

Sealife protection plans need people power

People have a once-in-a-generation chance to shape the management of Scotland's seas, say a coalition of environment groups. Eight members of Scottish Environment LINK's "Save Scottish Seas" campaign say the public consultation on a new marine planning system will determine the future health of the marine environment and the sustainability of development at sea. They also argue a network of Marine Protected Areas is vital to secure the environmental recovery of Scotland's seas so that future uses of the sea are put on a more sustainable footing.

For the next five weeks, Scottish Government officials and scientists are touring Scotland to present the plans, which include a network of proposed Marine Protected Areas designed to reverse the declining biodiversity in our seas. However, turn-out was low for the first event in Edinburgh last week and even fewer appeared in Lerwick the next day. This summer over 30 similar consultation drop-in sessions in local venues across Scotland will provide an opportunity for people to learn more about the plans and support a more progressive, more sustainable way of managing our seas.

The groups - which collectively represent nearly 500,000 members - have launched an online campaign to enable people to show support for MPAs and the recovery of Scotland's marine environment. They say that the plans for a network of Marine Protected Areas are welcome, but urge the Scottish Government to follow the advice of their own scientific advisors to ensure the marine ecosystem is given the best chance of recovery.

Calum Duncan, Scotland Programme Manager for Marine Conservation Society (and Convenor of the LINK marine taskforce) said: "Taking part in this online campaign is a chance to show your support for MPAs and the recovery of our seas. The ecological health of our seas has been in decline for many years now and the traditional industries reliant upon them have suffered; because of this, our maritime culture is also at risk. A network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) has the potential to benefit us all in the long-term, but MPAs will need strong local support and must be managed well if they are to recover our seas to better health. "

Richard Luxmoore, Head of Nature Conservation for National Trust for Scotland said:

"Scotland's seas rival the world's tropical ocean hotspots, but it's important to remember that they are not in as good shape as they once were. Rich seabed habitats that used to carpet our coastal waters have disappeared. And people up and down the East and West coast remember a very different past, where harbours were booming, estuaries overflowed with sea trout and anglers flocked to internationally renowned fishing festivals. There are whole areas now where our sealife is in decline."

Sarah Dolman, North East Atlantic Programme Manager for Whale & Dolphin Conservation said: "These plans for Marine Protected Areas are a political priority. We must let our representatives know that people support a stronger MPA network that includes all nationally important species, including whales, dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks. Our seas are treasured, and the plans laid out in this consultation have the potential to actively recover them: let's support MPAs."

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Kara Brydson, Head of Marine Policy for RSPB Scotland said: "This is a good start, and we support the development of a network of MPAs, but this work will not be complete until there are MPAs to protect Scotland's seabirds, and other groups of iconic wildlife currently excluded from the proposals. To set up a network which does not protect seabirds' feeding hotspots out at sea would miss the point entirely."

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Notes for editors:

Scottish Environment LINK's Marine Taskforce comprises the following eight organisations: Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust, Marine Conservation Society, National Trust for Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Scottish Wildlife Trust, WWF Scotland, Whale & Dolphin Conservation.

(<http://www.scotlink.org/public/work/taskforce.php?id=7>) The members campaign for Marine Protected Areas via www.savescottishseas.org

- Planning Scotland's Seas is the Scottish Government's marine consultation package on a Draft National Marine Plan, a network of Marine Protected Areas and sectoral plans for marine renewable energy
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-consultation/>
- A timetable for the national events can be found here: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-consultation/events>
- A map showing the locations can be viewed here: <http://www.savescottishseas.org/scottish-marine-protected-area-network>
- SNH Commissioned Report no 547: highlights the advice given to the Scottish Government by its scientific advisors: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/publications/search-the-catalogue/publication-detail/?id=1959>
- A review of a Scottish Government 'Planning Scotland's Seas' drop-in event can be read here: <http://www.savescottishseas.org/news/blog/will-ecosystem-based-marine-planning-draw-the-crowds/>
- A map showing the concerning and declining state of Scotland's seas can be found here: <http://www.savescottishseas.org/save-scottish-seas/recover/>
- Related information on MPAs can be found at www.savescottishseas.org/why-we-need-mpas