
Environmental groups welcome step towards recovery of Scotland's seas

Plans announced today for 33 nature conservation Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been welcomed by a coalition of Scotland's environmental groups as an important step towards the much-needed recovery of Scotland's seas.

Scottish Environment LINK's marine taskforce contends that a network of Marine Protected Areas cannot afford to simply protect what's left in Scotland's seas, otherwise the marine environment will continue to decline. The eight organisations who collectively represent 460,000 memberships, believe that a network of MPAs must actively help recover the seabed and the marine life it supports, implementing the ambition of national legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament over two years ago. A recent Government assessment found that a significant proportion of Scotland's marine habitats and wildlife are in a declining condition.

Today's announcement by the Scottish Government - which outlines those sites recommended by government scientists to be incorporated into a national MPA network - has been welcomed by the taskforce as a major and urgent step forward in that mission. The taskforce will now study the advice for the network and its contribution to recovery of Scotland's seas.

Members of the group, which calls for better, sustainable management of Scotland's marine species and habitats, remain wary that some sites will 'fall out' of the MPA process and that others are not big enough, both of which will weaken the network's ability to reverse decades of decline in Scotland's seas.

Some species, such as whales, dolphins and seabirds have been largely excluded from the process so far, despite the presentation of strong scientific evidence. Other sites, regarded as the best areas for protecting Scotland's marine biodiversity, are also in the balance. For example, the Firth of Forth Banks is famously home to some of Scotland's richest sandeel grounds, yet current plans indicate the site may not be afforded adequate protection for the fish species. Questions also remain about whether MPA sites recommended for seabed habitats are ambitious enough to support their recovery.

In autumn the group launched the Save Scottish Seas campaign to help raise awareness of the declining state of Scotland's seas and what can be done to recover them. Members of the Marine Taskforce have campaigned on these issues in recent months and tens of thousands of signatures, letters and postcards have already been sent to Scottish politicians. Whale and Dolphin Conservation delivered a 36,000 signature petition to Richard Lochhead on Thursday 13th December.

Calum Duncan, Marine Conservation Society's Scotland Programme Manager said "We welcome these 33 MPA proposals and urge that all options remain on the table for public consultation next summer. The MPA network must be about more than just 'relic management.' Some areas of Scotland's seabed are in a seriously degraded state, so we need careful management to recover them to better and more productive health, in turn helping secure all that the sea provides for this and future generations. After decades of exploitation, parts of the sea need a permanent rest from damaging activities."

Kara Brydson, RSPB Scotland's Senior Marine Policy Officer said "These proposals are a welcome start, but we're disappointed that there is still not a single protected area safeguarding the important places where seabirds feed in UK waters. This is a serious oversight, not least because of Scotland's international importance for seabirds, but also

because of the massive declines in some species such as kittiwakes. Scotland's marine protected area network must protect the seabirds our nation is most famed for - and we look forward to the consultation putting this right."

Alex Kinninmonth, Scottish Wildlife Trust's Living Seas Officer said: "A well-managed network of Scottish Marine Protected Areas is by no means secure. We have to follow the evidence and work together if we want healthier seas. These MPAs are not a conservationist's luxury - they are urgently needed to protect a natural environment that is currently under threat. We now know that society has impacts on the environment and MPAs are a vital tool to help manage those impacts."

Sarah Dolman, Whale and Dolphin Conservation's Head of Policy in Scotland said: "WDC are supportive of a coherent MPA network for Scotland, so the announcement of these MPA proposals is bittersweet. Whales and dolphins are currently excluded whilst more research is done, despite earlier commitment in the process to the use of "best available science". WDC have provided this evidence. The Scottish MPA network will not be complete without whales and dolphins and we urge the Scottish government to urgently move to include them."

Dr Dan Barlow, WWF Scotland's Head of Policy, said: "The development of Marine Protected Areas across the world's oceans can help address the ecological decline of our seas. Establishing a robust network of MPAs in Scottish waters can make an important contribution to the global effort to safeguard our marine environment."

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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 proposed MPAs have been searched for in Scotland's territorial and offshore waters and identified using a range of species and habitats on a 'MPA search features' list. As proposed they will protect a wider range of species and habitats on a 'MPA Protected Features' list. In addition to examples of representative habitats that need protecting, threatened and declining habitats and species on the 'MPA search feature' list include: burrowed mud, flameshell beds, horse mussel beds and common skate.

Potential sites for designation will be aired via a public consultation in summer 2013.

Related links:

- Report to the Scottish Parliament on Progress to Identify a Scottish Network of Marine Protected Areas
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork/MPAParliamentReport>
- SNH Commissioned Report: SNH and JNCC MPA network Advice: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/publications/search-the-catalogue/publication-detail/?id=1959>
- A map showing the concerning and declining state of Scotland's seas can be found here:
<http://www.savescottishseas.org/save-scottish-seas/recover/>
- Background documents on MPAs can be found at www.savescottishseas.org/reading-room/
- Links to campaigning done by members of the Marine Taskforce can be found here:
<http://campaigning.rspb.org.uk/ea-action/action?ea.client.id=13&ea.campaign.id=16661>
<http://www.mcsuk.org/mpa/scotland/support>
https://secure2.wdcs.org/protect/critical_habitat/mpa_petition.php