

MARINE PROTECTED AREAS – AN INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF BRIEFINGS FROM SCOTTISH ENVIRONMENT LINK'S MARINE TASKFORCE, EXPLORING THE CREATION OF SCOTLAND'S NEW MARINE PROTECTED AREA NETWORK

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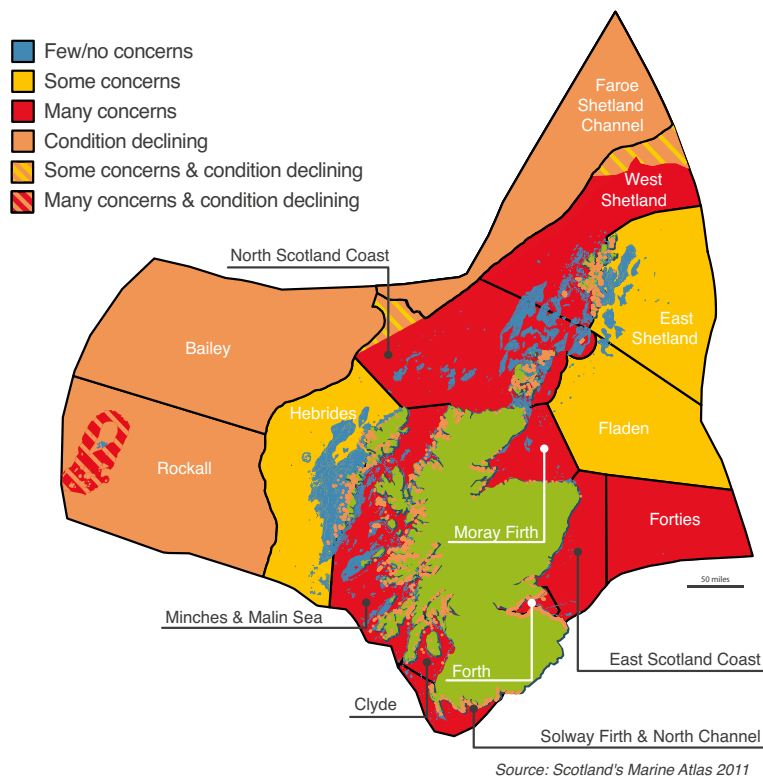
BACKGROUND

Scotland's seas are truly amazing. Our inshore waters alone support around 8,000 complex and 40,000 single cell plants and animals, including a variety of internationally important habitats and species. We have taken advantage of this diverse environment's ability to provide us with a vast array of goods and services and, in the 21st Century, it remains at the forefront of our food and energy needs. However, the industrialisation of our seas has taken its toll. If we do not take effective action now, our seas will continue their current decline to a poor and unproductive state from which they will not return. By providing species and habitats with some much-needed breathing space, marine protected areas can help ensure this does not happen. An ecologically coherent network of well-managed marine protected areas is therefore vital to conserve and regenerate our seas, in turn protecting the many goods and services they provide now, and for generations to come.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- It is highly likely no 'pristine' ecosystems are left in Scottish waters.
- Shallow and shelf subtidal sediments – the majority of Scotland's seabed – are facing some or many concerns.
- The health of virtually every habitat type in Scottish waters is either declining or a matter of concern (see map opposite).
- All of Scotland's 30 species of shark, skate and ray are on the OSPAR threatened and declining list.
- Kittiwake numbers have halved since the mid 80s, while Arctic skuas declined by 71% between 1986 and 2008.
- Harbour seal numbers are dramatically declining – in some areas by as much as 83%.
- Despite having the highest diversity in Northern European waters, the population status of many of the 20 plus cetacean species (whale, dolphin and porpoise) found in Scottish waters is unknown.

HABITAT CONDITION AND STATUS



This map shows the condition of Scotland's marine habitats as assessed by the Scottish Government's Marine Atlas.

WHY MARINE PROTECTED AREAS?

The term 'marine protected area' or 'MPA' refers to a geographically defined area of sea designated, regulated and managed to conserve or enhance an ecosystem. Just 1.3% of the global marine area is offered any degree of protection through MPA designation, which is still far below the target of 10% set by the Convention of Biological Diversity. Before the introduction of the Marine (Scotland) Act, the Natura 2000 process offered the only opportunity for spatial protection in Scotland's seas. Just 4% of our territorial waters are currently covered by Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designation, designed to protect four species and eight habitat types. There are no Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated entirely in the marine environment.

The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 provides powers to designate a new type of MPA. These 'nature conservation MPAs' offer spatial protection, tailored to meet the needs of all Scotland's marine habitats and species. The Act also places a duty on Scottish Ministers to deliver an ecologically coherent network of MPAs that contributes to the conservation or improvement of the UK marine environment. The process to identify potential areas for new nature conservation MPAs is now underway. LINK is working closely with SNH and Marine Scotland to ensure the most appropriate sites are selected. In future file notes we will explore the designation and management of these sites in detail and how you as an MSP can get involved.

LINK'S VIEW

- MPAs are urgently needed to help reverse the declining health of our seas and regenerate our marine environment.
- An ecologically coherent network of well-managed MPAs must be established by 2012.
- Sites should be designated according to scientific criteria, using our best available science, and following the precautionary principle where necessary.
- Strong conservation objectives for each site must be set to protect, and where appropriate, enhance the features under protection.
- Sites must be managed proactively to ensure all activities that potentially pose a threat are controlled. Any activities taking place within a site must be sustainable, as we cannot allow site damage to continue by the same activities that have resulted in the current degraded condition.
- The new marine planning system, established under the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 must support the conservation objectives of the MPA network.
- We acknowledge such decisions are challenging. Strong political will is therefore crucial if we are to meet our national and international obligations to protect and regenerate our seas.
- Adequate financial and administrative support must be provided so MPAs can be managed to meet site conservation objectives.

Scottish Environment LINK is the liaison body for Scotland's voluntary environmental organisations, over thirty organisations collectively representing around half a million people, working together for a sustainable Scotland. Scottish Environment LINK's Marine Taskforce comprises of the following organisations.

