Fisheries

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah speak.

I am proud to represent Brixham, which lands the highest value catch in England, worth £26 million. I am pleased that the Minister has already visited our fantastic new fish market, and I look forward to welcoming him back next year. He knows how important shellfish are to the industry locally, not only because 99% of scallops are landed for processing in the area, creating local jobs, but because the majority are then exported, adding significantly to our balance of payments.

Scallop fishermen, however, are under considerable pressure. They are not regulated by quotas, but by limitations to their effort through their kilowatt days at sea. They are therefore seeking an increase in the effort available to them in area VII and, as the Minister knows, the French have 5 million unused kilowatt days. Earlier this year some dangerous intimidation of Brixham fishermen occurred around the baie de Seine, arising from French grievance in relation to a closed season that our fishermen do not have to respect. It strikes us, therefore, that there is a lot of room for an arrangement of mutual benefit. I hope that in summing up the Minister will inform us of any progress.

In the next round of negotiations, will the Minister also make representations on behalf of Brixham scallop fishermen for an increase in their effort, which is vital to Brixham's local economy? Many people will make the case that scallop dredging is too environmentally damaging. I receive letters and e-mails saying that we should abandon it in favour of diver-caught scallops, but they would then be wholly unaffordable for most people, and that would completely destroy an industry. My hon. Friend Dr Offord, who is no longer in his place, referred to the work of Callum Roberts. Anyone who has read his moving work, "The Unnatural History of the Sea", will know that another way forward, which we are adopting, is to find areas of sanctuary.

In my area, there is a proposal for a large marine conservation zone of about 250 sq km, to be known as the Skerries. That will join a special area of conservation and will become a very large area. I welcome MCZs, but my concern is that we already have a successful inshore potting agreement in that area. Those who are part of the potting industry and use static gear in that area already operate in an environmentally sustainable way under that agreement. Understandably, they are worried about the impact. If it is too restrictive, and the area becomes a no-take zone, not only would that be unnecessary, it would destroy their industry. Will the Minister update those in my constituency who use static gear on the likely management arrangements in the proposed MCZ? The areas and their management will be announced next year.

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Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall, Conservative)

Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes a scallop dredger will stir up feed to attract other fish, and that it does not always destroy the ground?
Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. We all want scallop dredging to be removed from environmentally sensitive parts of the sea bed, but that should not be overly restrictive, and I agree that we do not want people to have a blanket idea that all scallop dredging is terrible if we want people to be able to afford scallops, and the industry to be maintained. My hon. Friend made the fantastic point that the issue is not just about conserving fish; it is about conserving our fishing communities, which are so vital in all coastal areas.

In closing, I pay tribute to Brixham coastguard, which is due to close, to its work on behalf of communities, and to all those whom they have helped to keep safe at sea.

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