Wildlife and Countryside LINK

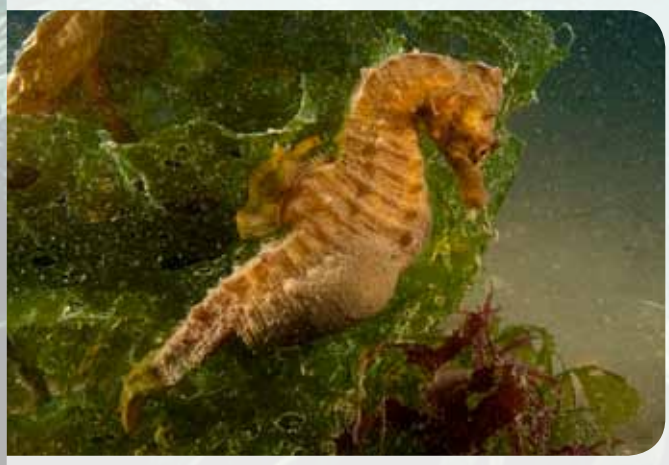
Marine Conservation Zones Parliamentary Bulletin, November 2012

127 Marine Conservation Zones: The Public Benefit

Following decades of neglect and over-exploitation, our seas are in a state of serious decline. The long overdue designation of a full network of 127 Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in English waters would generate significant social, environmental and economic benefits for the UK as well as providing the protection our marine wildlife desperately needs.

Background

Although there are still areas of great richness and beauty in our seas, the overwhelming weight of evidence shows that our marine environment has been in decline for decades. Climate change, ocean acidification and the overexploitation of commercial fish stocks present significant, long lasting and irreversible threats and changes to marine species and habitats. Basking shark numbers have fallen dramatically, and the common skate, once abundant, is now at risk of extinction. Corals, seahorses, whales, dolphins, seals and seagrass beds are all at risk.



Following successful campaigning by Wildlife and Countryside Link[1], the passing of the Marine and Coastal Access Act in 2009 represented a significant step towards restoring and protecting the UK's seas and marine wildlife. The Act introduced measures to designate MCZs, which, together with existing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), will make up an ecologically coherent network that will lay the foundations for recovery and increased resilience in the marine environment.

Link's sister organisations; Wales Environment Link; Scottish Environment Link; and the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force, are all working with Government to ensure the designation of MCZs and MPAs in Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish waters.

The Current Situation

The UK Government has so far failed to keep its promise to designate an ecologically coherent network of MCZs in English waters by 2012. There was a substantial delay whilst Defra commissioned the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Natural England to undertake further research on the evidence base for MCZs. Their advice to Government, which was published in July 2012, claims there is sufficient scientific evidence to justify the designation of the proposed MCZ network in English seas. Defra's Science Advisory Panel, appointed to oversee the MCZ selection process, also states that all 127 sites are needed to achieve an Ecologically Coherent Network.

However, there remains concern that the Government will ignore the findings of its own scientific advisers, and choose instead to designate fewer than the proposed 127 sites necessary to create a network that is ecologically coherent. Indeed, it is likely that significantly fewer sites will be designated, with no guarantee of a timetable for the phased designation of the remaining sites. A public consultation will be taking place at the end of this year with the first tranche of designations expected in 2013.

Mobile Species

While the proposed 127 sites will protect a representative proportion of all the main marine habitat types, the same cannot be said for mobile species. Link believes that some additional MCZs will need to be identified to protect highly mobile species such as birds, seals and cetaceans, as well as including mobile species in more of the existing proposed sites. This would go a long way in delivering a network of sites that protects the full range of marine wildlife.

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[1] *Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of 39 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.*

Environmental Benefits

MCZs are essential to enable the recovery of some of our wonderful marine biodiversity. Continued degradation of the marine environment has the potential to seriously compromise or undermine many of the ecosystem services we currently enjoy. For example, the oceans act as a carbon sink, absorbing around 50% of the atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO_2) produced by humans. Thriving seas are better placed to support increased productivity and sustainable resource use and are also more resilient to the adverse effects of the changing climate. The seas around the UK contribute to the purification and detoxification of human waste materials, while some habitats such as reefs and saltmarshes can reduce the impact of tidal surges storms and floods.[2] With energy increasingly sourced from waves and tides, and biofuels from macro and microalgae, a healthy marine environment also has the potential to supply renewable energy for decades to come.[3]

Economic Benefits

The UK's marine economy contributes £50 billion to the Gross Domestic Product.[4] A decline in UK marine biodiversity will result in a depletion of the provision of marine goods and services. This could result in severe impacts on society and the economy, including a decline in marine health and water quality, reduced fisheries potential, loss of recreational opportunities, decreased employment, and reduced carbon uptake.[5] Sustainable fisheries are vital to prevent degradation of the marine environment, and to support communities and livelihoods in the long term. Marine Biodiversity also provides the raw materials for products such as pharmaceuticals.

Recreational and Health Benefits

Marine biodiversity plays a fundamental role in supporting the social wellbeing of our society. As residents of an island nation, the British public has a special affinity with the sea which has played a significant role in the cultural development and identity of the nation. MCZs would safeguard the protection of the UK's natural marine heritage for generations to come. MCZs could also benefit the public's mental and physical health by providing clean and beautiful areas for activities such as walking, swimming, surfing, wildlife watching and picnicking, as well as providing optimum conditions

for both recreational and scientific research divers. Many of these activities generate and maintain employment opportunities for coastal communities,[6] and will be permitted within MCZs if they do not damage the integrity of the site.

Glossary

Marine Protected Area (MPA): is a general term to describe an area of the sea or coast where management measures are put in place to protect habitats and wildlife.

Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ): is a new type of MPA designation created by the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. MCZs can be designated anywhere in English and Welsh inshore and offshore waters.

Ecologically Coherent Network: MPAs (including MCZs) cannot stand alone. They must be developed as a network that takes account of the biological requirements and life-cycles of marine species and habitats, as well as the relationships and interactions between them and with their environment. The network must also interact with and support the wider marine environment.

Contact

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[2] *Beaumont et al (2007) 'Identification, definition and quantification of goods and services provided by marine biodiversity: Implications for the ecosystem approach', Marine Pollution Bulletin, 54, pp. 253-265*
[3] *Austen et al (2011) 'Marine' in The UK National Ecosystem Assessment Technical Report, UK NEA, UNEP-WCMC, p. 470*
[4] *Pugh, D. (2008) 'Socio-economic Indicators of Marine-related Activities in the UK Economy', Research Report, The Crown Estate, ISBN: 978-1-906410-01-8*
[5] *Beaumont et al (2006) 'Marine biodiversity: An economic valuation' Final Report to Defra, p. ii*
[6] *Chae et al (2011) 'Estimating the recreational benefits of Lundy MNR. A travel cost analysis', University of Portsmouth, p. 1*

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