Wildlife and Countryside LINK

The whole-site approach to managing MPAs
A Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing

March 2020

Executive summary

2019 has seen reports from the IPCC[1], UN[2], the UK Government[3] and others consistently warning that our ocean is reaching a critical turning point. In the context of these warnings and the UK Parliaments declaration of a climate and ecological emergency, there must be a step-change in ambition to recover our domestic marine environment. A fundamental step to achieve this should be the implementation of effective management measures in the English network of Marine Protected Areas. As part of this, UK Government should explore the development of a whole-site approach to management for use at appropriate sites. If delivered effectively as an additional tool to the existing feature based approach in the MPA network, a whole-site approach could be key to achieving wide-scale recovery and, in turn, increasing resilience of ecosystems in the face of growing pressures, including climate change.

Introduction

The latest UK Marine Strategy progress report[3] offered a stark warning for our seas, showing that only 4 out of 11 indicators of good environmental status are being met. This is despite over 25% of UK seas, and more than 40% of English inshore and offshore waters, being within one or more marine protected areas (MPAs). It is more important than ever that we prioritise the sustainable management of our seas, including these MPAs, to ensure their recovery and help deliver our UK wide commitment to achieve Good Environmental Status.

The Government committed to '*move to a wholesite approach to protect sites of greatest biodiversity interest*' in the 25 Year Environment Plan.[4] To inform this ambition, this briefing outlines what such a whole-site approach (WSA) should look like in practice and how and where it would be best suited in order to meet the conservation objectives of individual sites and the coherence and recovery of the MPA network as a whole.

Definition of whole site approach

WSA seeks to work alongside existing site management and protecting the natural dynamism of the marine environment. This is particularly relevant in sites where sessile, or semi-mobile organisms have the potential to recruit, breed and grow over time if negative pressures are removed.

We understand the WSA to be the approach to managing a site that starts from a position of considering the integrity of a site as a whole, not just where designated features are present, and its position as part of an ecologically coherent network, in order to support the management and (where necessary) recovery of the features of that site - particularly where they are broadscale in description (such as the broadscale habitats in the MCZ designations).

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[1] https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home/
[2] https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services
[3] https://consult.defra.gov.uk/marine/updated-uk-marine-strategy-part-one/supporting_documents/UKmarinestrategypart1consultdocumentfinal.pdf
[4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf

Principles of a whole site approach

WSA should be considered on a site-by-site basis and in tandem with existing management approaches. Conservation objectives for European marine sites are designed to enable recovery of designated features. Therefore, WSA is most appropriate where there is the potential to recover and maintain high levels of biodiversity across the entire site, in addition to the recovery of designated features. For some European Marines Sites, there are convincing legal arguments that these measures should be considered as the *de facto* baseline management for sites.[5]

Sites benefitting from a WSA should require an objective of increased enrichment of biodiversity, biomass, productivity or a combination of these attributes. Attributes must show a clear trend towards their pre-perturbation conditions, and the trend is expected to continue if pressures are managed. This will build resilience to current and natural pressures (e.g. storms, climate change) until attributes lie within their range of historical natural variation. Such resilience to storms, and rapid recovery of benthos has been demonstrated in the Lyme Bay SAC that has already seen a whole-site approach to restricting scallop dredging and trawling within 200km^2 of the MPA by local regulators.

Management of the site must consider damaging practices across the whole site, in addition to the achievement of conservation objectives for designated features. This will enable sufficient regulation and ministerial orders to be written whilst also complementing and adding to legislation to protect sites where species-specific measures have already been introduced.

For monitoring, a WSA would require the health of the whole site to be monitored. Other key species would be monitored, alongside the protected feature itself, building a greater understanding of both the health of the feature and the cause(s) of any changes to it and/or the wider ecosystem. With a greater knowledge of the ecosystem as a whole, a more informed approach can then be taken to targeted management. For example, a greater abundance of fish correlate with increased benthic diversity.[6] Inshore, species such as cod, pollock, wrasse, ling all are linked to diverse biotic and abiotic benthic habitats.

Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) must not be confused with the WSA. HPMAs offer the highest environmental protections for areas of our seas, where all damaging activities are prohibited, and only no-impact activities are allowed. Whole Site Approach on the other hand, is where management measures introduced to specific MPAs are extended to the whole of the site to aid its recovery alongside its protected features, the presence of which may not extend to the whole of the site. Therefore, while all HPMAs take a WSA by default (as all damaging activities across the entire site are prohibited), MPAs taking the WSA are not HPMAs – they simply extend the management measures put in place to the entirety of the site.

Benefits of a whole site approach

A WSA could result in additional benefits for the health of the site. Existing sites have conservation objectives set but where some sites have buffers in place, in certain cases (such as in Lyme Bay and

[5] Legal Council advice to MCS and ClientEarth regarding proposed partial fisheries management measures for offshore UK sandbank sites (2015).
[6] Elliott, S et al. 2017. Landscape effects on demersal fish revealed by field observations and predictive seabed modelling. Available here.

other South Devon reefs), the biodiversity associated with reefs recruits and grows outwith 'core' areas. Alongside feature based sites, WSA will support natural recovery in biodiverse areas e.g. mussels, corals, sponges and bryozoans that may be surplus to the 'listed' protected features that are currently used for designation and management of MPAs such as MCZs.

A WSA also has the potential to be better understood by a wider range of stakeholders. Due to the rising concern about plastic pollution and climate change, there is greater support for ocean protection amongst the public. A WSA will be more in line with the public perception of an MPA and will be more logical - in a management context - to the public.

Opportunities to test the whole site approach

There are already some examples of where IFCAs have adopted a 'whole ecosystem' approach, for the management of fishing activities. Whilst this management covers an area, rather than a specific site, it demonstrates that WSA could be applied in practice. For example, Southern IFCA has closed most of the South Wight Maritime site to trawling and scallop dredging (2014 byelaw), whilst 200km^2 of Lyme Bay SAC has been closed to all forms of bottom towed gears since 2008 (comprising reef, mud, gravel and sand habitats). These sites host widely dispersed reef and reef-associated species surrounded by sand and gravel veneers. Although not a measure for an MPA, the Sussex IFCA is considering closing the entire western inshore 0-3nm zone of its district to bottom towed gear such that kelp habitat is recovered[7].

If Defra intend to trial WSA within the boundaries of existing sites, and thus protect a variety of ecosystem services, we would suggest the following sites are candidates for consideration as they host mosaics of features and habitats that would likely recover were the pressure (from bottom towed fishing gear) to be removed;

- The Wash SAC
- Essex Estuaries SAC
- Flamborough Head SAC
- Margate and Longsands SAC
- Berwickshire and North Northumberland SAC
- Morecombe Bay SAC

Progressive 'whole-site' management measures were introduced as part of the Scottish Inshore High-Risk MPA management measures in 2016. Scottish Government were open to the idea of whole-ecosystem conservation in addition to the listed features for protection under the law. For example, Treshnish Isles SAC included conservation objectives for the reef feature alone. Yet, a whole-site approach to management was introduced as other features of the sites would be protected and recover.[8]

[7] https://secure.toolkitfiles.co.uk/clients/34087/sitedata/files/consultations/Nearshore-Trawling-Byelaw-19-2019-08-30-122351.pdf
[8] https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00498320.pdf

Wildlife and Countryside Link

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 58 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. Our members campaign to conserve, enhance and access our landscapes, animals, plants, habitats, rivers and seas. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.

This response is supported by the following Link members:

- Buglife
- Institute of Fisheries Management
- Marine Conservation Society
- MARINElife
- National Trust
- ORCA
- RSPB
- Shark Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation
- WWF UK