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Government marine review must lead to action

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link), an alliance of the UK's leading conservation organisations, welcomes the report to Government of the Review of Marine Nature Conservation (RMNC), following the most extensive marine environmental review for 25 years.

The RMNC report is a positive challenge to the Government to adopt a new approach to the way we manage and protect our seas and marine life. It calls for a UK marine nature conservation framework, and makes recommendations relating to marine spatial planning, marine protected areas, the protection of marine species, and a UK-wide marine information network. Ministers must now pick up the gauntlet which has been thrown down.

Link is campaigning for comprehensive legislation to safeguard the marine environment. This new report supports the concerns the alliance has voiced about the value of healthy marine ecosystems and the lack of effective measures, including legislation, to protect them.

Sam Fanshawe, representative of Link on the RMNC Working Group said: *"Our seas are under ever increasing pressure from many sources, including fishing, development, pollution and climate change, but legal protection for marine habitats, species and heritage is woefully inadequate. The Government must adopt and implement, in full, the recommendations in the RMNC report. If it does not, we will not make progress towards the healthy, clean and diverse seas which we owe to future generations"*.

The RMNC, a process led by Defra, reached its conclusions after 5 years of research and debate involving a wide range of stakeholders. It is one of several recent reviews and reports into marine issues, and Link members firmly believe that it is now time to turn words into action. The RMNC offers a timetable of actions needed between now and 2010 – it is up to the Government to rise to the challenge.

Sam Fanshawe continued: *"This report substantiates what we have known for some time - that the current approach to marine conservation is flawed. It is outdated, under-resourced, uncoordinated and inadequately supported by legislation. Government must take note of the conclusions of this and other recent reviews and act now to stem the tide of years of neglect."*

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For more information please contact:

Sam Fanshawe (Director of Conservation)
Marine Conservation Society
3 Wolf Business Park
Ross-on-Wye HR9 5NB
01989 561582
sam@mcsuk.org

Annie Smith
Wildlife and Countryside Link
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP
020 7820 8600
07944 101956
annie.smith@wcl.org.uk

Editors' Notes

1. Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is campaigning for comprehensive legislation for the protection and management of the marine environment. This should include:

- An ecosystem-based approach to managing the marine environment;
- Protection for nationally important marine wildlife sites;
- Better species protection;
- Proper integration of marine wildlife and heritage conservation;
- A spatial planning system for our seas;
- A new system for managing inshore fisheries.

This press release is issued on behalf of the following organisations:

Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust
Council for British Archaeology
The Herpetological Conservation Trust
Marine Conservation Society
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Shark Trust
Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
The Wildlife Trusts
WWF-UK

Further information about the campaign and copies of briefings on the above issues are available on the Link website – www.wcl.org.uk – or from Annie Smith on 020 7820 8600 / annie.smith@wcl.org.uk

2. The Review of Marine Nature Conservation (RMNC) is the most fundamental and comprehensive review of marine nature conservation management undertaken in the UK. The last comparable exercise was undertaken 25 years ago when the then Department of the Environment set up an inter-departmental working party which resulted in the introduction of legislation to support the establishment of Marine Nature Reserves. In 1999, the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) initiated the RMNC which was subsequently supported by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), to examine how effectively the system for protecting nature conservation in the marine environment was working, and to develop practical and proportionate proposals for improving it. The Review was



Wildlife and Countryside Link
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TP
T: 020 7820 8600
F: 020 7820 8620
E: enquiry@wcl.org.uk
W: www.wcl.org.uk

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advised by a Working Group which met 17 times between 1999 and 2004, and comprised representatives of UK Government Departments, the devolved administrations, relevant statutory agencies, representatives of the fishing and other marine industries, and of the non-Governmental conservation organisations. The full RMNC report can be found on the Defra web-site: www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/rmnc

3. The RMNC report makes 16 key recommendations and a number of supporting recommendations to government, including the following which are referred to in this press release:

- Government should introduce the necessary measures, including policy and legislation as appropriate, to underpin the application of the marine nature conservation framework throughout waters under UK jurisdiction (key recommendation 9).
- Government should ensure that mechanisms are in place to deliver enforcement arrangements capable of supporting any legislation underpinning the marine nature conservation framework (key recommendation 14).
- Government should undertake a trial of marine spatial planning at the Regional Sea scale to determine the suitability of implementing such an approach across all UK waters (key recommendation 7).
- Government should consider the extent of legislation required to ensure that an ecologically-coherent network of important areas can be established and conserved (recommendation 8.4).
- Government should establish a coordinated UK-wide marine information Network (key recommendation 12).
- Government should initiate a programme of work to implement the Review's recommendations with lead partners, and supported by the necessary resources, based on the action plan outlined in this report (key recommendation 16).

4. The RMNC is one of a number of recent reviews and reports relating to the marine environment, including: the Marine Stewardship Report (Defra, 2002); House of Commons EFRA Committee Marine Environment Report (sixth report of Session 2003-04); Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report into a sustainable and profitable future for UK fishing; Review of Development in Coastal and Marine Waters; Consultation on Developing a strategic Framework for Scotland's Marine Environment (Scottish Executive); DCMS's consultation Protecting the marine historic environment: making the system work better; and Defra's Review of Marine Fisheries and Environmental Enforcement.



5. The protection of our natural and cultural heritage in the marine environment falls far short of that on land. For example:

- There are 6500 Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the UK. Only 5% by area are estuarine and virtually none extend below low water. There are only three Marine Nature Reserves (only one, Lundy, in Defra's jurisdiction) compared to 207 terrestrial National Nature Reserves (figure from March 2001).
- Although all cetaceans occurring in UK waters are listed as protected under the Habitats Directive, we are still waiting for action to address the problem of bycatch in fishing nets. This winter the bodies of 140 dolphins and porpoises which died as a result of bycatch washed up on beaches in South West England. Cetaceans are also affected by pollution - the incidence of disease in harbour porpoises has been correlated with pollution levels.
- Rockhopper trawls destroy reefs on the sea bed, affecting rare species such as the pink sea fan and sunset coral.
- Marine aggregate dredging is likely to be permitted in the East English Channel where important sea bed communities have been identified which may take decades to recover, if they recover at all.
- Even wildlife in our supposedly most protected areas - Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas - is not safe. The sixty-plus UK SACs covering marine features are multi-use areas, and many are still being degraded by a range of activities - for example, the queen scallop fishery in Strangford Lough SAC, proposed port developments in the Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Thames SAC and a proposed offshore windfarm in the Liverpool Bay proposed SPA.
- There are 33,000 wreck sites, and 5,200 wreck positions known in UK seas, of which only 70 are protected; 7,400 located fishermen's net snaggings may indicate further wrecks. There are also thousands of aircraft remains. The number of human remains associated with such losses is enormous. Many of these sites are threatened by erosion, channel dredging development and fishing.
- You could once walk from Harwich to Copenhagen; there are Mesolithic sites (8500 BC) on the Dogger Bank; drowned Bronze Age fields between the Isles of Scilly; prehistoric footprints of humans and animals crossing Morecambe Bay; submerged sacred sites like Seahenge; and drowned forests in the Severn Estuary. However, we do not know the overall number or location of such survivals or their full extent; they are not legally protected, but they are very vulnerable to sea bed disturbance by fishing and development.

