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Clew Bay Marine Forum charts the way ahead

The Clew Bay Marine Forum 'grew' out of the CB Oyster Co-Op who recognised the need to encompass a broader range of views and activities than were covered by the Co -Ops remit. A forum was established to initiate links with other sectors operating independently within the Bay which now includes potfishermen, marine services, fish buyers, processors, manufacturers and mussel, oyster, scallop, trout and salmon farmers. Links were also established with agencies and authorities with responsibility for the marine.

The Forum established areas of common interest and objectives and a development plan was drafted in consultation with the different sectors. A work programme was designed with the potential to stimulate innovation within the Bay and through a more diverse and dynamic fisheries and aquaculture sector, result in the creation of wealth and employment in the region.

Local view

The Forum is the first local initiative to encompass the whole of Clew Bay from a variety of user perspectives. It had to adopt a flexible and broad outlook, which recognised, and worked on, the complex series of relationships and commonalties that exist within the Bay.

Clew Bay has a long tradition of people who make their living from the sea and this is prevalent in rural coastal areas that have not enjoyed the employment benefits of urban development. Some examples of these interrelationships: the boatmen that fish pots during the week, take anglers out at the weekend and also work for the fishfarms. The man who dredges oysters, fishes pots, farms oysters, cuts seaweed and gathers winkles.

These crossovers, which are not unique to Clew Bay, lead to multi-sectoral understandings, which have been an asset in the development of the forum. It is important that policy continues to allow this diversity, better still that it fully understands and promotes it. The integrated nature of activities of many marine operators provides vital year round viability. The challenge is to provide policies and legislation that are in keeping with that diversity, so that efforts to regularise activities do not compartmentalise them and in so doing become divisive. Compliance with sympathetic legislation is considered highly desirable and the amount of voluntary time that marine users are devoting to this process is proof of that.

Objectives

Continue to monitor water quality for existing and potential sources of pollution to ensure retention of 'A' classification water.

Facilitate a broad-based range of marine activities and act upon sustainable development opportunities.

Support safety & training

Encourage local input of fishing, aquaculture, tourism, leisure and marine groups into Integrated Coastal Zone Management policy for the area.

Work Programme and trial projects

In Jan 2001 a co-ordinated weekly sampling programme was established for biotoxin, bacterial and phytoplankton monitoring. Samples are collected by boat from 5 - 7 production areas, avoiding tidal influences, preventing costly product recalls and reducing the effort required by farmers to provide samples.

With BIM support the forum activated three trial projects in 2001:

(a) Pacific oyster bottom trials. In partnership with the CBOC the Forum are reseeding derelict native oyster beds with juvenile pacific oysters. The trial aims to assess size, mortality, suitable seabed, growth rates, and viability. The trial is ongoing and early indications are encouraging.

(b) Juvenile lobster stock enhancement trials. In partnership with the potfishermen, the Forum have released 1500 stage 6 juvenile lobsters on artificial and natural reefs. Diver monitoring of these reefs is ongoing and we expect that over 10,000 will be released in 2002.

(c) Scallop mesocosm pediveliger and settled mesh trials were carried out to establish a method of providing juvenile scallop spat for local scallop farmers to grow to maturity. Whilst the mesocosm was disappointing, the results from the settled mesh were encouraging and we will build on this in 2002.

Projects 2002

The 2002 will see the continuation of the sampling programme and completion of the existing trials. Work will also be done on growing small pacific and native oyster seed to reseeding size, a monitored V notching scheme is also expected to get underway this year and artificial reef creation using wrecks for the tourism, leisure and fisheries sectors is also likely to find local favour.

Several research projects are planned which will include collation of existing data and provision of baseline information, mapping of bay activities, risk assessment of bacterial and viral contaminants and hydrographic, current and dispersal modeling for the bay.

Integrated Coastal Zone Policy structures (CLAMS)

Minister Fahey launched the Clew Bay CLAMS document in Westport in December 2001. Aquaculture has replaced the traditional fisheries to become the largest financial sector in the Bay. For Clew Bay the CLAMS process represents the first piece in the puzzle of an Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) policy framework.

Inshore Fisheries Management Committee (IFMC)

Four active groups CB Oyster Co-Op, CB Pot-fishermen's Association, West Mayo Fisheries Development Co-Op and Clare Island Fishermen represent the Fisheries sector within Clew Bay. These groups will provide a strong base for the establishment of an Inshore Fisheries Management Committee for the area and we are awaiting the provision of adequate resources to make this a reality and provide the next piece in the ICZM policy framework.

Tourism and Leisure

The Forum will soon include representatives of commercial marine tourism and marine leisure users. It is expected that areas with potential for development will be identified and that funding and work schedules can be established to enhance the value of these sectors. We are not aware of formal structures (such as CLAMS or IFMC) for the tourism and leisure interests.

When all of these sector groups are operational, they feed into the Forum to offer the 'feet wet' representation in an ICZM group.

'Feet Wet', the Agencies and 'Feet Dry' partnership

The Forum has been described as a 'feet wet' organisation. To date the membership has concentrated on a marine user perspective, which has encouraged stakeholder participation, led to better understandings and the formation of alliances. The work programmes have enabled marine stakeholders to establish increased environmental awareness and credibility and this has helped to provide commonalties with a wider selection of external interest groups.

Liaisons with the various agencies that are responsible for aspects of the marine are being established as part of the three-way interaction required in reaching consensus on direction and policy.

Liaison with the 'feet dry' stakeholders of the Bay is an essential part of the growth of this process and meetings between Forum members and anti-fin fish farming groups are anticipated in the near future. However, the establishment of a widely representative onshore stakeholders group is needed for the longer term. The organisation of this group is thought to be outside the Forums current resources, but an answer may lie in the County Development Board Forum structures and this is an avenue we intend to explore in the near future.

Evolution

The evolutionary phase of the Forum partnership, shows signs of having the ability to combine industry and agency forces and add focus in tackling the challenges of the marine environment to realise more of its potential.

The further evolution of this process is to complete the 'feet wet' representation, meet with all of the Agencies and the 'feet dry' representation (when formed) and see what we can agree on and what needs more discussion.

Partnership funding for the group has come from industry, development companies and agencies. As this process develops the value to all sectors holds much promise, but there is no denying that the start up phase of this type of ground level approach requires widespread local support, a leap of faith, financial support and time.

* Niall O'Boyle is Development Manager of the Clew Bay Forum. He has written this article for "Aquaculture Ireland" which is on sale from next weekend.

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