



Studland Bay Consultation - RYA Position

March 2021

The following position has been developed based on meetings and correspondence with local clubs and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and in response to the both the MMO's assessment of the site and the consultation meetings chaired by the Dorset Coast Forum on 18th and 25th March 2021.

Context

The Royal Yachting Association (RYA), along with our member clubs, recognises the need to put in place measures to better protect sensitive marine habitats, as long as these measures are proportionate and take account of both conservation objectives and existing socio-economic activities that place a high value on recreation in coastal waters. To be effective, conservation measures at Studland Bay will need to use limited resources efficiently. A key element to achieving this is gaining the support of the boating community that uses the area. This will require engagement to go beyond superficial consultation to involve community representatives in transparent decision making. The benefits of community participation in decision making have been demonstrated over the last 20 years on coastal projects for the Solent, Plymouth Sound, The Exe and Poole Harbour- when properly resourced.

The RYA recognises the scientific consensus around damage caused to seagrass by some boating activities, primarily anchoring and mooring. Monitoring will be needed to ensure conservation measures at the site are an efficient use of resources. Importantly, monitoring will be required to enable inefficient practices (e.g. in the operation of No Anchoring Areas) to be identified and management adapted to allow improvement.

The RYA recommends that measures introduced should be voluntary, alongside a clear programme of user engagement and promotion that recognises how boaters receive information and act on navigation and conservation issues. This should include clear, visible marking of sensitive areas both on charts and on the water, alongside provision of conservation information. Any advanced or conventional moorings provided need to be clearly marked in situ to indicate the size of vessel that they are designed to support.

The RYA considers that banning boating activity at Studland Bay is counterproductive, as it would lead to resentment and not inspire recreational user support for wider conservation of habitats and species. It then may lead to conservation measures being ignored. It could obstruct education to promote the protection of the environment that recreational users enjoy, as it will not enable users to gain experience of using sensitive areas. Any approach to safeguard the habitats of Studland Bay must lead to wider user support for their protection. Conservation measures need to address the threat to the site and implement efficient protection that addresses the vulnerability of the seagrass habitats. Alongside the conservation importance of the site, Studland Bay is an important area for recreational boating, a place of refuge in bad weather and a rest-stop for craft on long distance cruises. A balance needs to be made between conservation priorities and the continued use of the site.

The threat to habitat at Studland is inappropriate anchoring and mooring practices which damage the seagrass beds. The RYA considers that the solution to the problem is a joint strategy involving two simultaneous solutions. Firstly, the establishment of a mooring area that uses Advanced eco-

Mooring Systems that prevent damage to the seagrass; secondly, the establishment of an anchoring area where recreational users can safely stop without damaging the seagrass beds.

However, the options presented by the MMO to the consultation meetings on 18th and 25th March did not fully consider both solutions together, and the discussion which followed was concerning for several reasons:

- The MMO stated socio-economic issues, such as recreational use, are secondary to conservation. This position misses the point of sustainably managing the site successfully: as it is the recreational use of the site that is seen as the cause of the impacts to conservation interests, and it is this use that needs to be comprehensively addressed to ensure successful conservation of the site's habitats (i.e. conservation and socio-economic use are linked)
- The area proposed as a voluntary no anchor zone encompasses the entirety of safe anchorage area within the bay. The south-west corner of the bay is the only area with suitable depth and shelter from the prevailing south-westerly winds, so does not balance conservation with safe recreational use
- The MMO were unable to offer any mitigation of this impact through supporting the installation of moorings at the same time as implementing the No Anchor Zone, as a result conservation measures using both solutions are incomplete (awaiting the completion of a "Moorings Strategy") and are unlikely to be effective
- It is unclear how a monitoring programme will be developed, and funded, to confirm the benefits or otherwise of the proposed control measures and allow adaptive management of the site. It was noted by the RYA and others at the consultation meeting that merely counting boats will not suffice. Practical habitat monitoring of the seabed will be required to ensure conservation measures are effectively protecting the vulnerable habitat over several years
- It is unclear how enforcement will be managed, if indeed there will be any enforcement measures
- The timeline for implementation (Summer 2021) is untenable. Previous experience of coastal zone management suggests a minimum of 2 years to consult, agree management measures, and implement with the support of the local community
- The speed of implementation of a no-anchoring zone by summer 2021, will leave little (if any) time to raise awareness and educate the local community before introduction. Given this is likely to be the summer boating season after easing Covid lock down rules, there will be large numbers of users wishing to enjoy the site, many of whom may be unaware of the situation. This is a recipe for confusion, poor communication and, importantly, otherwise avoidable damage to the seagrass habitat
- It was noted at the meeting that this is the first instance where non-licensable activities are being considered in respect of a Marine Conservation Zone. It is therefore critical that the process and the outcome are a success, and an example of best practice in applying suitable management measures to ensure comprehensive protection of seagrass around the UK coast

Alongside the conservation value of the seagrass beds, Studland Bay provides important cultural ecosystem services for recreation and a safe haven for craft during bad weather. The RYA believes that for protection of habitats and associated biodiversity to work, there is a requirement to base

any management option on information provision that actually reaches target groups, and a joint management and engagement approach that enables boat owners to understand and promote protection amongst their peer group.

Adopting a system dependent on enforcement, without the consent of the majority of the boating community and without the necessary resources, will be as effective as no enforcement at all. As noted above, the RYA advocates a largely voluntary system backed by information provision, proactive engagement with users and an appropriate forum (either new or as part of existing initiatives) for joint management between statutory agencies, clubs, commercial concerns and user representative organisations. We would be happy to engage with such a forum to contribute to a suitable management plan that addresses conservation concerns.

Recommendations

The RYA has a positive view of the opportunity at Studland Bay. This is the first MCZ where non-licensable activities are being considered and managed. We are keen to see proper protection of the seagrass beds for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, coastal protection, and recreational purposes.

The MMO should be aiming for a clear demonstration of best practice in consultation and engagement with local communities, to get their buy-in to management measures and provide support for enforcement at a local level.

Our recommended approach is:

- Following the current consultation meetings, to set up a representative stakeholder group that represents the interests of local residents, local authorities, landowners (of both the coast and the seabed), statutory bodies, boaters, divers and other recreational groups
- To task that group with agreeing how the area needs to be zoned in order to protect and enhance both the habitat and recreational activities
- To seek funding for mitigation measures, such as advanced moorings, that will enable continued use of the bay whilst meeting the conservation objectives
- To reach agreement as to how the mitigation measures will be maintained and funded in the long term
- To communicate the measures to all interested parties in a positive manner
- To introduce the management measures on a timeline that allows for the above consultation and communication process

There is no reason why all of the interest groups' objectives cannot be met with the application of some effort, and some funding. This will ensure conservation objectives are met and that Studland Bay remains a tourist destination that is enjoyed by thousands each year.

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