

MARINE PROTECTED AREAS – THE SELECTION PROCESS

THIS BRIEFING, THE SECOND IN OUR SERIES, OUTLINES THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S DESIGNATION PROCESS FOR NEW NATURE CONSERVATION MARINE PROTECTED AREAS UNDER THE MARINE (SCOTLAND) ACT 2010.

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Scotland's coasts and seas are truly amazing. Not only are they home to a huge variety of incredible marine life, they also provide a vast array of goods and services. Yet the health of virtually every broad habitat type in Scottish waters is declining or a matter of concern and populations of our iconic marine species are facing serious problems. An ecologically coherent network of well-managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is urgently needed to halt this trend and regenerate the health of our precious marine environment.

WHO IDENTIFIES AND DESIGNATES NEW NATURE CONSERVATION MPAs?

Marine Scotland is leading the project to identify new MPA locations, supported by SNH and JNCC. A report containing MPA options identified by Marine Scotland and partners should be placed before the Scottish Parliament for review near the end of this year, and the proposals will then be subject to a 12 week public consultation. Following this, Scottish Ministers will make the final designation orders. It is also possible for third parties to propose MPAs. LINK members and community groups have already submitted proposals for areas they believe would benefit from protection. These will be subject to the same assessment and designation process as MPAs identified by Marine Scotland.

WHAT HABITATS AND SPECIES CAN BE PROTECTED?

Any species or habitat can ultimately be offered protection within an MPA. However, a list of 'MPA Search Features' has been identified and the location of these features will underpin Scottish MPA site selection. The list of 'Search Features' is set out in the Scottish Government's MPA Selection Guidelines¹ and contains a variety of habitats and species such as flame shell beds, minke whale and black guillemot. It is important the network protects and, where appropriate, recovers features important to, and representative of, the Scottish marine environment in addition to those which are rare, threatened or declining.

HOW ARE NATURE CONSERVATION MPAs BEING SELECTED?

Marine Scotland and partners are identifying potential MPAs in accordance with the Scottish MPA Selection Guidelines. First, a review will assess the extent to which MPA Search Features are protected by existing protected areas and spatial management areas² (such fisheries closures). Just 4% of our territorial waters are currently designated as Special Areas of Conservation, protecting only four species and eight habitat types.

Next, broad search areas for the MPA Search Features not considered adequately protected by the above sites will be identified, and the MPA selection guidelines applied to refine them into search locations. These search locations will then be prioritised according to the quality of the Search Features. Areas considered by Marine Scotland to be 'least damaged/more natural' will be considered first, before extending the search across Scotland's seas more widely.

Once identified, the sites will be assessed collectively to determine the ecological coherence of the network as a whole. Future briefings will explore the criteria for ecological coherence and whether we think the Scottish Government is managing to deliver it.

1 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/295194/0113809.doc
2 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/295194/0121926.pdf

The Scottish Government is committed to identifying and designating sites based on the best available scientific evidence and we are supportive of this approach. Socio-economic considerations may be taken into account when choosing between two sites of equivalent ecological value. Many marine stakeholders, including LINK members, have supplied the project with data to aid the designation process. In addition, SNH and JNCC are carrying out an extensive programme of new survey work in order to support MPA designation. The surveys are already producing exciting new information about our weird and wonderful marine life. It is essential the Scottish Government maintains this survey effort to ensure we take the action necessary to protect and enhance the health of our seas.

This identification process is underway now. If you have any questions about MPAs, including what it might mean for the area you represent, please get in touch using the contact details below.

For further information please contact LINK's Marine Taskforce policy officers:
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Sea loch anemones © Paul Kay

LINK'S VIEW

- MPAs are urgently needed to safeguard currently unprotected species and habitats, and make a vital contribution to the regeneration of our marine environment.
- Sites must be selected using the best available scientific evidence, following the precautionary principle where necessary.
- Engaging local communities can help to maximise the benefits delivered by the network.
- It is essential MPAs outwith least damaged/more natural sites are identified to regenerate the health of degraded areas of Scotland's seas and deliver a coherent network.
- The network must protect nationally important habitats and populations of species already included in the Habitats and Birds Directives as well as species and habitats that are currently unlisted.
- Existing protected areas and spatial management areas must provide specific conservation objectives and management measures for any new MPA Search Features identified in the area, to ensure full and proper protection is provided.
- MPAs are a vital tool in the protection of highly mobile species. Areas used for important life stages such as breeding and nursing must be protected.

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.

