

Wildlife & Countryside Link is calling for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas

Marine Bill

Parliamentary Bulletin

A Future for our Seas – Marine Spatial Planning

February 2006

Campaigning for a Marine Bill

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) has been campaigning for many years for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas. The UK's seas are extraordinarily rich in wildlife, from seabirds, whales and dolphins to important fish stocks and coldwater corals. But this wildlife is poorly protected, and under increasing pressure as offshore activities proliferate and climate change disturbs the marine ecosystem. New legislation must close the gap between protection of wildlife on land and at sea, and bring coherence to the planning of the many activities happening in the marine environment. The Government is now working on its draft Marine Bill, and we expect a consultation in March on what it should contain. Link is contributing fully to this process.

This is the second in a series of Marine Bill Bulletins for parliamentarians, to let you know what our key priorities for the bill are, and how you can support our Marine Campaign.

What is Marine Spatial Planning?

In its General Election manifesto, the Government pledged that its Marine Bill will constitute a new framework for the seas, based on marine spatial planning. This will mean a more co-ordinated approach to planning the many activities happening at sea, prioritising different areas for different activities. A planning framework at sea will work in a similar way to the land-use planning system on land: it should not be unduly prescriptive, but it should provide all sea-users with a clearer indication of the kinds of activities likely to be prioritised in different areas of the sea.

Link believes there should be a national marine spatial planning framework, providing a strategic overview of national policies for all marine sectors, considerably improving joined-up government at sea. Beneath this, spatial plans should be developed for individual seas around the UK, such as the Irish Sea,

English Channel etc, and these plans should extend from the high water mark out to 200 nautical miles, or the outer limits of UK jurisdiction. The UK Government must also work closely with the devolved administrations in developing marine spatial planning.

The Government has carried out a pilot project to look at how marine spatial planning might work in practice, and the results of this are being fed into consultation as the Marine Bill is drafted.

Why do we need Marine Spatial Planning?

Our seas are in trouble: biodiversity is declining, fish stocks are dwindling, marine resources like oil and gas and marine aggregates are diminishing, and climate change is altering the marine environment. Meanwhile, pressures for marine resources and development continue to increase.

It is no longer tenable to manage marine industries sector by sector, with little regard to other industries or to the pressures placed on the marine ecosystem. In the current planning regime, decisions take up unnecessary and costly time and effort, because different sectors and government departments are not 'joined up' by an integrated planning process.

What can Marine Spatial Planning offer?

Marine spatial planning offers many benefits for industry, government and marine biodiversity. It will provide an overview of environmental impacts and enable potential conflicts between sectors to be identified and resolved at the planning stage, rather than later, when considerable investment has been made for individual proposals. Marine spatial plans will guide developers on where applications are more likely to succeed or fail, thus increasing certainty and reducing risk for investors. In addition, marine spatial planning could facilitate the sustainable development of new technologies, for example wave and tidal energy, by identifying and safeguarding important resource areas for those sectors.

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What are the benefits for nature conservation?

Marine spatial planning is necessary to deliver an ecosystem-based approach to the management of activities in the marine environment, allowing the impacts of development to be properly assessed. Marine spatial planning should enable the conservation and recovery of marine biodiversity to be seen both as legitimate objectives and valid use of marine space, and key to the delivery of sustainable development.

Can Marine Spatial Planning deliver the integration required to ensure an effective marine management system?

Marine spatial planning will be key to the delivery of a streamlined and efficient planning and consents regime. The process must ensure the integration of different sectoral policies, taking into account environmental, economic and social factors. In addition, nature conservation must carry the same weight as other sectors. This will mean establishing Marine Protected Areas where nature conservation is the priority, just as different activities will be prioritised in other areas.

How will Marine Spatial Planning reduce bureaucracy and lead to cost savings?

As already mentioned, marine spatial planning will allow for early identification of potential conflicts between industries, and between development and important wildlife areas. It will therefore offer a chance to resolve these conflicts. Developers will be able to predict with much more certainty where a proposal is likely to be consented, and this should reduce the work and costs that currently arise when conflicts are identified at later stages of the planning process.

Who will be responsible for Marine Spatial Planning?

As part of the process of consultation on the Marine Bill, the Government will be considering whether to establish a Marine Management Organisation (MMO). Link believes that such an organisation would be ideally placed to take responsibility for, and lead implementation of, marine spatial planning. The MMO should be given the authority to ensure co-ordination between all government departments to achieve integrated working on plans, and facilitate co-operation and conflict resolution between stakeholders. Once developed, a marine spatial plan would need to be made available for the public and interested organisations to comment.

How you can help

You can support Link's call for the marine spatial planning system to be comprehensive, encompassing all activities in the marine environment. If you would like to ask PQs about marine spatial planning, or anything else on the Marine Bill, please contact Helen Meech at Wildlife and Countryside Link (020 7820 8600; helen.meech@wcl.org.uk).

MPs can also sign EDM 174 (Draft Marine Bill), which sets out the key aspects of what Link believes the bill should cover, including marine spatial planning. We believe that support in Parliament will maintain the pressure on the Government to move towards publication of a draft bill this autumn, followed by public consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny. We would like to see a full Marine Bill in the 2007 Queen's Speech.