# Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing
# Marine benthic habitats
## Charting Progress 2: The State of UK Seas
## June 2011

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 of 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.

These briefings are supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Shark Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
- WWF - UK

## Overview

The Charting Progress 2 Report (CP2) is the result of a structured and co-ordinated approach to the second assessment of the status of UK seas. Published in July 2010, five years after the first assessment, it aims to illustrate the changes since 2005 and the advances made towards the UK vision of "*clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas*". It consists of the main CP2 Report (which is also available in an online format), and two summary documents; an eight page CP2 Overview and a 16 page Government's Commentary on CP2; and is based on four supporting technical "Feeder Reports" covering:

- Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas
- Clean and Safe Seas
- Ocean Processes
- Productive Seas

CP2 was prepared by the UK Marine Monitoring and Assessment Strategy community, which was established in response to the first Charting Progress Report. The assessment is structured around 11 regional seas covering all UK waters, some of which were subsequently merged to create the eight UK marine regions assessed.

The intention is that CP2 will be used to inform policy decisions on the future management of the UK's seas. It is also expected to form the foundation of the initial assessment required by the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which is due in 2012, and is already informing the evidence base for marine planning in England.

In light of the importance of CP2 for future decision-making on the management of UK seas, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is concerned that the current status of UK seas is accurately recorded, wherever that information is summarised. In a number of specific places, we are aware that the summarised information on CP2 does not accurately reflect the information in the CP2 report or the Feeder Reports.

Consequently, Link has produced this briefing on marine benthic habitats to compare the findings and messages of the Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas Feeder Report, with those used in the CP2 Report, the Overview and Government commentary.

In addition, Link has produced a further three separate briefings covering:

- Cetaceans
- Deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish
- Waterbirds and seabirds

If you would like to receive a copy of any of these briefings, please contact Fiona Llewellyn at Link (fiona@wcl.org.uk or 02079208600).

## Wildlife and Countryside Link Briefing: Charting Progress 2 - Marine benthic habitats

The UK supports a wide range of marine benthic habitats and associated biodiversity. Six broad-scale habitats were identified for the CP2 assessment:

- Intertidal rock
- Intertidal sediment
- Subtidal rock
- Shallow subtidal sediments
- Shelf subtidal sediments
- Deep-sea habitats

The Feeder Report concludes that on the whole, sediment habitats are more extensively degraded than rocky habitats, although many biogenic reef and some rocky reef habitats have been severely damaged.

There is a greater variety of pressures on marine benthic habitats in the south of the UK; in the north pressure is largely associated with fishing activities.

Inshore habitats are generally impacted by a greater variety of pressures than those habitats further offshore.

Loss of habitat, hydrological changes and, to a lesser extent, pollution and nutrient enrichment are identified as the main causes of damage and degradation in the intertidal zone.

Demersal and benthic-towed fishing gear is considered the main cause of damage and degradation in subtidal habitats.

**Summary**

Only one, or arguably two, of the six broad-scale habitats (intertidal and subtidal rock) have experienced limited impact.

The CP2 and Feeder Reports refer to the trends in conditions of habitats (over the past 10 years), as well as the current status of habitats (in comparison to former natural conditions) as a result of anthropogenic activity.

The assessment of the *trend in condition* of marine habitats over the past 10 years shows 56% to be deteriorating, while only 6% is improving, with 38% considered stable.

A detailed assessment of the *current status* of the six broad-scale habitats across eight sea 'regions' is provided in the Feeder Report. This concludes that of 41 regional assessments (six habitat assessments for each of the eight regions, minus seven for which trend information was not available), 18 (44%) are considered to have been little changed due to anthropogenic influences. Five (12%) were shown to have been moderately changed, and the remaining 18 (44%) were shown to have been subject to a high degree of change. However, for the habitats assessed as being subject to little or moderate change, 61% contained sub components which have been subject to a high degree of impact, with over 25% of their area assessed as '*worst case scenario'* and considered unlikely to recover in the foreseeable future.

Regional assessments of the condition of sediment habitats indicate significant impacts in a number of regions, with over 25% of the area of the habitat impacted by one or more activity.

From the information presented in the CP2 Report and the Feeder Report, the following conclusions are appropriate for marine habitats:

Impacts range from coastal squeeze, adding to historical land reclamation in intertidal sediments, to beam trawling and scallop dredging affecting function and structure of shallow subtidal sediments. Demersal fishing is identified as a pervasive source of disturbance affecting shelf subtidal sediments.

Although subtidal rock areas are generally considered to be less impacted than other habitats, some areas and associated communities have been permanently damaged or removed by mobile fishing gear. The remaining substratum has a reduced structural complexity and is less diverse.

Extensive areas of biogenic reefs may be damaged or destroyed as a result of fishing or aquaculture activities, and some biogenic reefs have already been permanently lost.

Fishing activity, particularly trawling is considered to be a significant threat to deep sea habitats.

Further localised losses of some habitats is likely to occur in the future as a result of development for renewable energy (wind, wave and tidal) and container port facilities and marinas at the coast.

While the intensity of pressure is anticipated to remain relatively stable for the next one to two decades, it is not clear what additional pressure will result from climate change, e.g. establishment and range extension of non-native species, coastal squeeze as sea levels rise, changes in seawater salinity and temperature.

**Conclusions**

In light of these findings, Link is of the opinion that the CP2 Overview, which states "*human and natural pressures have impacts on many of our habitats and species*", and the conclusion of the Government's Commentary that "*intertidal and nearshore habitats are generally in reasonable condition*", are seriously misleading. Albeit the second part of the Commentary statement is accurate in recognising that "*seabed habitats in large areas of the North Sea, the Western Channel / Celtic Seas and the Irish Sea have been impacted by mobile fishing gear*."

Link is concerned that the CP2 summary documents fail to reflect the findings of the Feeder Report and CP2 Report, and subsequently, the urgent need for further action to provide adequate protection for marine benthic habitats and improve the management of activities which have a direct impact on them, will not be addressed in the future.