

Looking ahead to the next World Ocean Day: Actions urgently needed to deliver marine recovery

World Ocean Day this month (8 June) saw consensus across political parties that the ocean enriches life beyond measure, and shared concern at the precipitous decline in ocean health.

This annual acknowledgement of the challenges facing the ocean is welcome – and must now be followed by action. We set out below measures the Government must take ahead of the next World Ocean Day, to avoid catastrophic decline, help the ocean recover and to secure the benefits of a healthy ocean for everyone.

Priority actions for ocean recovery:

1. The Marine Protected Areas (MPA) network needs urgent strengthening

MPAs were intended to provide sanctuaries for marine wildlife to recover, but are failing to achieve this outcome, rendering them ‘paper parks’. Marine Conservation Society research has revealed that all but one of the 73 offshore MPAs in the UK designated to protect the seabed have experienced bottom trawling, with trawl and dredge vessels spending at least 89,894 hours fishing the seabed inside offshore MPAs over a 3-year period.¹ As a result of these and other damaging human activities, JNCC data suggests that only 5 UK MPAs ‘may be’ moving towards or achieving their conservation targets (less than 7% of the total).²

Positively, work is underway to address this and to ensure the MPA network is strong enough to fulfill its intended purpose. The Government is developing a programme for assessing sites and implementing byelaws, where necessary, to manage damaging fishing activity in all English offshore MPAs by 2024.³ Byelaws for an initial four English MPAs will come into place on 13 June,⁴ with the Government seeking views on measures for a further 13 sites.⁵

Whilst these byelaws are welcome, they have a limited range, as the four MPAs they will cover from 13 June represent just 10% of offshore MPAs in England. To complete the required strengthening of the network, the Government needs to:

- Speedily bring forward protections for the remaining 36 offshore MPAs, with protections being fully implemented by 2024. Protections for the initial four sites were delayed, which raises fears that the 2024 date for protecting the whole offshore network will be missed. Delivery by 2024 is an essential step in delivering progress towards Good Environmental Status (GES) for our

¹ <https://media.mcsuk.org/documents/marine-unprotected-areas.pdf>

² <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bright-Blue-Seas-Greenpeace-report.pdf>

³ The programme is managed by the Marine Management Organisation:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/marine-management-organisation-launches-consultation-on-four-of-englands-marine-protected-areas>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-uses-brexit-freedoms-to-protect-our-seas>

⁵ https://mcusercontent.com/ab1c7ee88ca09c8ad43de6922/files/f83c3f9f-3142-7293-25e0-cd3ea2e07733/Letter_Marine_Management_Organisation_call_for_evidence_on_the_draft_fisheries_assessment_for_13_MPAs.pdf

seas, the next evaluation of which will be in 2024 (with the UK having missed 11 out of 15 targets at the last assessment).

- Explore all options to secure urgent protections. With every year of limited protection degrading the capacity of offshore MPAs to contribute ocean recovery, urgency in delivering the new protections is absolutely vital. The 2024 deadline must be adhered to. Marine eNGOs have highlighted that an alternative and complementary approach to byelaws would be to use licensing powers and the ability to place conditions on them. The 2020 Fisheries Act gives the Government additional post-Brexit powers to impose limits on fishing vessel licences of all flags in UK seas. Without going through lengthy consultation processes, placing conditions on licences could be implemented by the end of 2022, revoking permissions to fish in offshore MPAs and offering speedy protection.
- Put in place effective monitoring and management of sites, to ensure compliance with the new protections. Effective management is essential to meeting the 2030 target of having 30% of English seas meaningfully protected for nature, through fully or highly protected MPAs maintained in favourable condition.

The public are strongly support the case for stronger marine protections. YouGov polling carried out for Wildlife & Countryside Link in June 2022 found that almost three-quarters (73%) of people believe ocean wildlife needs more protection. More than half of the British public (55%) say damaging bottom-trawling fishing practices should be banned in all our Marine Protected Sites, with less than 1 in 5 (19%) saying that bottom-trawling should be allowed to continue in these areas.⁶

2. New Highly Protected Marine Areas need to be delivered to a high ambition

The Government has committed to introduce Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) in English waters by the end of 2022; we are expecting a consultation on proposed pilot sites imminently.⁷ If delivered in the right manner, HPMAs could provide much needed sanctuaries for our threatened marine life; complementing the MPA network and providing valuable data and evidence to inform wider ocean recovery efforts.

In order for this potential to be realised, it is important the first tranche of HPMA sites retain the ambition of the 2020 Benyon Review that first proposed them. HPMAs should:

- Provide the strictest protections. HPMAs must provide a higher level of protection than other types of MPA, allowing marine areas to return to as natural a state as possible. They must prohibit all extractive, destructive and depositional uses.
- Cover a range of sites. HPMAs must be sufficient in size and number, in each regional sea, and in inshore, nearshore, and offshore English waters, so they encompass a range of habitats. This will enable research into how different ecosystems recover when pressures are reduced.
- Be of sufficient size. The current minimum size of 5km in diameter for a HPMA is not large enough to realise the full benefits of new protections. Sites significantly over 5km in diameter should be designated, so that the impact of protections on sizeable areas can be considered.

⁶ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/brits-say-better-protection-for-ocean-needed.asp>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-marine-commitments-to-mark-world-ocean-day>

- Prioritise ecological and climate factors. The primary basis on which HPMA site selection should be ecological, responding conservation evidence and principles. Where socio-economic factors are considered, assessments must factor in both the positive socio-economic outcomes of HPMA (increased wildlife tourism, spillover effects for fishing etc) as well as negative ones. Pilot sites should also include blue carbon habitats in recognition of the potential of these ecosystems to store and sequester carbon.
- Benefit from a whole-site approach. All the wildlife and habitats within HPMA boundaries should be protected by effective management measures. A buffer-zone should be incorporated around their boundaries to avoid impacts from neighbouring activities affecting their success.
- Be closely monitored. A complete management and monitoring programme should be in place for each site from day one of designation. Where available, technologies should be used to aid monitoring, management and enforcement, to ensure that HPMA provide detailed information on what happens to different ocean sites when damaging activities are removed.

An HPMA network delivered to a high-ambition specification will boost fish stocks, as well as contributing to ocean recovery. As HPMA conserve wildlife and habitats on a large scale, the number, diversity, and size of fish in them will increase. Neighbouring fisheries will benefit as commercially fished species spillover into surrounding waters. Benefits of no-take zones can be seen in Scotland in Lamlash Bay where studies have shown that marine life has flourished since the establishment of Scotland's first no-take zone. Some species are reported to have increased by nearly 400% since protection measures were introduced, with benefits for exploited fish stocks.⁸

3. Fisheries must be rebuilt for thriving communities, nature and climate

UK seas are incredible, but they are in decline. In the wake of the recent IPCC report⁹, and with evidence showing that we are failing on 11 out of 15 indicators for marine health, transformative and fast change is needed. Fishing practices are recognised as the biggest threat to marine biodiversity and there is a need to ensure fishing and fish farming activities in the UK do not threaten the survival of endangered marine wildlife.

A fresh approach to fisheries management could see the UK place itself as a world leader in securing a more resilient future for our seas and coastal communities. We are calling on all UK administrations to strengthen their new joint draft policy (the Joint Fisheries Statement, (JFS) to deliver nature and climate smart fishing and set a pathway for ocean recovery. Currently the draft JFS, expected to be published in November 2022, lacks the necessary detail and ambition needed to chart a new course for our seas.¹⁰

UK governments could rebuild our fisheries for good through:

- Timebound commitments to recover depleted stocks and deliver environmentally sustainable fisheries and effective ecosystem-based management.

⁸ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link%20-%20HPMA%20briefing%202022.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>

¹⁰ [FFA response to the JFS consultation 12.4.22.pdf \(mcsuk.org\)](https://www.mcsuk.org/FFA%20response%20to%20the%20JFS%20consultation%2012.4.22.pdf)

In 2020, only 67% of assessed stocks of interest in the UK were fished at or below sustainable levels¹¹, putting the long-term future of UK fishing at risk. This over-exploitation is set to continue; in 2022 annual Total Allowable Catch (TAC) negotiations between the UK and other member states resulted in only 35% of the 79 agreed TACs being set in line with scientific advice provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) on sustainable take levels.¹² WWF research has shown that rebuilding fish stocks to their maximum sustainable yield could allow the UK to land an extra 442,000 tonnes of fish every year, worth £440 million, and support an additional 6,600 jobs in the fishing industry.¹³ Environmental sustainability must be the basis of fisheries management, with the environmental pillar of sustainability underpinning socio-economic sustainability. Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) must provide practical and environmentally sustainable management through the development of stock and geographic level management plans, including spatial management measures. In order to reflect current global best practice, FMPs need to include clear, timebound objectives to recover and maintain stocks within safe biological limits.

- Urgent and effective action to tackle wildlife bycatch in UK waters.

There remains a lack of meaningful progress by UK administrations to effectively tackle the issue of marine wildlife bycatch in UK waters. Each year thousands of seabirds, marine mammals, and other marine wildlife die unnecessarily in UK waters despite the fact that there are clear solutions to many of the problems. The JFS provides an opportunity to make real progress on this issue and to set urgent timebound targets to minimise and where possible eliminate sensitive species bycatch, as well as some of the key measures that are needed to further support this objective, including effective monitoring and mitigation.

- A firm commitment to the roll out of Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM).

As the Fisheries Act made its way through Parliament in 2020, there were strong voices from seafood businesses and parliamentarians alike that Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM) was a robust and cost-effective tool that would support the sustainability and accountability of UK fisheries. REM is a proven fisheries management tool already utilised by countries currently leading the way in sustainable fisheries management such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Not only would REM provide a more accurate picture of the impact UK fisheries are having on the marine environment, allowing for better management, it would also improve transparency and accountability across the UK fleet, remove potential barriers to entering sustainable supply chains and support positive marketing of UK seafood.

- A timebound commitment from all administrations to set out a climate-smart fisheries strategy.

The Fisheries Act sets out a clear objective to address the climate impact of fisheries. However, there is little in terms of concrete commitments as to how and when this will be delivered. It would be in keeping with the UK's nature and climate commitments to commit to setting out, in collaboration with stakeholders, a clear timetable for the delivery of a climate-smart fisheries strategy. Last August, the Future Fisheries Alliance (WWF, RSPB, MCS) published a report that

¹¹ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24056>

¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1061261/Assessing_negotiated_catch_limits_2020_to_2022.pdf

¹³ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/Value%20of%20restored%20UK%20seas%20summary.pdf>

set out a blueprint for what climate smart fisheries could look like.¹⁴ A new report developed in collaboration by MCS, WWF, RSPB, the NFFO, North Sea Wildlife Trusts and the University of Hull presents new findings and a route forward to help decarbonise the sector by electrifying the fishing fleet.¹⁵

Once again, these measures would support the long term future of fishing, as well as contributing to ocean recovery.

4. More must be done to realise the potential of blue carbon

Marine and coastal habitats like [seagrass](#) meadows and [saltmarshes](#) are vital 'blue' carbon stores, which have been in decline for decades. The last century saw the loss of 90% of UK seagrass and 85% of UK saltmarsh.¹⁶ The Government has acknowledged the climate benefits of restoration (the restoration of seagrass alone could lock up about 3% of the country's annual CO2 emissions.¹⁷) but meaningful action to support restoration at scale has not yet been forthcoming.

The following actions can be taken at comparatively low cost to drive restoration forward and to increase the carbon stored by marine habitats:

- Inclusion of blue carbon stores in carbon accounting. Although emissions from terrestrial carbon sinks are included in the greenhouse gas inventory, coastal and marine habitats are not included. This causes policy makers to overlook the importance of blue carbon for achieving net-zero goals and should be speedily rectified. Furthermore, we need to accelerate efforts towards achieving a scientifically robust UK blue carbon inventory and its mainstreaming into the Greenhouse Gas Inventory, the UK's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), Long Term Strategy and other instruments to achieve net zero.
- Development of a blue carbon code. By developing a rigorous and credible carbon code for saltmarsh and other habitats, the Government can encourage new financial instruments to support restoration (including leveraging private finance through carbon offset schemes). The Government could fund a body such as the British Standards Institute to support the development of a code for blue carbon stores, with Natural England or the Environment Agency acting as the regulator. Strategic well funded research is needed to inform the development of such a code, to ensure such mechanisms are rigorous in measurement and accounting.
- Funding an expansion of the ReMeMaRe project. [ReMeMaRe](#) is an Environment Agency initiative that has been working to restore 800 ha of saltmarshes, 25 ha of seagrass meadows and 50 ha oyster beds and 2 ha of kelp forests. The project is aiming to secure an additional £24 million of resources to drive forward this work. Rather than the EA embarking on an extended process of fundraising, the Government should deliver this investment to ensure that this restoration work can be undertaken as soon as possible.

¹⁴ Climate Smart Fisheries Report | WWF

¹⁵ [Electrifying the Fleet | Marine Conservation Society | Marine Conservation Society \(mcsuk.org\)](#)

¹⁶ <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/16/restoring-estuarine-and-coastal-habitats-conference/>

¹⁷ <https://news.sky.com/story/seagrass-that-stores-35-times-more-carbon-than-rainforests-being-planted-off-devon-coast-12283146>

An improvement in protections across the MPA network, as proposed above, would also help to realise the potential of blue carbon. Research on the English North Sea MPA network has found that it contains 51.9% of the total organic carbon stores in the English North Sea and 42.1% of total inorganic carbon stores in the English North Sea.¹⁸ However almost all of these MPAs are still subjected to broadscale disturbance, reducing their ability to store carbon. Stricter MPA protections would prevent further deterioration of carbon storage ability. Extensions of the MPA network should be considered to cover significant carbon stores that are currently completely unprotected. The potential of habitats not currently defined under the blue carbon label to store carbon should also be considered, including kelp.

As with other ocean recovery measures, action to realise the potential of blue carbon would also help fish stocks in the long term. Seagrass and saltmarsh are recognised for the support they offer coastal fisheries, providing shelter and sustenance for the juvenile populations of over 1/5th of the world's largest 25 fisheries.¹⁹ These habitats act as the nurseries needed to maintain fish stocks at sustainable levels, their restoration will help secure those stocks into the long term.

Conclusion

The organisations who have worked on this briefing published a 'marine scorecard' in January 2022, assessing the extent to which the Government had been successful in making 2021 a marine 'super year'. Whilst welcoming positive measures announced by Government, the scorecard concluded: *"Despite notable progress in some areas, in many respects 2021 has been a missed opportunity for action to protect our seas, and we look to 2022 for more urgent action towards ocean recovery."*²⁰

The measures set out above are the urgent actions 2022 needs to see for ocean recovery. By swiftly making the MPA network fit for purpose, complementing it with an ambitious HPMA network, addressing overfishing and unleashing the potential of blue carbon, space can be created for marine species to recover in and some of the worst pressures on those species can be alleviated. The recovery of these species will drive forward wider ocean recovery and pave the way for the recovery in fishing stocks required if fishing is to have a long-term future.

It is also essential that pollution shows clear downward trends to ensure any additional measures aren't thwarted by the impacts of pollution. This includes a robust UK chemicals strategy targeting the most harmful chemicals in use currently, such as PFAS.

A package of ambitious measures needs to be urgently implemented ahead of the next World Ocean Day. 2022 cannot be another missed year for ocean recovery.

¹⁸ https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?4427941/Assessment-of-Carbon-Capture-and-Storage-in-Natural-Systems-within-the-English-North-Sea-Including-within-Marine-Protected-Areas

¹⁹ Seagrass meadows support global fisheries production - Richard K.F. Unsworth, Lina Mtwana Nordlund, Leanne C. Cullen-Unsworth, Conservation Letters, Volume12, Issue1

²⁰ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/WCL_Marine_Scorecard_report_results.pdf



Wildlife and
Countryside



This briefing has been prepared by the Marine Conservation Society, Surfers Against Sewage, WWF-UK and Wildlife & Countryside Link, following World Ocean Day 2022.

For more information please contact:

Alice Watson, Marine Conservation Society alice.watson@mcsuk.org

Monika Baunach, WWF-UK, MBaunach@wwf.org.uk

Matthew Dawson, Wildlife and Countryside Link, matthew@wcl.org.uk

Amy Slack, Surfers Against Sewage amy@sas.org.uk