

A Future for our Seas

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is calling for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas. Achieving these improvements will require co-ordinated action at a UK level and by the devolved administrations. This paper is an introduction to a series of papers that highlight Link's concerns about the current lack of protection for our marine heritage – including species, habitats and our archaeological heritage in UK seas. The series of papers has been developed in consultation with colleagues in sister Link organisations – Wales Environment Link, Scottish Environment LINK and Northern Ireland Environment Link – who will be calling for specific changes to improve the devolved management of the marine environment.



Act before it's too late

There are clear signs that our seas are in crisis. We have ignored what is happening above and below the surface of our seas for far too long. Species, habitats and maritime archaeology are threatened and in decline as never before, by development, human activities and climate change. In 2001, Wildlife and Countryside Link produced a *Marine Charter* calling for fundamental reform of how our seas are managed and protected. Out-moded laws and complex consenting processes are still making a mockery of the Government's vision of "clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas"¹. We need comprehensive marine conservation legislation now.



Why is reforming the law important?

The laws affecting the UK's seas have developed piecemeal over time, and are not equal to the task of managing the impacts of the wide range of activities at sea and the impacts of modern technologies as they extend further offshore. Current planning regimes are non-existent or at best applied sector-by-sector, resulting in conflict between sea users and making comprehensive assessment of the cumulative impacts of different activities impossible.



There are very few UK laws in place to protect our precious marine heritage. The legislation which does exist is more relevant to land-based conservation. Furthermore, our national wildlife protection legislation applies only to the 12 nautical mile limit and is difficult to implement and enforce at sea. EU laws such as the Habitats and Birds Directives, transposed into UK regulations, will protect some marine wildlife sites, but there are many species and habitats important to the integrity of our own seas that are not listed or protected under EU law.



The Government has made numerous commitments to protect the marine environment, which are detailed in the first Marine Stewardship Report, *Safeguarding our Seas* (DEFRA 2002). These include an undertaking, endorsed at the 5th North Sea Conference (2002), to adopt an ecosystem-based approach to managing our seas – that is "to integrate marine protection objectives with sustainable social goals and economic growth and address conservation objectives alongside the full range of human activities and demands that we place on the marine environment"².



¹ Defra 2002 *Safeguarding Our Seas – A Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of our Marine Environment*. Chapter 1

² Defra 2002 *Safeguarding our Seas – A Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of our Marine Environment*. Paragraph 1.15





This cannot be achieved at present, due to the absence of a systematic and co-ordinated approach to managing the UK's seas. Development is progressing ahead of conservation and there is no long-term strategy in place to address this imbalance, resulting in both damage to marine heritage and conflict amongst marine users.

What is needed?

Link is calling for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas. As a minimum, we believe that marine legislation must address the urgent need for:

- Joined-up governance of our seas to deliver an ecosystem-based approach to marine conservation and management (see Link's briefing *'The right governance of our seas'*);
- A clearly stated purpose for the laws to deliver an effective marine framework (see Link's briefing *'What future do we want for our marine environment?'*);
- An efficient and unifying marine spatial planning system, that integrates the precautionary principle and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) into planning and provides some certainty for developers (see Link's briefing *'A planning system for our seas'*);
- Sea users and decision-makers to take proper responsibility for the protection and, where appropriate, sustainable use of our marine environment;
- Better protection for marine species and habitats including a network of nationally important Marine Protected Areas (see Link's briefings *'Better protection for marine wildlife'* and *'Protecting our nationally important marine wildlife sites'*);
- Sustainable management of coastal fisheries;
- A comprehensive enforcement strategy for marine management and protection; and
- A comprehensive survey of the UK continental shelf, ongoing marine science and monitoring programmes and appropriate access to marine data.

Such are the threats to the marine environment that Link believes these issues must be addressed *en bloc*. Without a holistic, integrated framework for marine conservation and management, adequate protection for our seas will not be achieved. Further, a comprehensive approach to marine legislation will lead to more efficient and better regulation and more appropriate resource allocation, and will optimise the time Parliament spends on marine matters.

For more information

To receive further copies of this or other Link marine briefings, or for further information on any of the issues raised, please contact Annie Smith at Wildlife and Countryside Link: 020 7820 8600 / annie.smith@wcl.org.uk, or see www.wcl.org.uk.

The following Link marine briefings are also available:

- *The right governance of our seas*;
- *What future do we want for our marine environment*;
- *Protecting our nationally important marine wildlife sites*;
- *Better protection for marine wildlife*; and
- *A planning system for our seas*.

To receive information on Scottish Environment LINK's parallel campaign for marine reform, please contact Calum Duncan on 0131 2266360/ scotland@mcsuk.org.