	19
Have your say	20
References.....	21

Summary

The Northumberland Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority (NIFCA) drafted the first Angling Strategy in 2021, to improve and strengthen engagement with recreational sea angling stakeholders in the Northumberland district. It was also to acknowledge the importance of the angling community with its link to fisheries stock management, individuals' knowledge and socio-economic benefits it brings. These core aims still continue today and are very much at the forefront of our work with recreational sea angling stakeholders.

Main areas of focus:

- Angling National Line Recycling Scheme (ANLRS) awareness and promotion and bin locations shared were installed across the district in areas recommended by local anglers.
- Measuring boards installed at popular angling spots within the district where undersize retention was highlighted as an issue.
- Angling focused patrols have increase to spread awareness of NIFCA's remit in relation to the recreational sea angling community, to complete catch checks and record inshore fish data.
- Tackle shops in the area are visited biannually and/or as required and publications are distributed.
- To improve information sharing between NIFCA and the recreational sea angling sector via different platforms and use feedback to improve stakeholder relationships.
- The Species Challenge Competition was launched in 2023 to build on previous engagement and gain insight into species present and absent around the coastline. This has continued into 2024 with increased participation and greater engagement with stakeholders.
- A European sea bass scale sampling project was launched in 2024 to gain knowledge and understanding of the sea bass population within the NIFCA district.

NIFCA will continue engagement while increasing datasets to ensure evidence-based action plan is implemented if required in the future.

Overview of Northumberland IFCA

The Northumberland Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority (NIFCA) is one of ten Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) in England, established in 2011 under Section 150 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009¹. IFCA duties include the management of sea fisheries resources to ensure it is carried out in a sustainable way, and to balance the social and economic benefits with the need to protect the marine environment.

The NIFCA district extends from the centre of the River Tyne to the Scottish border, out to 6 nautical miles and to the normal tidal limit of estuaries (Figure 1).

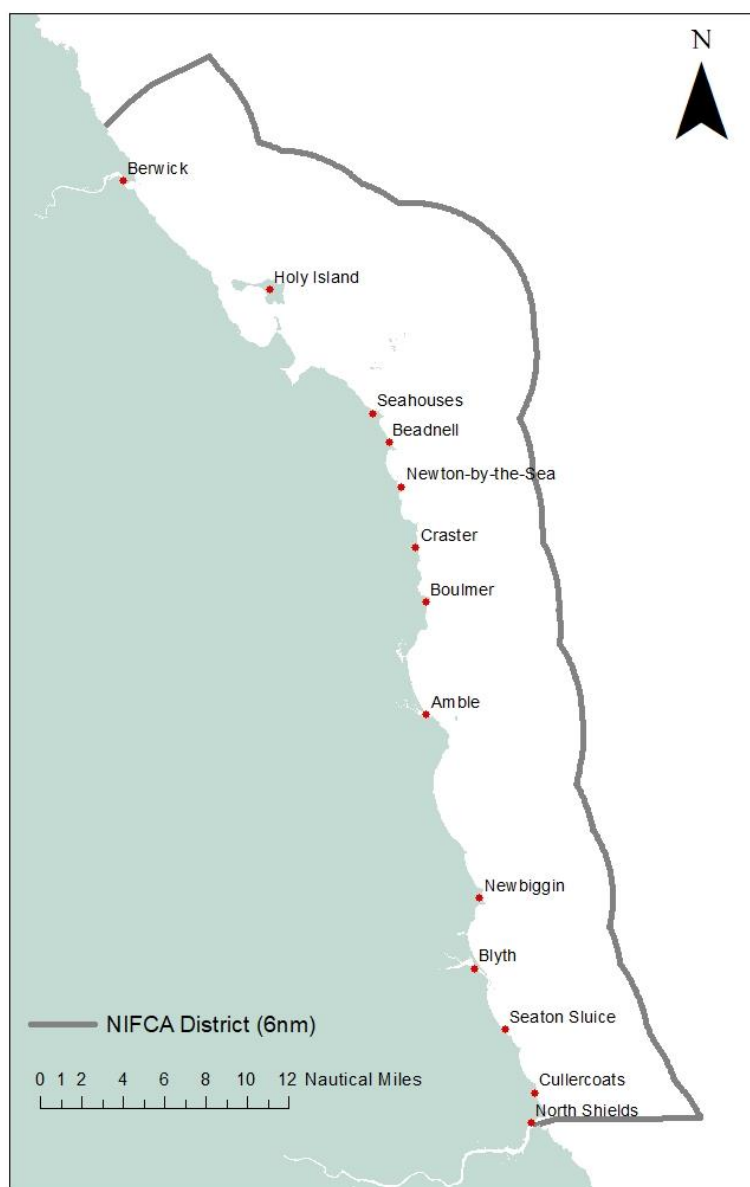


Figure 1 Boundaries of the NIFCA district.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/23/contents>

Recreational sea angling

Recreational sea angling can bring significant economic benefits to regions, by boosting spending at bait and tackle shops, charter boat hire, angling club membership and local hospitality facilities where competitions and meetings take place. During 2017, expenditure in England amounted to £1.94 billion on sea fishing, and was estimated to support over 16,000 jobs (Hyder *et al.*, 2020).

Recreational sea angling (RSA) is a popular and high-value leisure activity for locals and visitors throughout the NIFCA district. People can choose between a variety of sea angling activities, including fishing from the shore, kayaks, private and charter boats.

The sport provides people with an opportunity to socialise and connect with the marine environment, whilst encouraging people to consider the protection and sustainability of sea fisheries resources (Armstrong *et al.*, 2013). Sea anglers contribute to rod and line fisheries sustainability by complying with minimum conservation reference sizes (MCRSs), practicing catch and release, and submitting catch data to initiatives such as NIFCA's Species Challenge. Some local clubs have championed best practice and adapted weekly competitions to improve fish survivability, and sustainability. Matches have been run as 100% catch and release, the size limits of some species have been raised, drop nets are used and wet workstations for dehooking fish have been set-up during match times.

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NIFCA previously contributed to the UK's largest sea angling survey conducted by the Centre for Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) in 2012 titled, Sea Angling 2012 (Armstrong *et al.*, 2013). Social and economic data were recorded from recreational sea anglers within the NIFCA district. The study was designed to help local and national policy makers develop well-balanced decisions on the sustainable development of sea fishing. It also allowed the UK to estimate and submit the recreational sector catch information for protected species, including the European seabass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) and Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*), as required under the European Commission's Data Collection Framework². Regional data was collected through face-to-face interviews with anglers and online surveys. The findings noted frustration from anglers towards the commercial fishing fleet, particularly those involved in trawling activity and the setting of gill nets, as

² (EU) 2019/472: Multiannual plan for fish stocks in the Western Waters and adjacent waters.

well as stakeholders feeling they were unfairly looked upon as a result of the actions of a small minority, who have been responsible for littering and the removal of undersize fish.

Following the Sea Angling 2012 data collection, NIFCA completed an in-house survey to develop links with angling stakeholders (NIFCA., 2017). The Engaging with Anglers document led by a dedicated NIFCA Officer, furthered our understanding of sea angling in the district and strengthened the stakeholder relationship. Signs were placed along the coast displaying minimum reference conservation size information, an angling guide was published, and a wide variety of promotional material was distributed. Litter at sites used by anglers was an issue raised and in 2019 NIFCA began supporting the Anglers National Line Recycling Scheme (ANLRS) and purchased recycling



Figure 2 NIFCA Officers attend the 2024 Amble Sea Angling Clubs' annual Amble Open Competition and chat to entrants.

bins for discarded line along the coast. With recreational sea angling now recognised in UK fisheries management under the Fisheries Act (2020) NIFCA have dedicated more time on improving the relationship with the recreational sea angling sector. NIFCA officers meet recreational sea anglers at a variety of local and regional angling events (Figure 2), and during district (onshore and offshore) patrols to ensure fishing activity follows all regulations. Compliance checks with local anglers primarily focus on MCRS of a number of protected species within the district (NIFCA Byelaw 3).

By speaking with recreational sea anglers more regularly, officers hope to strengthen and improve stakeholder relationships. The increased engagement will also offer an opportunity to promote NIFCA's responsibilities and the regulations while gaining insight from the recreational sea angling community to ensure informed decision-making as and when it is required. Stakeholder engagement will now be reviewed and developed further by annually revising the Recreational Sea Angling Strategy.

Purpose of this strategy

The IFCA Vision

IFCAs will lead, champion, and manage a sustainable marine environment and inshore fisheries, by successfully securing the right balance between social, environmental, and economic benefits to ensure healthy seas, sustainable fisheries and a viable industry.

NIFCA aims to continue to meet its statutory duty to balance the needs of all stakeholders including recreational sea anglers engaged with sea fisheries resources in the district.

This strategy is built upon the foundations of the NIFCA's 2013-14 Sea Angling Strategy, while taking account of the wider national picture. It incorporates the former strategy's aim to gain insight into local important issues and the National Angling Strategy's (2019- 2024) delivery plan aim to increase angler engagement.

The strategy is intended to be a living document enabling NIFCA to continually edit it with regards to the needs and duties of NIFCA and the RSA stakeholders.

Aims and Outcomes of the Strategy

Aims:

- To build strong relationships with recreational sea angling stakeholders within the NIFCA district.
- To gain a better understanding of recreational sea angling catch and inshore fish species in the NIFCA district.
- To ensure evidence-based decisions for sustainable recreational sea angling activity are made (as and when required).

Outcomes:

- For recreational sea anglers to understand NIFCA's remit and how we can assist them with their concerns and queries.
- To ensure promotion and sharing of recreational sea angling news and information on a variety of online platforms.
- An improved section of the NIFCA website dedicated to recreational sea angling.
- Improved communication and knowledge sharing between NIFCA and stakeholders, and to ensure stakeholders are represented and have an opportunity to voice their views and/or concerns.

How to achieve the RSA strategy aims

Good engagement is key to the effectiveness of this strategy. Effective engagement involves presenting meaningful information and understanding within the sector, as well as listening and learning from individuals and organisations/clubs.

The RSA Strategy aims will be achieved by the actions detailed below:

Aim: To build strong relationships with recreational sea angling stakeholders within the NIFCA district

Engage with recreational sea angling stakeholders

- Develop links with sea angling clubs and organisations which represent a broad range of individuals.
- During routine sea and shore patrols talk to recreational sea anglers and record issues or concerns raised.
- Visit tackle shops, and attend angling meetings, events, and competitions.
- Join recreational sea angling forums online to introduce NIFCA and improve stakeholder links.
- Promote the Authority's website and social media accounts by encouraging anglers to visit them for angling updates and news.
- Ensure more sea angling posts are published from the Authority's social accounts and website. Promote angling news/events/festivals/meetings that align with NIFCA's vision.

Develop recreational sea angling information material

- Review and update where necessary the NIFCA guides for recreational sea angling.
- Review and update permanent signage along the coast to inform recreational sea anglers of our work, regulations and contact details.

- Distribute MCRS informational resources to charter boats, RSA retailers and individuals along the coast.
- Design posters with legislative changes and local byelaw information for tackle shop distribution

Workshops/Talks/Events

- Deliver workshops shore-side during times of increased RSA activity to inform anglers (and the wider public) of NIFCA's work, as well as listen to stakeholders' views and/or concerns.
- Organise meetings at sea angling clubs/associations to promote NIFCA's work, gain insight into the current situation of RSA activity and create interest in future involvement of a NIFCA Recreational Sea Angling Group.
- Attend RSA events and competitions throughout the district to engage with the RSA community.

Establish a NIFCA Recreational Sea Angling Group

- Hold meeting(s) to gather opinions about how NIFCA could work more effectively with the recreational sea angling sector and decide where to pinpoint actions and resources.
- Provide an initial point of contact for all angling related enquiries to NIFCA.
- Offer an opportunity to collect stakeholders' opinions on regional (and if relevant national) fisheries management decisions and work on shared solutions. NIFCA can support the RSA sector and discuss any initiatives they would like to see in the district.

Aim: To gain a better understanding of recreational sea angling catch and inshore fish species in the NIFCA district.

Gathering important knowledge and data

- Whilst out on the coast, NIFCA officers will record recreational sea angling activity locations and catch details (if available) using Survey123 app.
- NIFCA staff to attend RSA club competition and matches where catch data can be collected.
- Officers to promote the bass scale project and collect scales online and in-person during patrols and events.
- Store all inshore recreational fish catch data in one dataset and issues/concerns raised in one document.
- Promote the NIFCA Species Challenge and record all competition submissions.

Processing and sharing information

- Survey123 location information will help patrols be more location focused.

- Bass scale data will be shared with North-Eastern IFCA with a long-term aim to understand connectivity across the two districts while both IFCA's are running the same project.
- A report will be published to share the fish catch information collected from the NIFCA Species Challenge

Aim: To ensure evidence-based decisions for sustainable recreational sea angling activity are made (as and when required).

Build on communication and data gathering

- Include recreational data and sea anglers' views in national and regional consultation responses to ensure all sectors are considered.
- If a Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) relating to the NIFCA district's recreational sea angling activity is in its consultation phase, ensure it is publicised among the RSA sector, and they have the opportunity to voice their views.

Previous actions completed

The actions that have been initiated and are ongoing remain in the strategy's aims, and the actions completed have now been removed from the aim section with further information below.

1. Recreational Sea Anglers Call for Information questionnaire – The questionnaire was developed as a starting point for stakeholder engagement. The questions covered stakeholders' understanding of NIFCA's remit, their main angling concerns and to provide an idea of economic benefits sea angling brings to the district. Sea angling location preferences were recorded with an aim to identify activity hotspots, allowing recreational sea angling focused patrols to be more effective. The questionnaire was publicised through social media, the NIFCA website, publications and face-to-face meetings. There were four responses to the call for information during the 18-month period it was open which is unfortunately a low take up however we received some important information as outlined below.

The responses (black) and NIFCA actions (red):

- Ways to improve engagement with the sector: speak to more anglers out fishing, attending local angling clubs' meetings and eliminating pollution. Recreational sea angling focused patrols have increased around the district and officers-initiated contact with angling clubs and attended competitions. NIFCA work closely with partner agencies and initiatives including the Fishing for Litter Scheme and Angling National Line Recycling Scheme with a remit to address marine pollution and are committed to managing a sustainable marine environment as per the IFCA vision.

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- Areas used by RSA stakeholders to keep up to date with news and information: Facebook, WhatsApp Groups, websites, online forums, magazines, YouTube and own observations. NIFCA increased the frequency of RSA specific social media posts for example, in 2021 there were eight posts while in 2024 this reached 34 between the months of January and October. The RSA section of the NIFCA website has improved, promoted NIFCA in publications and created new signs and leaflets to improve RSA engagement as well as keeping recreational anglers up to date with Fisheries Management Plans development, consultation and publication
- Main issues affecting the sector: lack of fish is decreasing the amount of interest in the sport. Fish data is being collected with a long-term aim to identify any trends in recreational marine catch.
- Most popular locations for angling: between Blyth and Amble. NIFCA complete patrols in this area but due to the low response rate it is still important to continue patrols in the further north and south of the district.

Given the low response rate to the call for information, NIFCA have adapted the communication strategy as outlined in the section above. NIFCA have also introduced new initiatives which have increased two-way communication between NIFCA and anglers such as the Species Challenge which has had an excellent response rate though 2023 and 2024. Further details in NIFCA Species Challenge section.

2. Review and update the Angling section of the NIFCA website

- The Recreational Sea Angling section of the NIFCA website has been updated and provides user-friendly and succinct information for stakeholders.

3. Develop a database to contact interested stakeholders regarding recreational sea angling matters

- A directory of stakeholders that have provided permission to be contacted regarding RSA matters has been set up and used to share reports and changes in legislation.



Figure 3 The first RSA meeting with local angling club representatives in August 2021 at the NIFCA office in Blyth

Main RSA Concerns

Meetings held at the NIFCA office (Figure 3) as well as engaging with sea anglers and tackle shops along the coast has refined focus on issues important to the sector. By maintaining regular contact, it is hoped that stakeholders feel like they are kept informed of RSA information and are able to highlight any issues they feel need to be looked at by NIFCA.

RSA Meeting Key Discussions

Date	Attendees	Main issues/concerns raised
26/08/21	RSAC's within the NIFCA district	<i>Retention of undersize species</i> <i>Seal-fish interactions</i> <i>Fixed nets</i> <i>Declining fish stock</i>
05/12/23	RSA stakeholders	<i>Bass regulation updates</i> <i>Anti-social behaviour</i> <i>Signage</i> <i>Litter</i> <i>Crab cart</i> <i>MCRS</i> <i>Species Challenge 2024</i> <i>Bait collection</i>
14/03/24	RSA stakeholders	<i>Best practice guides for releasing fish</i>
17/05/24	RSA stakeholders	<i>Cod MCRS</i> <i>Litter</i> <i>Recreational Sea Angling Clubs</i>

Outcomes

Actions taken following meetings with RSA stakeholders combined with other RSA stakeholder engagement:

Retention of undersize species

- Increased compliance checks at angling hotspots (including evening and weekend checks).
- Published social media posts to increase awareness of minimum conservation reference sizes (MCRS) and made the NIFCA website user-friendly to access minimum size details in the district.
- Designed and installed fish measuring signs to Blyth pier and other recreational angling hotspots (Figure 4).
- Created a MCRS sign (relates to Byelaw 3 and minimum landing sizes) that also displays the information in other languages especially to areas that have been noted for undersize catch retention (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Signs and posters designed following RSA stakeholder engagement

Seal-fish interactions and nematodes increase

- Stakeholders were concerned about the increase in seal numbers around the coastline and the impact they have on fish populations. The ‘netsman’s defence’ was removed from national legislation as of 1 March 2021 following amendments to the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 by Schedule 9 of the Fisheries Act 2020 which banned seal shooting and culls in UK waters. Addressing seal populations is not within NIFCA’s remit, but information was passed to other organisations including the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) but due to little research on seal population impacts no new information could be attained. In regard to an increase in nematodes in some stock, there is no systematic monitoring of these parasites. This could form a future research project in partnership with a university to identify differences in parasite burdens, range of species, size of fish etc.

Fixed nets

- Officers have attended locations on the coastline following reports of illegal gill nets and protected finfish being landed. NIFCA reviewed the Fixed Engine Byelaw in 2024, The new byelaw is due to come into force in 2025, under the revised byelaw a permit is required to fish using a net, the byelaw also sets headline depth restrictions for the protection of migratory fish and to reduce the risk of bird bycatch and prohibits the use of nets recreationally.

Declining fish stock

- NIFCA have found it difficult to obtain finfish data from RSA stakeholders, and as result created the NIFCA Species Challenge competition in 2023 to increase communication, trust, and data sharing between NIFCA and stakeholders. This acts as a starting point to understand the species present in the district and an opportunity to record other biometric data with a longer-term aim to propose future research questions to university students and collect further information.



Bass regulation updates

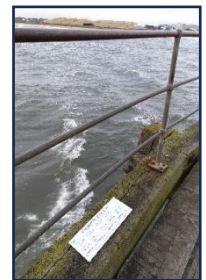
- A European sea bass section on the sea angling page of the NIFCA website was created, bass posters (Figure 4) were distributed to tackle shops and social media posts were published to make it easier for stakeholders to remain updated with any regulation changes.

Anti-social behaviour

- Officers attended meetings concerning anti-social behaviour as a representative to RSA stakeholders, to ensure that activity, if legal, could go ahead as normal. MCRS and Information for Angler signs were installed at sites where anti-social behaviour was present.

Signage

- Signs have been designed and installed around the coastline to spread awareness of MCRS and Information for Angler signs. These signs are regularly checked and replaced by officers if vandalised or removed.



Litter

- The Anglers National Line Recycling Scheme (ANLRS) was promoted on the NIFCA website and social media. Pipe bins were installed to locations that were suggested by local anglers if permission was granted from landowner. Unfortunately, in 2023 the pipe bins were removed as were being misused and vandalised. NIFCA still collect and recycle fishing line and have bins located in the NIFCA office at Blyth, at the Amble and Royal Quays marina and various tackle shops. All bin locations can be found at www.anglers-nlrs.



Crab cart

- The sale of crab cart, notably online, is a concern for some local anglers. Crab cart if being sold commercially would be purchased from either a wholesaler or from a commercial fishing vessel. From commercial returns data the crab cart sales do not seem to be driving an increase in fishing effort as this shellfish would otherwise be sold for human consumption. NIFCA officers' complete regular minimum conservation reference size compliance checks of individuals hand gathering during patrols.

MCRS

- There has been a request to look at increasing the MCRS for cod in the district. Some local sea angling clubs have already raised their minimum landing size for catches above the national MCRS. NIFCA are now collecting fish data from the species challenge and from patrols where we measure fish, this will act as a starting point to identify any trends in cod sizes. We are interested in researching the size at maturity of cod locally.

Bait collection

- Codes of conduct were developed, and signs installed in 2022 for bait collection at the Blyth Estuary. This was a concern for anglers because it was suspected collection was on a commercial scale and therefore may impact recreational collection. Officers visit areas where bait gathering activity occurs, especially during spring tides to speak to collectors and understand more about the activity. NIFCA designed an app to record all intertidal activity to help form an accurate assessment of the current bait collection levels.

NIFCA Species Challenge

NIFCA launched its first Pilot Recreational Sea Angling competition in May 2023 to learn more about fish species present in the district throughout the year.

The entries did not disappoint, with more than 60 competitors submitting catches. During the competition's timeline between May and December 2023, 20 different species were submitted (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Some people not competing were even happy to share their unusual finds including shad and bonito!

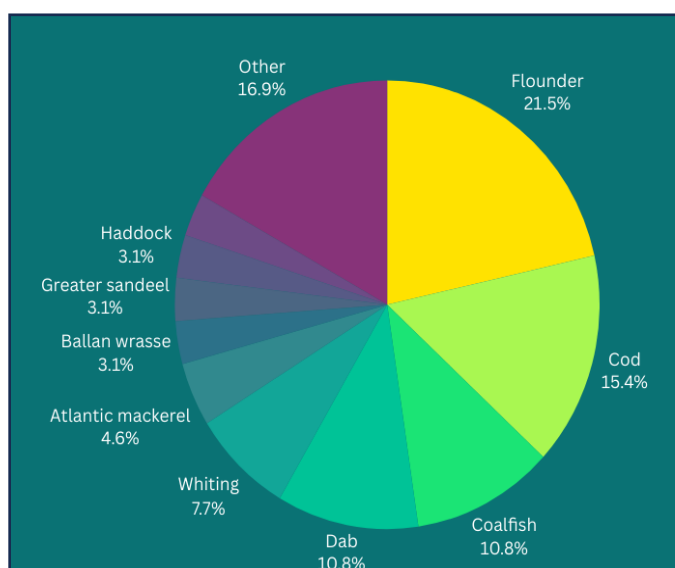


Figure 5 A comparison of the different fish species submitted to NIFCA between May and December 2023.

September was the best month for the number of different species being caught. (11 different species recorded), while the highest number of fish submitted was in May. The winner was announced in early 2024 and presented with a cheque of £150 (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Following the feedback from 2023, NIFCA aimed to run a bigger and better angling species competition this year, introducing monthly prizes, a larger overall winner and an active leaderboard. 2024 NIFCA Species Challenge to date has proved to be more successful than the previous year with 89 competitors, 34 species and over 900 fish submissions. For more information of the 2024 Species Challenge results please visit <https://nifca.gov.uk/recreational-fishing/sea-angling/>



Figure 6 The winner Robbie Robson of the 2023 NIFCA Species Challenge being presented with the annual prize.

Other Engagement Work

RSA focused patrols

Since 2021, the number of sea and shore patrols with a recreational sea angling focus (Figure 5) have increased. Officers use these patrols as an opportunity to talk to stakeholders about legislation changes, catch fluctuations, record concerns, measure fish and distribute leaflets as well as measuring stickers for store boxes.



Figure 7 Increased angling engagement by sea and shore patrols

Tackle shop

NIFCA Officers am to visit tackle shops quarterly to share information and distribute recent publications. The 2024 NIFCA Species Challenge offers a voucher from local tackle shops to the winner and is a great way to engage with stakeholders while supporting local tackle shops.

Working with other between sea angling organisations

The Angling Trust staff and volunteers visited the NIFCA office in January 2024 while on a trip to the Northeast to help build visibility in the area. It was a great opportunity to talk about the Angling Trust' and NIFCA's work with local sea anglers and identify any overlap where either party could offer more involvement or support key issues facing sea anglers in the region.



Figure 8 An opportunity to see if there were areas to work in collaboration with the Angling Trust

Catchwise is also a project that we share a common goal, to understand more about anglers catch and the species being caught by sea anglers. Unfortunately, to date we are unable to collaborate with our fish catch records. NIFCA promote their project as it is still important to gain as much information as possible to ensure future sustainability of sea angling.

Boatlife 2024

NIFCA staff attended the Boatlife conference at Birmingham NEC. It was a fantastic opportunity to speak to many sea anglers at a national event and to understand some of the collective challenges and to hear feedback from those who visited our stand.



Figure 9 Rob Clarke the AIFCA Chief Officer presented on the role of IFCA's at the main stage as part of Sustainability Day

Finfish data set



Figure 10 To aid fish data collection fish are measured by officers during patrols as well as anglers for the Species Challenge competitions (2023-2024)

NIFCA began to record finfish data in May 2023 to bridge an evidence gap of recreational catch information. Since then, we have gained 1,066 fish lengths and locations and hope the numbers of fish being measure with increase annually.

Competitions and matches



Figure 11 Clockwise from top left Amble Open (2024), Newbiggin Sea Angling Club (2023), Amble Open (2023), and Long Benton and Seaton burn Sea Angling Club (2024)

NIFCA attend regional competitions and club matches throughout the year, it is a great way to meet and talk to local anglers. Any points of interest or concerns are recorded and discussed about what officers can do next.

Bass scale project

This new project launched in October 2024 aims to provide baseline information about sea bass population within the NIFCA district. This includes size and age data, which are important tools for understanding the demographics of the fish population.

NIFCA are asking interested anglers to take part in this project by measuring the overall length and girth of the bass caught and removing five scales around the pectoral fin on each side. The scales are then collected or posted to the NIFCA office for analysis. Under magnification the spaces between the dark bands 'circuli' are counted to determine the age of the fish (Figure 13).

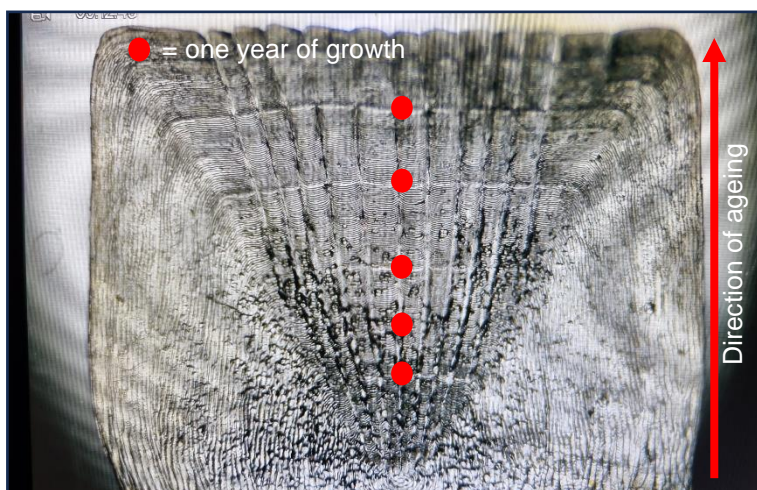


Figure 12 Bass scale removed from a five-year-old bass

With the information provided by anglers, NIFCA hope to gain further understanding in the future of the species northern shift and how local populations fit in with the UK wider populations that have been previously studied.

Monitoring and measuring success

Fair and transparent engagement will be evidenced through;

- a) Increased contact with the recreational sea angling sector through the RSA Forum Group, NIFCA website, Twitter account, Facebook page and via direct contact with NIFCA staff.
- b) A better understanding of our work and its effect on the recreational sea angling sector, demonstrated through the above contact and patrols.
- c) Increased information from the sector; and
- d) Increased participation in public events, calls for information and consultations by the recreational sea angling sector.

Continuous feedback directly from stakeholders means issues will be highlighted and addressed early on.

Next steps

The more stakeholders that are willing to engage with this strategy, the stronger the working relationship becomes, the better the quality of the information gathered and the better represented the recreational sea angling sector will be. It is hoped that through this RSA Strategy, both the RSA sector and NIFCA will benefit from the increased engagement and strengthened working relationships.

For the year ahead NIFCA would like to be more consistent with attending competitions and matches, promote the bass scale project to increase participation, increase the finfish dataset and

continue sea angling focused patrols and above all ensure communication is maintained and improved between NIFCA and stakeholders.

Have your say

If you are a recreational sea angler in the NIFCA district and have any questions or concerns, you would like included in this strategy please contact us by email nifca@nifca.gov.uk or call us on 01670 797 676.

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