

World Ocean Day 2021: Westminster Hall debate briefing

World Ocean Day is a moment to reflect on the importance of the ocean to our planet, and human existence on it. The economic, social and health benefits that the ocean provides go well beyond any one policy area or a particular Government department – it enriches every part of our lives.

On this World Ocean Day, celebration must be accompanied by action. The benefits that spring from marine ecosystems are reducing, as the health of the ocean declines. Climate change, pollution and damaging human activities are putting enormous pressure on all aspects of marine life. The deadline to achieve Good Environmental Status for our seas was 2020. With the deadline passed, it has been confirmed that the UK is currently failing on 11 out of 15 indicators of ocean health.

We set out below how robust policy action would arrest the decline of the ocean and place this planetary life support system into recovery, securing and growing the benefits of a healthy ocean for everyone.

What can the UK do to make this World Ocean Day a turning point for ocean recovery?

1. Unleash the potential of blue carbon

Benefits:

- Help the UK to hit net zero: Coastal habitats like [seagrass](#) meadows and [saltmarshes](#) are vital carbon stores. Sky Ocean Rescue and WWF's 'Value of Restored Seas' report suggests that restoring these habitats could capture up to 137Mt CO₂e with an economic value of c. £9.4bn by 2050.¹ The restoration of seagrass alone could lock up about 3% of the country's annual CO₂ emissions.²
- Provide new jobs in places where they are needed most: Green Alliance research has shown that constituencies with potential for seagrass restoration have a higher proportion of people with poorer employment prospects than the average.³ Supporting habitat restoration at scale will benefit the creation of new jobs locally to deliver that restoration, contributing to the Government's levelling up agenda.
- Protect against flooding: Protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems will preserve and prolong the flood defence benefits these habitats provide. This would save an estimated £6.2 billion in spending on artificial flood defences by 2050⁴, protecting our coastal communities from rising sea levels and increasingly frequent powerful storms.
- Preserve fish stocks: 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

¹ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/ocean-heroes/uk-seas>

² <https://news.sky.com/story/seagrass-that-stores-35-times-more-carbon-than-rainforests-being-planted-off-devon-coast-12283146>

³ https://green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Jobs_for_a_green_recovery.pdf

⁴ RPA (2020) The Value of Restored UK Seas - Final report for WWF, Jan 2021.

world's largest 25 fisheries.⁵ These habitats act as the nurseries needed to maintain fish stocks at sustainable levels.

Policy action needed to realise these benefits:

- Coordinate and scale up the protection and restoration of saltmarsh and seagrass habitats, through grant opportunities, government funding and the establishment of new financial instruments (including leveraging private finance). This restoration programme would help halt current rates of loss of coastal habitats (estimated at approximately 3% per year⁶) and address the loss of 85% of UK saltmarsh and 90% of UK seagrass over the last century.⁷

2. Secure a long-term future for fishing

Benefits:

- Preserve fish stocks: In 2020, only 67% of assessed stocks of interest in the UK were fished at or below sustainable levels⁸, putting the long-term future of UK fishing at risk. This is far from the UK's commitment to end overfishing by 2020 – a target that has now been missed and risks the long-term future of UK fishing, as well as the very survival of affected species.
- Create new jobs: 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.⁹
- Stem biodiversity loss: Fisheries, in terms of overfishing of target stocks and capture of non-target species and impact of damaging practices, is the biggest direct cause of biodiversity loss in the ocean.¹⁰ An urgent transition to more sustainable fishing is essential to stem these losses.
- Help the UK to reach net zero: Recent research suggests that the carbon released by bottom trawling is larger than most countries' annual carbon emissions.¹¹ Ending the practice in UK seas, both in key blue carbon habitats and in areas protected for seabed features, will reduce our carbon emissions. In addition, the value of emissions avoided through fleet decarbonisation could be close to £100m by 2050.¹²

Policy action needed to realise these benefits:

- Remove environmentally damaging fishing activities from all offshore MPAs designated to protect seabed species and habitats, and those protecting blue carbon. Bottom trawling is a

⁵ Seagrass meadows support global fisheries production - Richard K.F. Unsworth, Lina Mtwana Nordlund, Leanne C. Cullen-Unsworth, Conservation Letters, Volume12, Issue1

⁶ RPA (2020) The Value of Restored UK Seas - Final report for WWF, Jan 2021.

⁷ <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/16/restoring-estuarine-and-coastal-habitats-conference/>

⁸ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24056>

⁹ RPA (2020) The Value of Restored UK Seas - Final report for WWF, Jan 2021

¹⁰ <https://www.mcsuk.org/ocean-emergency/sustainable-seafood/unsustainable-seafood/>

¹¹ <https://www.blumarinefoundation.com/2021/03/18/trawling-discovered-to-have-massive-climate-change-impact/>

¹² RPA (2020) The Value of Restored UK Seas - Final report for WWF, Jan 2021

particularly damaging method of fishing where heavily weighted nets are dragged across the seabed to sweep up fish and shellfish. The practice devastates seabed ecosystems, stirring up and releasing significant quantities of carbon stored in the sea floor. A 2021 Marine Conservation Society paper found that bottom trawling was taking place in 98% of UK MPAs and highlighted that an offshore marine habitat could not be considered protected if it was subject to the practice.¹³ 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. Whilst this is a start, there are a total of 40 offshore MPAs in English waters – to be effective, a ban needs to cover all 40.

- Extend Remote Electronic Monitoring across the fishing fleet. We do not have the data to fully understand the scale and impact of fishing, as less than 1% of catches are independently monitored.¹⁴ Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras provides a way forward. REM cameras on fishing vessels will provide high quality data on the reality of what is being fished, including insight into the type and frequency of other species accidentally caught in fishing gear (bycatch), and will help deliver compliance
- Publish clear timetable for action to end wildlife [bycatch](#). This should include effective independent at sea monitoring, and mitigation on damaging gear.
- Develop an English fisheries strategy that sets out actions to achieve the climate change objective within the Fisheries Act. The strategy should provide a decarbonisation pathway for English fisheries to achieve lowest possible emissions, in line with net zero.

3. Strengthen and protect our network of Marine Protected Areas

Benefits:

- Create new jobs: Extending full protection to just 30% of our seas would yield net gains for the UK economy estimated at £10.5 billion, supporting up to 12,000 jobs in the tourism and recreation sector alone¹⁵. A strong network of healthy, nature-rich marine parks in UK waters will be a major draw for domestic and international tourism.
- Boost mental health: Recent research from the Mental Health Foundation has found that 65% of people said that spending time by water has a positive impact on their mental health, with the more pristine the natural habitat the better the effect on mental health.¹⁶ Allowing more people access to more nature-rich, healthy and fully protected ocean sites will boost public health, and help national physical and mental wellbeing.

Policy action needed to realise these benefits:

- Begin consultation on the designation of pilot [Highly Protected Marine Areas](#) in English and Secretary of State waters (the English inshore and offshore and Northern Ireland offshore zones) and announce designation by the end of 2021. At least five pilot sites should be identified that

¹³ <https://www.mcsuk.org/ocean-emergency/marine-protected-areas/>

¹⁴ <https://www.mcsuk.org/news/five-reasons-cameras-boats-could-help-end-overfishing/>

¹⁵ RPA (2020) The Value of Restored UK Seas - Final report for WWF, Jan 2021

¹⁶ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf

cover a range of habitats including areas of high blue carbon potential, inshore and offshore waters areas and English coastal regions.

- Publish a detailed roadmap for achieving full or high protection of 30% of our waters by 2030 ahead of October 2021 and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in October. The UK was a driving force of the [30x30 initiative](#), which aims to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030. We must set a domestic path to meeting this international commitment.

4. Publish an ocean recovery strategy

Benefits:

- Help achieve net zero: Our ocean is essential to a healthy climate, but rising temperatures hamper its ability to protect us from the effects of climate change.¹⁷ The ocean has so far absorbed one third of all emissions but is projected to warm by 1-4oC by 2100.¹⁸ Surfers Against Sewage are campaigning for an '[Ocean Emergency](#)' to be declared to secure action on ocean warming. A climate focused ocean recovery strategy will help reverse this concerning trend.
- Highlight the role that the marine ecosystem plays in combating climate change: It is beyond doubt that the ocean and climate are intertwined - action on one is action on the other. An ocean recovery strategy could include measures to support the incredible ability of the marine ecosystem, and of individual marine species, to help regulate our climate and capture and to store carbon to accelerate progress towards achieving net zero. To give one example, a blue whale captures around 33 tons of CO2 equivalent over the course of their life.¹⁹ The survival of these marine species will help to guarantee ours.
- Provide global leadership: Ocean recovery offers new opportunities to provide leadership in marine protection. With the UK now an independent coastal state, there is a once in a generation opportunity to set clear and ambitious targets that not only achieve Good Environmental Status but also ensure the long-term restoration of a healthy marine ecosystem, demonstrating the UK's leadership in marine matters on the global stage. This leadership will be particularly effective in this crucial year for nature in view of the UK presidencies of the UN climate summit (COP26) and the G7.

Policy action needed to realise these benefits:

- Recognise that the Marine Strategy, the framework that manages human activity in English waters, is nearly a decade old - and is showing its age. A 2019 update found that it was failing to deliver on its core objective of achieving Good Environmental Status for English waters, missing 11 out of 15 indicators for good sea health.²⁰ Given new commitments to tackle climate change and nature loss, and our increased understanding of the relationship between the ocean

¹⁷ See Surfers Against Sewage, Ocean and Climate Report 2020

<https://www.sas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SAS-Ocean-Climate-Report-2020-Digital.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/oceans-do-us-a-huge-service-by-absorbing-nearly-a-third-of-global-co2-emissions-but-at-what-cost>

¹⁹ <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/protecting-whales-protect-planet>

²⁰ https://www.mcsuk.org/news/uk_marine_strategy_2019

and our climate, the marine strategy should be reviewed, renewed and reframed as a holistic Ocean Recovery Strategy.²¹ This strategy should be fit for purpose in tackling the climate and nature emergencies, and be set up to reverse the decline of UK seas and achieve ocean recovery by 2030.

- Lay out a clear path to delivering the [2030 Species Recovery target](#), which the Government has now pledged to add to the Environment Bill, as well as contributing to net zero.

Next steps: Scoring progress on ocean recovery

At the start of 2021, the Government declared 2021 to be a “Marine Super Year”. Marine Conservation Society, Surfers Against Sewage, WWF-UK and Wildlife & Countryside Link and eight other nature charities have published a Marine Super Year Scorecard, setting out priority areas for marine action that would enable the Government to deliver on this designation. This scorecard can be found [here](#).

The action taken over the months ahead, in the year of UK COP leadership, will help determine if 2021 truly becomes a Super Year for the marine environment - and whether this World Ocean Day will be a turning point for ocean recovery.

This briefing has been prepared by the Marine Conservation Society, Surfers Against Sewage, WWF-UK and Wildlife & Countryside Link ahead of the Westminster Hall Debate secured by Selaine Saxby MP for World Ocean Day, 8 June 2021.

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²¹ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/ocean-heroes>