

Flapper skate conservation in Scotland January 2021

Information for stakeholders

Summary

Recent surveys have revealed a large concentration of critically endangered flapper skate eggs in the Inner Sound of Skye. The Scottish Government have received advice from NatureScot in relation to the protection of this feature, which is of national importance, and are now considering options to provide additional protection for the species at this site.

Flapper skate

In 2009, it was found that the fish previously known as 'common skate' is actually two distinct species:

- flapper skate (*Dipturus intermedius*)
- blue skate (*Dipturus flossada*)

Flapper skates occur in the northern North Sea and off Scotland's north-west coast. The common skate complex is on the OSPAR Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats List and the list of Priority Marine Features. Furthermore they considered 'Critically Endangered' globally and in European waters by the IUCN. Common skates were historically one of the most abundant skates and rays in the North-east Atlantic and widely distributed in the seas surrounding the British Isles, however their range has reduced significantly and catch rates declined throughout the 20th century.

Flapper skate eggs take around 18 months to hatch and are sensitive to a number of types of disturbance during that time. NatureScot have advised that the volume of eggs observed suggests that a number of females are using the same egg nursery. Furthermore the eggs are at different stages of development, suggesting that this site has been used for at least two consecutive years.

NatureScot has advised that this is the first flapper skate egg-laying habitat of this scale to be identified in Scotland and is of national importance for conservation of this species. They recommended that the Scottish Government implements permanent protection for the eggs, with an interim measure in place from 01 April 2021, when the current seasonal fisheries restrictions end.

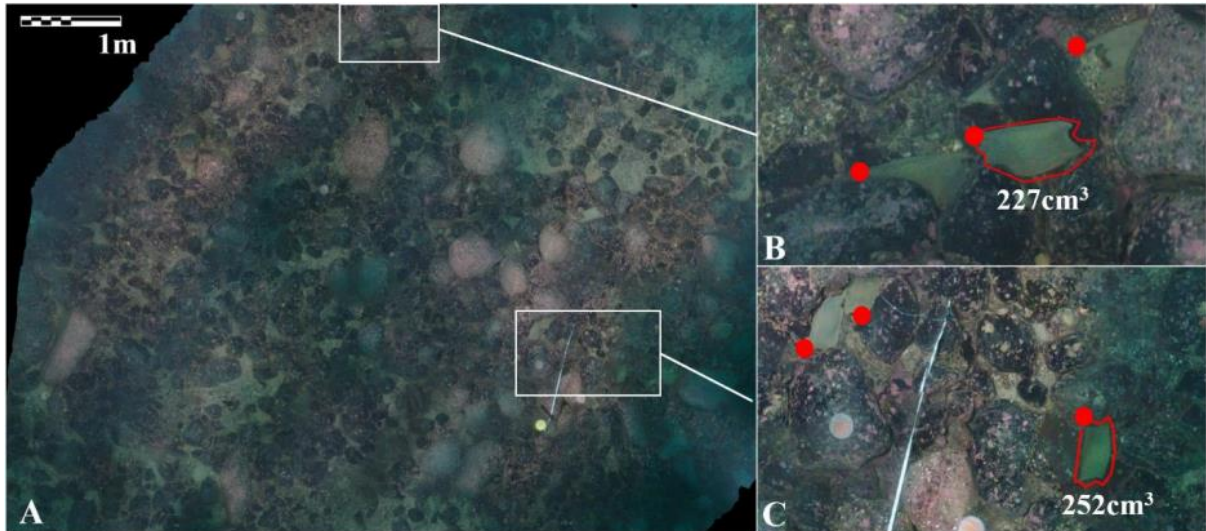


Figure 1: A mosaic of egg-laying habitat with the Inner Sound, derived from photogrammetry. B Inset of egg case cluster lodged in crevices, featuring smallest egg case. C inset of egg case cluster featuring largest measured egg case (from Dodd *et al.*, *In prep.*)

Seabed impacts

NatureScot has provided advice to the Scottish Government outlining the pressures that flapper skate eggs are sensitive to, including surface abrasion, incidental catch, intentional removal, siltation changes, physical change to habitat and chemical contamination. The marine activities identified associated with the pressures are fishing with mobile bottom-contacting gear, fishing with static gear, aquaculture, installation of marine infrastructure, anchorages and marine deposit sites.

Stakeholder Engagement

Due to the urgent nature of this issue, we are considering interim protection for flapper skate eggs in this location. We wish to engage with key industry representatives to inform development of interim management proposals. The meeting will discuss the detail of a potential boundary for interim management, as well as the relative socioeconomic importance of the area for different marine industries, with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of challenges for stakeholders. This will inform advice to ministers. We will subsequently consider permanent protection for flapper skate eggs in this location, and will undertake a full stakeholder engagement process and public consultation prior to that being implemented.

Location

Figure 2 below shows feature records for flapper skate eggs in the region between Scalpay and the Crowlin Islands, including the proposed boundary under consideration for the interim protection measures. The map also shows maerl beds and flame shell beds, which are both Priority Marine Features for which the Scottish Government is currently considering protection.

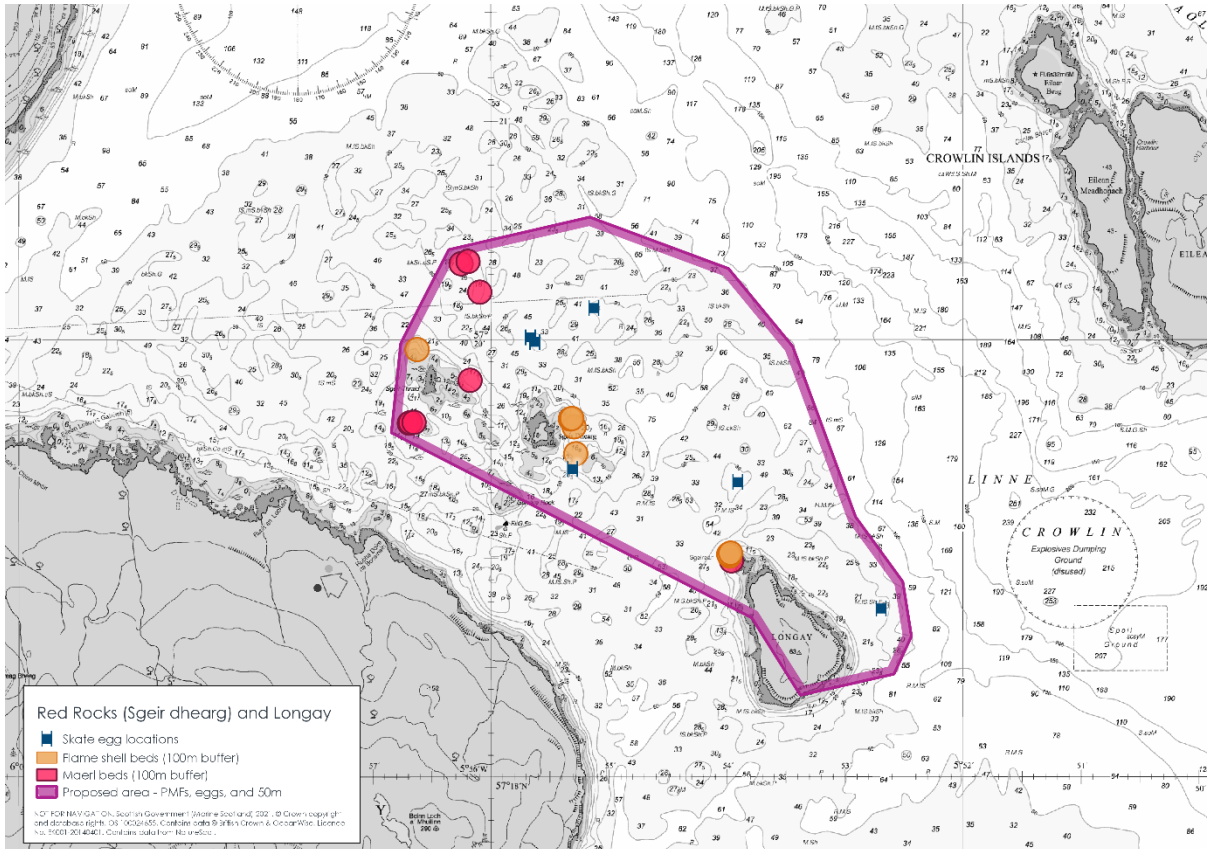


Figure 2: A map showing location of flapper skate eggs in the Inner Sound of Skye along with other sensitive Priority Marine Features in the area, and a proposed interim management boundary.