Guidance on habitat scoring where MPAs with seabed features are present: relating to section 3.3.1 of the MCS Wild Capture Methodology (version 2 June 2018, available here)

This document has been prepared to provide guidance for ratings assessors and stakeholders when scoring habitat impacts where MPAs with seabed features are present, specifically when applying section 3.3.1 of the MCS Wild Capture Methodology. It aims to clarify various terms and provides definitions relating to this section of the methodology to help ensure it is interpreted and applied consistently.

This guidance does not apply to MPAs that have been designated for non-habitat purposes such as pelagic species like dolphin and porpoise. The methodology evaluates impacts of the fishery on such species in section 3.3.1 (tables 16 and 17), as such there is currently no specific mechanism relating to MPAs for these species in the methodology.

Scale of assessment

As stated in the methodology, the scale of most fishery ratings assessments is based on the wider stock area and is therefore generally a very large geographical area, for example the entire North Sea. At such a scale, it is difficult for MCS to identify if fishing is occurring in an MPA[s] or not and if it is, to what extent.

Defining 'high likelihood'

The methodology states that 'where available information clearly indicates **a high likelihood that a fishery/fleet at the scale of the assessment is occurring in an MPA,** the MPA tab in the above matrix (sic) is applied to score habitat impacts', referring to table 15, page 29 of the methodology. The statement 'high likelihood... at the scale of the assessment' is defined as follows:

There is evidence (e.g. recent catch reports or VMS data) of significant bottom towed fishing activity (>=20% of the catch or effort or coverage) from the fleet[s] under the unit of assessment occurring in an MPA or MPAs designated for seabed features.

Scenarios

To better facilitate understanding of scoring of habitat impacts in MPAs, the following scenarios have been identified:

Scenario one*: *less than 20% of the fishery is operating in MPAs

Where there is not a high likelihood that a fishery/fleet at the scale of the assessment is operating in an MPA, we use the default habitat score for that gear. For example, demersal otter trawling over mud is scored 0.5 based on the habitat matrix (table 15). In these scenarios, we recognise there may still be some bottom towed fishing operating within MPAs, and may refer to this within the text of specific ratings, and also encourage the supply chain to investigate their specific sources. See **Supply chain recommendations** below.

Scenario two: 20% or more of the fishery is operating in designated or managed MPAs

Where there is a high likelihood that a fishery/fleet at the scale of the assessment is operating in a designated or managed MPA**,** the MPA column in the habitat matrix (table 15) is applied to score habitat impacts. For example, demersal otter trawling is scored 1 based on the habitat matrix (table 15).

Scenario three - Default red ratings: 20% or more of the fishery is operating in managed MPAs and fishing illegally or there is concern for the features or objectives of the site

Where there is a high likelihood that a fishery/fleet at the scale of the assessment is occurring in a designated and managed MPA and:

(i) There is insufficient evidence[1] demonstrating that the activity is not damaging to the protected feature[s] or a threat to the conservation objectives of the site[s]; or
(ii) A significant proportion[2] of the fishing activity is operating illegally[3] in an MPA;

A critical fail is triggered, and a default red rating is applied.

Supply chain recommendations:

In cases where there is not a high likelihood of fishing within MPAs at the scale of the assessment (as defined above), but there may still be bottom towed fishing operations within some MPAs designated for seabed features within the unit of assessment, MCS encourages the supply chain to identify if their specific sources are being caught from within the MPAs.

If sources are suspected of coming from within designated and managed MPAs, MCS advises businesses to:

(i) Establish if the fishing activity is operating legally inside a designated and managed MPA.
(ii) Request evidence (such as justification of management measures or an Environmental Impact Assessment or appropriate risk assessment[4]) from the fishery or managing authority to demonstrate that the activity is not damaging to protected features or a threat to the conservation objectives of the site[s].

Where suitable evidence demonstrating the above cannot be provided or the activity is operating illegally inside the MPA, MCS would consider fish from these sources as red rated and therefore Fish to Avoid and would encourage businesses to source alternatives.

Note MCS does not envisage developing specific ratings profiles for fisheries taking place in individual MPAs at this stage.

MCS is aware that because the required information is not routinely made available to commercial buyers, it is difficult for them to currently know precisely where fish have been caught and if there is overlap with any MPAs. As monitoring practices and technologies continue to improve, and as supply chain information and traceability systems are better developed, we anticipate that it will become easier to integrate such information into seafood buying decisions. Likewise, as MPA management and monitoring improves, it will become easier for the industry and managers to demonstrate to buyers that fish being procured has not been caught using fishing methods that are damaging to MPAs.

MCS strongly encourages commercial buyers to support the ongoing designation of MPAs and swift implementation of robust management measures inside these areas so that these important habitats can be afforded proper protection as quickly as possible, and play their role in recovering the health and function of our seas.

[1] Evidence here generally refers to publicly available information including reports or assessments from relevant managing authorities, scientific research organisations, or conservation advisory bodies. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Habitat Risk Assessments (HRAs) would be examples of such evidence.
[2] Significant proportion refers to 20% or more of the fishery at the scale of the assessment.
[3] Illegal operations here refers to incursions into MPAs which are contrary to agreed and active management measures for the site.
[4] For example, the risk based approach adopted for European Marine Sites.