

Healthy Seas: why we need Marine Protected Areas

Introduction

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have a vital role to play in the Government achieving its vision of “clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas”. This Wildlife and Countryside Link¹ bulletin provides an update on progress towards the establishment of MPAs in the UK. It includes information on the importance of MPAs, the current phase and timetable for the next two years, areas where more action is required and devolved activities.

The health of UK marine ecosystems

Although there are still areas of great richness and beauty in our seas, the overwhelming weight of evidence shows that our marine systems have been in decline for decades. The plight of commercial fish stocks and the livelihoods they support is well understood. But the results of centuries of mismanagement go beyond economics. Basking shark numbers have fallen by more than 95% from historic levels, and the common skate, once abundant, is now at risk of extinction. Corals, seahorses, whales, dolphins, seals, seagrass beds – all are at risk.

Thankfully, it is not too late to turn this situation around. Our seas and sealife have a remarkable capacity to recover – if we give them the chance. There is much to be gained; thriving seas are better placed to support increased productivity and sustainable resource use, such as sustainable fisheries, as well as helping to fight the effects of climate change.

The importance of MPAs

MPAs have a critical part to play in restoring marine ecosystems, with benefits for both people and wildlife. They protect key marine areas from damaging activities such as dredging and construction. Experience from all around the world shows just how important MPAs are for restoring and protecting marine ecosystems. Some examples include the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park² and Goat Island Marine Reserve in New Zealand³.

The UK Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 introduces measures to designate Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) as part of a wider network of marine sites across UK waters. Together with existing national and international designations, MCZs will make up an ecologically coherent network of MPAs that will lay the foundations for recovery and increased resilience in the marine environment.

¹ *Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of the UK's major environmental NGOs working together for the conservation and protection of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Together we have the support of over 8 million people in the UK. For over 10 years, we have been working together with parliamentarians and others to bring about the introduction and implementation of comprehensive legislation to protect our seas.*

² <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/>

³ <http://www.discovergoatland.co.nz/reserve.html>

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Timeline of English regional Marine Conservation Zone projects

The four stakeholder-led regional MCZ projects, established to select MCZs in English inshore waters and offshore waters adjacent to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, are now entering their final phase, with final site proposals to be delivered to the Science Advisory Panel and the Statutory Nature Conservation Agencies by the end of August 2011. The next 4 months of discussions within the Regional Projects are therefore critical to the formation of robust and ambitious MCZ proposals that will deliver the greatest possible ecological value.

What still needs to be done?

Link believes that if MCZs are to contribute to a coherent and effective MPA network, supporting recovery of, and improving resilience in marine ecosystems, it is imperative that the UK Government, along with stakeholders, ensures that:

- **MCZs are set up in the right place** – sites are determined by wildlife and ecosystem needs, rather than socio-economic interests;
- **MCZs are well managed** – removing the presumption in favour of voluntary management measures, incorporating pre-emptive regulation of damaging activities and allowing recovery of common habitats and species, as well as those that are rare and threatened, from past decline;
- **MCZs are not considered in isolation** – collectively they are able to deliver on network objectives and criteria, as set out in Government policy documents;
- **MCZs are designated on time** – so that the UK can meet its own timetable as well as international obligations and help build the framework for delivering marine plans.

Devolved projects

Link's sister organisations, Wales Environment Link, Scottish Environment LINK and the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force, are working to ensure the designation of MPAs in Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish waters and the offshore waters adjacent to Scotland. Together we are calling for a UK-wide ecologically coherent network of MPAs.

In **Welsh** inshore waters the Marine Conservation Zone Project Wales will designate a small number of highly protected MCZs, adding to the 75% of coastline and 37% of Welsh territorial seas already protected by sites of European/international importance, Natura 2000 sites.

Scottish MPAs will be established under the UK Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 for offshore and inshore sites respectively. They will be identified for the protection of nationally important marine biodiversity and geodiversity features.

Northern Ireland currently plans to introduce a Northern Ireland Marine Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2011 to come into force in 2012. This will provide the tools to designate and protect MCZs in Northern Ireland's territorial seas.

Contact

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