



Pot markers: is it time to change the law?

After fouling a pot marker line off the Irish coast, Norman Kean counts the cost, looks at best practice, and happily wields his Tudor Axe

In the Letters pages of *YM* (Apr 16), Tony Barlow made a plea for regulation of pot marking buoys. He suggested that they should be lit, set well away from sailing routes and have their positions registered on a dedicated website.

There is little chance of that coming to pass, but Mr Barlow hit the nail on the head when he mentioned floating lines. These are the greatest single cause of entanglement, and restricting their use would eliminate most of the problem at a stroke.

Tony Barlow pointed out that in two years the RNLI had rescued 1,197 people with fouled propellers. That represents about £2.5m, plus Coastguard helicopter mission costs – in Ireland, around €15,000 per flight.

RIGHT: Norman's disabled Coire Usage is towed alongside by the Castletownbere lifeboat

In September 2015, off Bantry Bay, we became entangled in a pot line when we inadvertently sailed between two buoys connected by 5.2m of 12mm floating line. It jammed between skeg and rudder. We could sail and motor but we were towing a string of pots by the rudder and we couldn't steer. With a Force 6 onshore wind, we drifted to within 30m of the cliffs before our anchor, and (mainly) the pot line, stopped us. We had put in a

Pan-Pan call, and were towed to safety by Castletownbere lifeboat. Our warmest thanks go again to Coxswain Brian O'Driscoll and the crew of RNLB *Annette Hutton*. But between damage and donation we were seriously out of pocket, we almost lost the boat and we could have lost our lives.

We know who laid the (unidentified) buoys, but is there any prospect of recompense, for the RNLI, the Coastguard, or us? Not the slightest chance.



How pots should be marked

What does the law have to say? There is a uniform set of rules for all EU inshore waters. Buoys must be durably tagged with the number of the fishing vessel. That's all. Enforcement is patchy, and here in Ireland, non-existent. Anonymous buoys, sometimes with 12-15m of excess floating line attached, are commonplace. But the law in the EU does not recognise pot lines as a hazard to navigation. The Department of Transport in Ireland issued a Marine Notice in June 2016, warning of the risks and offering guidelines, with no legal force or policing they are toothless and highly unlikely to be heeded.

In Iceland, the Coastguard takes a more robust approach. Fishermen who lay booby-traps of floating line are fined and



PHOTOS: GERALDINE HENNIGAN UNLESS MARKED OTHERWISE



PHOTO: HALMAR ZACHARIASSEN

On the left, the marker that caught us with its ridiculously long 5.2m floating line. But within minutes I knew that the owner of the buoy on the right, found on a beach, was Faroese fisherman Poul Zachariassen

Having been cut free by the RNLI and a fishing boat, Coire Usige was towed into Castletownbere



have their gear confiscated, because everybody agrees that what they've done is stupid and dangerous.

In the Faroes too, seamanship prevails. On our local beach, I recently found a two-foot buoy, fairly weedy but clearly marked HELLUKLETTUR KG472, with a phone number and traces of reflective tape. It was the work of a moment on Google to find that the owner of this buoy and the 10m boat that lost it, is Poul Zachariassen from the Faroese island of Borðoy. The buoy was instantly traceable, and much bigger and more visible than a typical Irish one. I wrote to Poul, and got a very friendly reply from his son Hjalmar, who told me that incidents like ours are very rare in the Faroes, and floating ropes are seldom used. He said: 'It surely sounds like a very serious

issue that can put many people in harm's way.'

Our experience cruising France and Spain suggests a relatively orderly picture. The pilot book says that off the French coast south of Noirmoutier buoys are connected by surface lines with small floats. We've seen two such set-ups, but that's all. Otherwise, the lines seem to go straight down to the pots. Buoys at each end of the same string of pots are

often the same distinct colour.

In Australia, a weight of at least 500g (1lb) must be attached at least 5m below a pot buoy. In the USA, Chesapeake Bay is crowded with both leisure craft and crab pots, but the buoys can bump along a hull without the risk of fouling, because by law the lines must be weighted, and they hang straight down. Fair enough, there are almost no tidal streams, whereas here, two buoys must

often be tied in tandem. But the cord between them need be no more than 1m long and 6mm diameter, and it need not float (this is a common arrangement in Galicia). The two buoys are obviously connected, there's little chance of inadvertently sailing between them, propeller-mounted cutters stand a chance of doing their job, the cord is easier to cut, and it may even break under the strain of holding a fouled boat.

PHOTO: GRAHAM SNOOK/YYM



Many other countries have a more yacht-friendly pot-marking policy

Changes must be made

What's to be done? The law should be amended, and enforced. Sailing organisations, backed up by the RNLI, should lobby Governments. But that will take time.

How to free yourself from a fouled line



How to free yourself from a fouled line

PHOTOS: GERALDINE HENNIGAN



A grappling hook helps you get hold of the offending line

It's best to avoid becoming fouled so keep a sharp lookout and be especially watchful for buoys that might be tied in tandem. Keep them upwind and uptide. At night, stay well offshore. If you are snagged, does a knife lashed to a boathook do any good? Seldom, in our experience – it's not rigid enough, and too many people have been hurt, even killed, by succumbing to the temptation to go overboard with a knife in rough water.

Time to wield the axe

To deal with fouled propellers, the old RNLI lifeboats used to carry a device known in the Institution as the Tudor Axe. It was a shaped slab of stainless steel, 5mm thick and about 280mm across, with scalloped cutting blades all round and a hook sharpened on the inside and outside edges. When needed, it was screwed into the end of a pole.

Such a device can be easily made up by any machine shop, and the pole could also be a boathook, a deck scrubber or a dinghy oar. An added shackle enables a line to be attached. A small throwing grapnel on a stout line completes the gear. Use the grapnel to snare the fouling line and winch it in so that it's visible and within reach of the Axe. If sawing at it fails, bring the sharp hook to bear, and if necessary winch in the axe line while keeping firm hold of the pole, because when the pot line parts, the Axe will tend to fly home,



The keen-bladed axe makes short work of the pot marker's floating line

Chain spliced into a rope is useful for mooring, but it can also be used to snare a fouled floating line



PHOTO: GERALDINE HENNIGAN

shredding sails and crew on its way. When not in use, the Axe needs to be muffled in a protective wooden or leather case, and when mounted, its connection to the pole must be absolutely rigid.

Another nifty trick for grappling a fouling line under the boat is to carry a short length of chain with rope spliced into each end of it. Drop the chain bight over the bow and sweep it aft to catch the submerged pot line.

Cutting the line of course doesn't free a fouled prop. But it does free a snagged boat, which for sailing vessels is normally the important bit. Abandoned and disconnected pots are bad news for crustaceans, but don't let that stop you – there's another buoy on the other end of the string of pots. Chop away with a clear conscience. ▲



Your prop may still be fouled but, once free, at least you can sail clear of danger



This fearsome-looking device, nicknamed a Tudor Axe, is the best way to deal with a fouled line