

2021: The Marine Super Year?

An assessment of Government progress on ocean protection

January 2022

Wildlife and
Countryside



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a speech to the Coastal Futures Conference in January 2021, Environment Minister Rebecca Pow [declared 2021 to be a 'Marine Super Year'](#), stating that the UK would use its presidency of COP26 to lead calls to restore the marine environment to health. The Minister stressed that global leadership “really starts with our ambition and delivery at home”. This vision was very welcome and built on increasing public and political awareness of the role healthy seas play in building healthy communities and in fighting the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

To track the actions taken to match this ambition, we published [a scorecard](#) setting out what needed to be done for 2021 to be a ‘super year’ for our seas. Supported by a wide cross-section of the UK’s leading environment and wildlife groups, our proposals included ocean recovery targets, offshore planning reforms and progress on bycatch. These actions and policies were those we judged to be essential to tackle the urgent threats faced by the marine environment.

We have assessed progress for 2021 against this scorecard. This comes at a time when the health of our seas has rarely been higher on the agenda, particularly with public awareness of the impacts of sewage on our coasts. However, on the whole our findings reveal a widespread and concerning lack of meaningful action, with progress too slow across many aspects of marine policy. So, despite notable progress in some areas, in many respects **2021 has therefore been a missed opportunity for action to protect our seas, and we look to 2022 for more urgent action towards ocean recovery.**

There have been highlights where Ministers have demonstrated leadership on the marine environment. We were heartened to see the World Oceans Day commitment to designate Highly Protected Marine Area pilots in English waters, and the Government also deserves great credit for adopting the world-leading ‘State of Nature’ target in the Environment Act. In addition, the Government helped ensure that the Glasgow Climate Pact agreed a more prominent role for the ocean. But these have not been matched by adequate progress on marine protections, bycatch, or offshore planning.

Our analysis concludes that the majority of priority areas saw little progress, with only 2 of the 17 interventions we proposed seeing good progress. However, many opportunities remain to make 2022 the year where the tide is turned for UK seas given sufficient political will and commensurate support.

Through action to ensure Environment Act targets on halting the decline of nature apply at sea as well as on land, agreeing a joint fisheries statement that delivers on the objectives of the Fisheries Act, and delivering action on HPMAs that matches the stated ambition, we can achieve this goal. We call on the Government to enact the policies we have highlighted as outstanding from 2021 as the basis of a comprehensive marine recovery agenda for 2022.

SCORECARD

Our scorecard set out an assessment of 5 priority areas for the marine environment in 2021, listed in no particular order. Each priority area includes policies which we believed to be practical, achievable and most importantly beneficial for ocean health.

These have now been scored for progress in 2021 as either:

-  Good Progress
-  Some Progress
-  No Meaningful Progress

Score	DELIVER TARGETS FOR OCEAN RECOVERY
	The Environment Bill must be amended to include a legally binding target to halt nature's decline by 2030
	The UK Marine Strategy should be revised as a new 'Ocean Recovery Strategy', running up to 2030
Score	PROTECT AND ENHANCE MARINE BIODIVERSITY
	Begin consultation on the designation of pilot HPMA's in English & SoS waters by World Ocean Day 2021 and announce designation by year end
	HPMA pilot sites should be identified that cover a range of habitats including Blue Carbon ecosystems, inshore and offshore waters areas and English coastal regions
	Deliver the MPA bottom trawling restrictions the MMO has recently consulted on and remove environmentally damaging fishing activities from all offshore MPAs
	Publish a detailed roadmap for achieving 30% of our waters being fully or highly protected by 2030 ahead of the COP15 biodiversity conference
	Deliver a consultation on Remote Electronic Monitoring on fishing vessels
	Deliver meaningful action to ensure that fisheries are sustainably managed, with fishing quotas allocated fairly across the entire fleet based on sustainability criteria and scientific advice
Score	OFFSHORE PLANNING REFORM
	Marine Plans must be urgently updated so increasing demands on the sea are planned to allow nature to recover at the same time as helping to mitigate climate change
	Commit to a centralised, and cross-departmental, plan led approach to consenting of marine developments
	Ensure that nature protection, recovery and enhancement are front loaded into strategic marine planning
Score	ACTION ON BYCATCH
	Urgently increase testing and deployment of both alternative gears and effective mitigation measures at the fishing fleet level
	Ensure effective at-sea monitoring of fishing activity and bycatch reporting
Score	ACTION ON BLUE CARBON
	Action to prioritise the creation, protection and restoration of marine sites with potential for the greatest natural carbon storage
	At least one of the pilot HPMA's should focus on Blue Carbon protection and restoration, as recommended in the Benyon Review
	On the international stage, government should advocate for the preservation of Blue Carbon to be recognised as a key nature-based solution and climate mitigation strategy

DELIVER TARGETS FOR OCEAN RECOVERY

The Environment Bill must include a legally binding 'State of Nature' target to halt nature's decline by 2030 at the latest - on land and at sea. The UK marine strategy must be revised to deliver ocean recovery in the same period:

Verdict of progress in 2021: A mixed picture

The Environment Act was amended to set a legally-binding State of Nature target to halt and begin to reverse the decline of nature by 2030. This is a fantastic step forward to ensuring that the UK Government has the right legal framework in place to justify its claim to be a world leader in environmental policy.

However, the Government has yet to grasp the opportunity to reform the **UK Marine Strategy**. This is the framework designed to monitor and manage human activity in UK waters, but the goal of achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) by 2020 was missed, failing on 11 out of 15 targets.

The UK's status as an independent coastal state offers a chance to set clear and ambitious targets that not only achieve GES, but ensure the long term recovery of our oceans. Doing so would bolster the UK's credentials for international marine leadership, however current proposals look unlikely to achieve GES by 2024, the date of the next assessment. With the Government currently reviewing the strategy's 'Programme of Measures', which outlines how the Government aims to achieve GES, there remain opportunities for reform, yet without increased ambition and action we face another cycle in which it fails to deliver meaningful improvements.

Actions outstanding which must be delivered in 2022:

- Integrate the new State of Nature target (to halt and begin to reverse the decline of nature by 2030) into the UK Marine Strategy and wider marine policy, setting out a path to ensure that at least 30% of our seas are fully or highly protected by 2030 (30x30).
- Strengthen the UK Marine Strategy through enhancement of the Programme of Measures, which was recently consulted on. When the final Programme of Measures is published in Summer 2022, ensure that recommendations from the [ELUK consultation response](#) are included in the updated strategy.

- Use the opportunity presented by a new cycle of the UK Marine Strategy to enact reforms that will see the strategy deliver Ocean Recovery in UK Seas by 2030 - building on the Fisheries Act objective, the 30x30 ambition and achieving the aims of the 25 Year Environment Plan.
- The Environment Act target to halt and begin to reverse the decline of nature by 2030 should apply to species at sea as well as on land; the biodiversity index should include marine species and there should be a target for the condition of protected sites at sea.

PROTECT AND ENHANCE MARINE BIODIVERSITY

Ahead of the COP15 Biodiversity Summit, Defra must make sure action is taken to protect and enhance marine biodiversity, prioritising action to ensure that 30% of our waters are protected and managed for nature's recovery by 2030:

Verdict of progress in 2021: Little progress

- Designating Highly Protected Marine Areas.*** In June 2020, an in-depth Government review, led by former Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon, recommended a new designation for the protection and recovery of marine ecosystems – Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs). On World Oceans Day in June 2021, the Government confirmed plans to pilot HPMAs, a hugely welcome announcement. However, while we called on the Government to deliver the designation of HPMAs at pace, with sites nominated by the end of 2021, this process will not be completed until late 2022, with a shortlist of pilot sites yet to be published. Pilot sites should be identified that cover a range of habitats including Blue Carbon ecosystems, inshore and offshore waters and English coastal regions, and be at a scale to deliver meaningful protection for chosen sites within the trial period and beyond. However, without a public shortlist, we cannot assess whether the sites will indeed deliver this range of habitats and scale of protection.
- Removing environmentally damaging fishing activities from all offshore MPAs within English and Secretary of State waters.*** In February 2021, the Marine Management Organisation launched a consultation on imposing partial restrictions on bottom trawling in two offshore English MPAs, and completely prohibiting bottom trawling in two others. We called for measures to ban bottom trawling in these areas to be enacted as soon as possible. While we appreciate the challenges in relation to the EU exit deal, there has



been no meaningful progress on this initiative and the Government must now use the new powers in the Fisheries Act to deliver effective protections.

- iii. ***Ensuring that fisheries are sustainable and effectively monitored.*** There were some steps in the right direction on fisheries last year. We welcome the Government's Call for Evidence on potential measures to manage stocks of sandeel and Norway pout in UK waters, which could start a fundamental overhaul of how the industrial fishery for forage species is managed. There is compelling evidence that the sandeel fishery is compounding climate-induced declines in sandeels and the UK seabirds they support. So much stronger curbs on these fisheries and their catch limits are needed to guarantee enough of the stock for seabirds and other marine wildlife, including struggling cod stocks.

In addition, there are 40 offshore MPAs in English waters, where damaging fishing activities need to be stopped. The Government has not yet taken any action to protect nature by restricting industrial fishing techniques across the wider network of protected sites. A detailed roadmap for achieving full or high protection of 30% of our waters by 2030 should still be published ahead of the COP15 conference.

Implementation of new measures has generally been limited. The Government has not committed to ensure that fishing catch limits are set within scientifically recommended sustainable levels. It also took no action in 2021 to begin the roll-out of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) as a mechanism to ensure that all fishing activity is fully documented. There has been a dearth of action to ensure that all fisheries activity takes an ecosystems-based approach, alongside wider marine planning and conservation measures. There has also been a lack of progress on fairly allocating fishing quotas across the entire fleet based on sustainability criteria and scientific advice.

Actions outstanding which must be delivered in 2022:

- Complete the HPMA pilot process, delivering a minimum of five HPMA pilot sites covering a range of habitats including Blue Carbon ecosystems, inshore and offshore waters areas and English coastal regions. Sites should be designated at a scale to deliver meaningful protection during the pilot period and beyond.
- Deliver the partial restrictions on bottom trawling in two offshore English MPAs, and completely prohibit bottom trawling in the two others consulted on by the Marine Management Organisation. Bring forward proposals for the



40 offshore MPAs in English waters, where damaging fishing activities need to be stopped.

- Publish a detailed roadmap for achieving full or high protection of 30% of our waters by 2030, this should be published ahead of the delayed COP15 conference.
- Deliver REM with cameras across the fishing fleet to a fixed timescale, to ensure that all fishing activity is fully documented by 2024 at the latest. Ensure that adoption is begun across priority fleet segments in 2022.
- All UK nations agree on a joint fisheries statement that delivers on the objectives of the Fisheries Act and that legally binding Fisheries Management Plans are adopted to enable stock recovery for all commercially exploited stocks.

OFFSHORE PLANNING REFORM

To deliver its ambitions for the deployment of offshore wind, the UK Government must urgently revise the marine planning system to deliver a clear hierarchy of decision making, with climate and nature as the top priorities:

Verdict of progress in 2021: Some progress

There has been some welcome action on offshore planning in 2021, with positive steps to prioritise nature protection, recovery and enhancement. The consultation on compensation for developments in MPAs addressed an important issue with increased activity at sea. We are glad that Defra recognises the need for spatial prioritisation in the marine environment given Government commitments to marine protected areas, offshore wind and fisheries. It is also positive that Defra are keen to examine the effects of underwater noise at the construction phase of offshore wind as well as noise linked to unexploded ordnance work, and the commitment to launch an evidence project looking at the option for co-location of fishing and offshore wind is welcome.

However, Marine Plans still urgently need to be updated to ensure that the cumulative environmental impacts of our increasing demands on the sea are planned to allow nature to recover at the same time as helping to mitigate climate change. Marine plans are still not suited to help deliver 40GW of offshore wind capacity by 2030 in a way that is compatible with nature's recovery.

We welcomed last year's publication of the four remaining Marine Plans to complete the English network of Marine Plans. However, these plans still lack the strategic or spatial road map to supporting the achievement of GES and delivering net zero targets whilst supporting ocean recovery following an ecosystem-based approach. We are concerned about the plans' abilities to address emerging challenges including cumulative impacts, displacement and colocation in the face of the rapid expansion of offshore wind development.

A poor planning regime will further exacerbate these challenges and we are disappointed at the lack of progress in amending the East Marine Plan in England to make it the pilot for a new generation of marine plans.

Actions outstanding which must be delivered in 2022:

- The Government still needs to commit to a centralised, cross departmental, plan-led approach to consenting of all marine developments and activities.
- Nature protection, recovery and enhancement must be front loaded into strategic marine planning to facilitate the timely rollout of the UK's new generation of offshore wind. This is vital to ensure a truly green energy transition which avoids further damage to our degraded marine environment and contributes to ocean recovery.
- The welcomed approach of the Marine Spatial Prioritisation programme must translate into amendment of the East Marine Plans for England. These plans must become the pilot for a new and improved generation of Marine Plans. Engagement with stakeholders, including eNGOs, will be vital throughout the process to ensure the challenges faced by our seas are addressed.

ACTION ON BYCATCH

Effective and urgent action is required to eliminate bycatch, particularly of sensitive species, across UK fisheries:

Verdict of progress in 2021: Little progress

Sensitive species continue to be bycaught, injured and killed in UK fisheries. The Government has failed to take urgent and effective action to address fishing related deaths:

- i. We have yet to see the establishment of clear targets for continual reductions in sensitive species bycatch in order to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch within a set timeframe.

- ii. There was no meaningful action to establish a programme to urgently increase testing and deployment of alternative fishing gear and effective mitigation measures at the fleet level.
- iii. There has been no increased action on the water to ensure effective at-sea monitoring of fishing activity and bycatch reporting to improve knowledge using adequate numbers of human observers and/or REM.

Actions outstanding which must be delivered in 2022:

- We welcome the intention to publish the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative in 2022, although we remain concerned that it will lack the strong measures necessary.
- Going forward, bycatch prevention plans must be robust, enforceable and contain the detail required to meet the 'ecosystem objective' of the UK Fisheries Act (2020) within a reasonable and specified timeframe.
- A robust and fit for purpose bycatch monitoring programme would help to ensure that there is sufficient data to determine and monitor reductions in bycatch rates.
- Deliver REM with cameras across the fishing fleet to a fixed timescale, to ensure that all fishing activity is fully documented by 2024 at the latest. Ensuring that adoption is begun across priority fleet segments in 2022.

ACTION ON BLUE CARBON

The UK Government should promote nature-based solutions to the climate and ecological crises, prioritising the protection and restoration of Blue Carbon Habitats through site-based measures:

Verdict of progress in 2021: Some progress

The UK played a leading role on the international stage last year, particularly at COP26 in Glasgow. The Government deserves credit for its work to elevate the ocean in the climate discourse. Work to define the place of the ocean in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), building off the COP25 mandate, helped ensure that the Glasgow Climate Pact agreed a more prominent role for the ocean. In particular, it recognised the "critical role" of nature, including the ocean in climate change adaptation and mitigation, invited existing UNFCCC workstreams to consider how to "integrate and strengthen ocean-based action" and set up a bespoke annual ocean dialogue in UNFCCC to "strengthen ocean-based action".

However, despite the increased interest in Blue Carbon from the Government, as also demonstrated by the commitment to establish a Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership, there has as yet been insufficient precautionary action on the ground to protect key Blue Carbon habitats from increasing anthropogenic pressures.

Domestically, there has been some progress by the Environment Agency in identifying areas with potential for the greatest natural carbon storage around the coast of England and prioritising the creation, protection and restoration of these sites based on their potential to capture carbon. But there has not yet been coordinated action to protect and restore these habitats, nor a commitment that at least one of the pilot HPMA's will focus on Blue Carbon protection and restoration, as recommended in the Benyon Review.

Actions outstanding that must be delivered in 2022:

- Ensure that at least one of the pilot HPMA's focuses on Blue Carbon protection and restoration, as recommended in the Benyon Review.
- Take steps to ensure the Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership is set up to work closely with the UK Blue Carbon Forum to share data and avoid duplication of effort in work towards quantifying blue carbon stocks and fluxes in UK waters.
- Make efforts to protect Blue Carbon stocks in offshore waters through limits on the use of bottom towed fishing gear within current MPAs and in key areas outside of MPAs.
- Ensure that critical coastal habitats currently within protected areas receive the protections mandated by those designations and accelerate action for the creation, and restoration of marine and coastal sites based on their potential to sequester carbon.

CONCLUSION

This scorecard was originally compiled by Wildlife and Countryside Link in April 2021. We are publishing this update in January 2022, highlighting progress across the marine environment and assessing whether 2021 truly was a Marine Super Year.

Based on the analysis above, we would conclude that the Government cannot be judged to have delivered a 'super year' in 2021. The majority of priority areas saw little progress and only 2 of the 17 policies we highlighted as necessary saw good progress. Action on the State of Nature target and at COP26 has not been matched by enough progress on marine protections, bycatch, or offshore planning.



As we look to the new year, we remain hopeful that 2022 will turn the tide for our seas. Action to protect our precious marine life remains in the Government's reach and the ambitions for a Marine Super Year can still be achieved given sufficient political will. We call on the Government to enact the policies we have highlighted as outstanding from 2021 as the basis of a comprehensive marine recovery agenda for 2022.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 65 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. This document is supported by the following Link members:

