

Wildlife & Countryside Link is calling for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas

Wildlife and
Countryside



Marine Bill Bulletin

A Future for our Seas – The case for Highly Protected Marine Reserves

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is calling for comprehensive legislation to achieve better protection for marine wildlife and effective management of our seas. Link believes that the Marine Bill offers a critical opportunity to provide for the designation of a representative network of Nationally Important Marine Sites (NIMSSs), which must include a suite of Highly Protected Marine Reserves (HPMRs).

This bulletin follows the discussion on MPAs in Marine Bill Bulletin issue 4: *A Future for our Seas – The Marine Bill and Marine Protected Areas*.

In this bulletin a number of terms are used to describe different types of protected sites in the sea. 'Marine Protected Area' ('MPA') is used as a general term that encompasses all of the designations discussed.

The current approach to conserving marine biodiversity in the UK is failing. It is widely recognised that we need to apply an ecosystem approach, incorporating a range of management and conservation tools. One of the tools is a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Link advocates that these should include HPMRs where a high level of protection is needed to underpin biodiversity conservation or the maintenance and/or recovery of ecosystem processes.

In UK waters to date, only one small area at Lundy in Devon benefits from a high level of protection. This represents 0.00038% of the UK's marine area, just 3.3km² out of a total sea area of 867,000 km².

Current legislation

In the UK we currently have two systems in place for designating MPAs: Marine Nature Reserves (MNRs) under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), and Natura 2000 sites, designated under the Habitats and Birds Directives (1992 and 1979 respectively).

Unfortunately, experience has shown that alone these tools cannot ensure the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable management of our seas. Only three MNRs have been designated in the last 25 years, and the Natura 2000 network of sites, whilst important, even when complete will have significant limitations. In particular, the legislation applies only to a handful of marine habitats and species, and only sites deemed to be of international importance will be designated, leaving the majority of the UK's marine biodiversity ineligible for protection. Furthermore, there are issues relating to the implementation of management measures in a number of MPAs, and marine Natura 2000 sites have been implemented as multiple use sites that do not offer the high level of protection envisaged for HPMRs. From 0-12nm, marine nature conservation is controlled by the devolved administrations, leading to some variation in application of the Habitats Directive.

What the Marine Bill should provide

Link believes that a representative network of Nationally Important Marine Sites (NIMSSs) - MPAs to protect nationally important areas, habitats and species - is needed to help deliver conservation and recovery of the UK's marine biodiversity. It would also significantly contribute to fulfilling the UK's commitments under OSPAR, contracting parties of which have agreed to designate an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in the North East Atlantic by 2010.

A two-tier model for an MPA network is proposed by Link, to include:

1. MPAs (including NIMSSs, Natura 2000 sites and OSPAR sites) within which activities are allowed to take place provided they are consistent with the site's conservation objectives (including when effects are considered in combination with those of other activities).
2. Highly Protected Marine Reserves (HPMRs), afforded a higher level of protection (see below),

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to contribute collectively to the viability and function of the wider MPA network, and which could be stand-alone sites or zones within existing larger sites.

NIMSS and HPMRs should add value to the existing approach in the following ways:

Sites should be selected to protect the full range of habitats and wildlife found in UK waters, rather than only a restricted selection of rare and/or threatened species or diverse habitats (although these would also be included).

The designations should be used to build a functioning, ecologically coherent network of interconnected sites that support each other as well as the wider ecosystem.

As their name suggests, HPMRs would benefit from a high level of protection but they would not necessarily be absolute "no-go" areas. Extractive activities such as fishing and mineral extraction, construction, and other damaging activities should be excluded. However, activities such as research, education and some leisure activities could be encouraged (at managed levels, and possibly with mitigation measures in place) where these activities were compatible with site protection needs. Management plans should be developed and applied for each site, in full consultation with stakeholders. The role, function and management of a suite of HPMRs should be recognised both in legislation and policy. The identification and implementation of sites should reflect the function of both the network and of individual sites, and may be steered by the Statutory Nature Conservation Agencies. However, individual sites would need to be considered on a case by case basis, based on specific site objectives, through a transparent stakeholder process.

Link believes that the protection offered by HPMRs should be permanent, aimed at delivering long-term benefits. However we need to ensure that there is some flexibility in the designation system to allow potential to accommodate, for example, the implications of climate change for these sites. This style of MPA management

has been proven to aid recovery of threatened biodiversity and biomass in tropical and temperate marine habitats (Scientific consensus statement on marine reserves and protected areas, NCEAS, 2001). Link firmly believes that HPMRs are a vital tool in implementing an ecosystem-based approach to the management of activities in our seas, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Potential benefits

In essence, HPMRs would provide breathing space for marine habitats and wildlife to exist in conditions that are as near to the unexploited state as possible, helping to maintain biodiversity-rich areas, or allowing biodiversity to recover at previously impacted sites. Zones designated as HPMRs within NIMS or Natura 2000 sites could help to support achievement of these sites' conservation objectives. As part of a coherent network of MPAs, HPMRs will help to support the wider marine ecosystem, buffering or moderating the effects of human activities outside the network and increasing the resilience of marine ecosystems, for example in the face of climate change.

In addition to biodiversity and ecosystem benefits, HPMRs would prove invaluable as scientific reference areas, helping us to improve our understanding of the marine environment and the impacts of human activities and climate change.

HPMRs situated close to the coast could also provide further benefits to local communities, such as for educational and managed leisure and eco-tourism use. Protection for cultural heritage features could also result from HPMR designation.

Link believes that MPAs, including HPMRs, will be vital to the protection and recovery of marine ecosystems. However, we would emphasise that to be effective they need to be implemented alongside a suite of wider measures designed to achieve sustainability of human activities. These measures include marine spatial planning and development control, fisheries

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management measures and regulation, where appropriate, of leisure activities to protect vulnerable species or habitats. In combination, these measures will enable us to safeguard the marine resource-base, so benefiting those industries which depend upon it, including fisheries and tourism.

Conclusions

Link advocates that HPMRs, in which damaging and harmful activities (notably extractive activities) are excluded, are essential to underpin biodiversity conservation, recovery, and the maintenance and/or recovery of ecosystem processes. HPMRs would confer a number of benefits in addition to biodiversity protection and recovery. These benefits should be sought at the level of the MPA network, as well as from individual sites.

Link therefore calls for the Marine Bill to provide for the identification, designation and effective management of a **representative network of Nationally Important Marine Sites, which must include a suite of Highly Protected Marine Reserves.**

The Bill is a once in a generation chance to deliver better protection for marine biodiversity. If it does not do this it will have failed.

Further information:

- Link's marine campaign
http://www.wcl.org.uk/marine_campaign.htm
- Policy paper: The Marine Bill and Marine Protected Areas
http://www.wcl.org.uk/downloads/2005/WCL_Marine_Protected_Areas_26Aug05_Final.pdf
- Marine Bill Bulletin issue 4: *A Future for our Seas – The Marine Bill and Marine Protected Areas*: http://www.wcl.org.uk/downloads/2005/Link_Marine_Bill_Bulletin-Issue4.pdf

For more information on Link's marine campaign, or to be added to the mailing list for future bulletins, please contact Helen Meech on 020 7820 8600 or helen.meech@wcl.org.uk