

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 – Link’s response to the Marine Bill White Paper, “A Sea Change”**

**Date: May 2007**

## **Campaign for a Marine Bill**

**Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of the UK’s major voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together, our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK. 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.

This is the fourth in Link’s series of bulletins for parliamentarians on the Marine Bill, and gives our views on the recently published Marine Bill White Paper, A Sea Change. The Government is now consulting on the contents of the White Paper.

## **A vital step on the road to legislation**

Following the absence of the Marine Bill, either in draft or final form, from the 2006 Queen’s Speech, we welcome the recent publication of Defra’s plans for this legislation. We are broadly happy with the contents of the White Paper, as we were with Defra’s consultation on what should be in the Marine Bill during summer 2006. The critical issue now is that the Government brings forward firm proposals for legislation as soon as possible. Link is calling on Ministers to include a Marine Bill in the Queen’s Speech this November – we fear that if this does not happen, Environment Secretary David Miliband’s promise of a Marine Act during this Parliament will be in jeopardy.

## **Link’s priorities for the Marine Bill – and how the White Paper measures up**

### ***Marine protected areas***

Our greatest priority for the Bill is that it should deliver a better framework for marine nature conservation, which lags far behind the protection of wildlife on land. We are calling for the Marine Bill to allow the identification and designation of a representative network of marine protected areas for wildlife around the UK’s coasts, including a suite of highly protected areas (i.e. areas where all extractive and damaging activity would be excluded).

The White Paper does much to satisfy our concerns, stating that ‘marine conservation zones’ will be a priority, and that some will be given the very highest levels of protection. However, we are concerned that the legislation behind ‘marine conservation zones’ must improve upon the provisions for ‘marine nature reserves’ in the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which are largely considered to have failed (only three MNRs have been designated since 1981). Link will be calling for the Marine Bill to include strong legal duties for the designation and management of ‘marine conservation zones’. There is also some lack of ambition, with the White Paper stating that the network of ‘marine conservation zones’ should be constructed so as to cover the smallest area necessary. We believe that the starting point for designating the network should be to protect our important and threatened wildlife and secure healthy, functioning ecosystems, rather than to put a ceiling on the number or extent of sites. We are also concerned that the White Paper suggests that a full network of marine protected areas will be in place by 2020 – a rather relaxed timetable.

### ***Marine planning***

The Government has stated that its Marine Bill will be based on a new system for planning at sea, an objective Link supports. We believe a co-ordinated planning

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regime is needed in seas that are increasingly busy, and that such a system should help to identify priority areas for particular activities (whether development, nature conservation, or protection of our cultural heritage), and therefore head off conflict between different interests.

The White Paper's recommendations address many of Link's priorities, including an overarching, UK-wide planning policy statement, under which plans will be developed at the regional and local level. The policy statement and plans will include all activities, including oil and gas exploitation and the development of renewable energy offshore. There are one or two points where this section diverges from our thinking. In particular, we are concerned that the White Paper misses the opportunity to plan at a more ecologically coherent 'regional seas' level (e.g. the Irish Sea), focussing instead on plans that follow political and administrative boundaries.

#### ***Inshore fisheries***

Again, this section contains much that we have campaigned for, including large-scale modernisation of inshore fisheries management. The Sea Fisheries Committees will be retained, but placed on a firmer financial footing, and given a clearer remit that will include environmental considerations, and greater powers and duties to deliver these. We also welcome the proposals to introduce representation and management of recreational sea angling.

#### ***Marine licensing and the Marine Management Organisation***

This is a complicated section, looking at the way activities at sea are administered and consented. While we support reform that will fill current gaps, remove duplication and provide a more modern and transparent system, it must ensure environmental safeguards are in place and enforced.

Related to this, the proposed new Marine Management Organisation (MMO) will take charge of marine planning,

some marine licensing, marine fisheries and fisheries and conservation enforcement. It will be a centre for marine expertise; an independent body answerable to a number of Government Departments. However, we are very concerned that it appears the MMO may not be involved in licensing major projects, such as larger offshore renewable energy developments and ports. It is proposed that these projects would be covered by new proposals for major infrastructure on land, set out in the Planning Reform White Paper, and we fear that this would reduce democratic accountability in decision-making on such projects, and potentially leave environmental considerations sidelined.

#### **Where next?**

As indicated at the top of this bulletin, the imperative now is to secure a slot in the next Queen's Speech for this important Bill. All major political parties have indicated that they regard a Marine Bill as a priority, and there is strong support in Parliament. 315 MPs from all parties signed an EDM calling for such a Bill in the 2003/04 session, and almost 300 signed a similar EDM in the 2005-06 session. There is also significant public support – more than 160,000 pledges and postcards in support of legislation have been delivered to 10 Downing Street.

#### **How you can help**

Link is encouraging MPs to write to the new Prime Minister to urge him to include the Bill in his first legislative programme. MPs can also help by signing the current EDM 549 which calls for the Marine Bill to be introduced in the next Queen's Speech.

For more information, please contact **Annie Smith at Link on 020 7820 8600 (annie.smith@wcl.org.uk)**. You can also find out more about our Marine Bill campaign by visiting **www.wcl.org.uk**