

Delivering a network of MPAs: Highly protected sites

June 2011

Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together the UK's leading voluntary organisations united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

Link supports the four Regional Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) Projects and the valuable work being done to bring stakeholders together in the discussions over the selection of potential MCZs. Following the introduction of the UK Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009, we have been campaigning for the full implementation of the new legislation, and in particular, for the designation of MCZs as part of a complete, representative and ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) under the Act. Now that the Regional Projects are preparing their final MCZ proposals, discussions are turning to appropriate conservation objectives and management implications for proposed sites.

To fulfil international and national commitments regarding the establishment of networks of MPAs, and to ensure that collectively, MCZs contribute to the protection and recovery of the marine environment, it is vital that the sites designated are properly protected. The network should include areas with a range of protection levels; from sites that are afforded a high level of protection to underpin biodiversity conservation or facilitate the maintenance and/or recovery of ecosystem processes, through to areas requiring fewer management restrictions.



MCZ protection

The protection for each MCZ should be tailored to suit the features and/or processes that the site is trying to protect, and the conservation objectives set for those features. Conservation objectives need to take into account the condition and sensitivity of a site's features, and the role those features will play in achieving the overall network objective of ecological coherence.

The level of management intervention required within MCZs will therefore depend on the conservation objectives established for a particular site. For example, where sites are already in good condition, conservation objectives should aim to maintain the current condition of the site, preventing any degradation in the site's condition. For other sites, where recovery to a former, better condition is required to meet the conservation objectives, a much higher level of intervention to prevent further degradation and allow for recovery will be required. Such sites are likely to require more restrictions on activities within and/or around the site.

This will give rise to a spectrum of protection levels for MCZs in the network, as laid out in the "Network design principles" found in the Ecological Network Guidance (p.18, Section 1.3.2). The explanatory text for the principle of protection states that, "the MPA network is likely to include a range of protection levels. Ranging from highly protected sites or parts of sites where no extractive, depositional or other damaging activities are allowed, to areas with only minimal restrictions on activities that are needed to protect the features."

Marine
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Highly protected areas – what and why?

Where network objectives require, for example particularly sensitive sites or those with a high degree of naturalness, high levels of protection should be put in place. This could include exclusion of activities that are known or suspected to be damaging or result in disturbance to the site or its features and/or habitats. The Ecological Network Guidance (Section 4.7.4) states that higher levels of protection for sites can “boost the resilience of marine ecosystems” and are likely to be necessary for areas containing vulnerable species or habitats, areas representing a high level of naturalness, and/or areas important for the recovery of biodiversity and ecological processes.

Link believes that highly protected areas are essential to underpin the conservation or recovery of biodiversity and ecosystem processes, and to contribute collectively to the viability and function of the wider MPA network. Sites with a high level of protection would provide breathing space for marine habitats and wildlife, helping to support the wider ecosystem and buffering the effects of human activities outside the network. Including some highly protected areas within the network would also increase the resilience of the network (and marine wildlife as a whole) to impacts such as marine climate change.

Reference areas

The Ecological Network Guidance also requires the designation of some highly protected MCZs as benchmark or reference areas, with ENG Guideline 16 stating that, “Each broad-scale habitat type and FOCI [Feature of Conservation Importance] should have at least one viable reference area within each of the four regional project areas where all extraction, deposition, or human-derived disturbance is removed or prevented.”

The four Regional MCZ Projects are currently discussing potential reference areas within their proposed MCZ networks.

Link supports the rationale for delivering scientific reference sites within the network. Reference areas are useful for scientific research, as they allow the study of ecological changes resulting from human pressures, by comparing sites of minimal impact (the reference, or control areas) with sites subject to greater impacts and/or the wider marine environment. This knowledge is vital for marine management and contribution to impact assessment – only when we know the impacts our actions are having can we take sensible decisions about what level of activity is acceptable for different features and sites.

Ideally, these reference areas should represent the range of marine habitats and species protected by the network, and should furthermore be distributed to take account of biogeographic variation of features.

Summary

Link encourages the continuation of the important work in the Regional Projects to select reference areas within the draft MCZ proposals. We believe that it is important to create reference areas within the network to allow scientific research into the effects of protection within MPAs. However, reference areas should not be the only sites in the network offered a high level of protection; such protection should also be adopted for all vulnerable, rare and endangered features.

If the MPA network is to make a difference for marine nature conservation and the protection of our marine wildlife, there needs to be a significant level of ambition to protect sites properly. The legislation provides a flexible protection mechanism for MCZs, enabling the protection for each site to be tailored to meet the needs of the features the site is designated for, and the conservation objectives set for those features. While some MCZs designated as reference areas will require a high level of protection to minimise impacts on the site, other MCZs (that are not necessarily designated as reference areas) may also require high levels of protection to safeguard the features for which the site has been designated, potentially involving the exclusion of some activities that might otherwise damage or disturb those features.