

Press release

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Government report confirms need for a Marine Bill

The launch today of the government report *Charting Progress* assessing the state of the UK's marine environment is broadly welcomed by Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link), a powerful alliance of conservation groups.

Eighty six per cent, 19 out of 22, of the key factors or pressures on the UK's seas identified in the report are deemed to be unacceptable or have room for improvement. Perhaps of greatest concern are the numbers of factors or pressures deemed to be unacceptable – nearly a third. These include; climate change; commercial fishing; decline in some sea bird populations; by-catch; the introduction of non-native species and beach litter.

Ongoing adverse effects of human activity in the marine environment highlighted in the report range from over-exploitation of fish stocks and damage to sea bed habitats, to the impacts of climate change. Plankton, the starting point of the marine food chain, have been so severely affected that it has been described as a regime shift and this poses a real threat to the balance and integrity of the marine ecosystem. Symptoms of this shift are starting to be seen, for example, with the failure of whole bird colonies to breed in Shetland last summer.

"This report is official recognition of what marine conservationists have been saying for the last 20 years. The seas around the UK, whilst rich in sea life and habitats, are in a poor state of health," said Ben Stafford, Chairman of the Link Marine Campaign. "Link believes the data shows that the state of our seas is deteriorating – through climate change, over fishing and unmonitored pollution in particular – and that the seas are now in crisis. It is time for the government to take immediate action to introduce a Marine Bill rather than wait for yet more evidence of declines in wildlife.

"The Marine Bill must include a strategic planning system as well as stronger protection for our marine wildlife. Link believes that this will be an important step towards the sustainable management of our marine economy."

In addition to identifying the main known threats to UK seas the report recognises that current knowledge is lacking on the status of many species and habitats. This report provides a good starting point but further work is needed to better understand the state of our seas.



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"Bringing voluntary organisations in the UK together to protect and enhance wildlife and landscape, and to further the quiet enjoyment and appreciation of the countryside"

Chair: Hilary Allison, Director: Alexia Wellbelove

Ben Stafford continued: "The report highlights important gaps in our knowledge about the marine environment, but these must not be used as an excuse for inaction. We are calling on the government to take urgent measures to protect the marine environment, including the introduction of a comprehensive Marine Bill."

Other report findings include:

- Around two-thirds of the main fish stocks in UK waters are over-exploited, with cod and mackerel suffering reduced reproductive capacity in certain regions.
- There is evidence to suggest that PCBs accumulate in the blubber and mercury in the liver and reduce the ability of marine mammals to fight disease
- 86 per cent (19 out of 22) of the key factors or pressures identified in the report are deemed to be unacceptable or have room for improvement.

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Editor's notes

- Wildlife and Countryside Link is a coalition of the UK's major environmental non-governmental organisations. The Link marine campaign is led by the Marine Conservation Society; the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society; the Wildlife Trusts and WWF-UK, and is supported by other Link members including Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust; the Council for British Archaeology; the Herpetological Conservation Trust; the Shark Trust; the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.
- In the 2003-4 parliamentary session, 315 MPs from all parties signed an Early Day Motion calling for comprehensive legislation to protect the marine environment – this was the third most signed EDM of that session.
- In July 2004, the government-led Review of Marine Nature Conservation published 16 recommendations. These included a trial of marine spatial planning, the recognition and conservation of a network of important sites and the complete overhaul of marine species protection legislation.
- The Prime Minister last September promised marine legislation in his speech to the 10th Anniversary of the Prince of Wales's Business and the Environment Forum.
- For the Celtic Sea (the western approaches to Britain and Ireland), it is estimated that, between August 1992 and March 1994, the total annual by-catch of 2,200 porpoises was 6.2 per cent of the estimated population there. When scientific advice states that cetacean populations can only withstand by-catch levels of up to 1.7 per

cent (or less in more threatened populations), this high proportion raises serious cause for concern.

- Catches of salmon in the North Atlantic dropped by more than 80 per cent between 1970 and the end of the 20th century. In the past few years there has been a steady decline in salmon numbers in British waters.
- Just under eight million seabirds from 25 species, including kittiwakes, gannets, puffins and terns, breed annually on British shores. Millions more waders, gulls, divers and seaducks winter in and around our coasts and estuaries. Since the mid-1980s, there has been a decline in the numbers of three of the five tern species breeding in Britain and Ireland. In addition, sandeel shortages have been a major factor in the decline of Arctic skuas (down 37 per cent), kittiwakes (23 per cent decline) and shags (25 per cent drop) in the past 15 years, and the island refuges of many seabird species are under threat from introduced predators such as rats, cats and mink. (*Seabird 2000*: http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/seabird_2000.asp).

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