**Seas our Future**

**An Environment Links UK briefing on the UK Marine Strategy**

*May 2019*

**What is the UK Marine Strategy?**

The UK Marine Strategy is *the* UK’s overarching plan to ensure UK seas recover to a healthy state, known as ‘*Good Environment Status’* (GES). It’s a legally binding strategy and the measures outlined in the plan are implemented by each country in their own waters.

The Strategy covers all aspects of biodiversity, from reefs and sandbanks right up to whales, dolphins and seabirds. It also covers key human pressures from fisheries to pollution, including plastics and underwater noise. No other holistic framework exists that brings together action to reduce all human pressures with the need to conserve and recover marine ecosystems generally, as well as protecting particular habitats and species

The [first Marine Strategy was set in 2012](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/marine-strategy-part-one-uk-initial-assessment-and-good-environmental-status) and the UK Governments were due to report to the European Commission by the end of 2018. Due to the political climate, the UK Governments have only recently launched the [consultation on their progress](https://consult.defra.gov.uk/marine/updated-uk-marine-strategy-part-one/) to date and proposed new targets to take forward to 2024.

**Failing to turn the tide for our marine environment**

We welcome the publication of the latest UK Marine Strategy consultation. Yet, we are deeply concerned about the failure to achieve GES to date, the lacklustre new targets proposed for the new strategy and the scandalously short consultation period.

To date, the UK Governments have only **achieved GES for 4 out of 15 indicators;** Eutrophication, Contaminants, Contaminants in seafood and Changes in hydrographical conditions. This is alarming in and of itself, but we are more alarmed these indicators have been classified as achieved at all given plastic has been found in [every marine mammal surveyed in the UK](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-37428-3); [a third of UK caught fish](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0025326X12005668) contain microplastic particles and; the Orca population in the western isles of Scotland number just 8 individuals, with one stranded member found to have [20 times the safe level expected for cetaceans](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-39738582).

Reports such as the recent [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services global assessment](file:///%5C%5CWCL-CORE1%5CCOMPANY%5CPolicy%20and%20Campaigns%5C2019%5CMarine%5CMSFD%5CComms%5Ciconic%20nature%2C%20but%20also%20the%20benefits%20that%20a%20healthy%20marine%20environment%20provides%20for%20people.) and [JNCC’s 6th report](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/22/ukmiss-almost-all-2020-nature-targets-official-report-admits) to the Convention on Biological Diversity almost all the biodiversity trends continue to go in the wrong direction, with plastic choking our seas, seabirds starving and noise levels dangerously high. Our seas are also on the front line against climate change, absorbing a third of global CO2 and [90% of all heat](https://www.ukssd.co.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=cdd573d3-ad46-447f-b034-88b865fc7fab) produced by humans since the Industrial Revolution.

This latest report shows Government are failing to heed the warnings we’ve received to date. Given the short consultation period they are also failing to prioritise this vital piece of legislation. Without greater ambition and leadership, the UK Governments will continue to fail in delivering healthy seas, to protect our iconic nature, but also the benefits that a healthy marine environment provides for people.

**Seas-ing the future**

As we close in on new global targets to restore nature in 2020, the Government’s honest admission that our seas are not yet in Good Environmental Status should be a wakeup call to all of us. Business as usual is no longer an option when it comes to protecting the ocean.

This strategy is the essential framework for ensuring that, post 2020, marine ecosystems are recovered to a healthy condition and well-managed, we deliver on our SDG commitments and we ensure to collaborate with our marine neighbours after EU exit. However, weak targets will not lead to the action needed for our seas to recover for the benefit of people and nature and could leave us behind on the global stage.

The UK Government and Devolved Administrations must effectively resource the delivery of the UK Marine Strategy, including compliance, enforcement and monitoring. Specific actions include:

Increased protection for wildlife

* Ensure completion of an ecologically coherent and well managed UK Marine Protected Area network that covers at least 30% of UK seas, is recovering as a network and contains more areas that are “fully protected” from human pressure;
* Complete and implement both cetacean and seabird conservation strategies that enhance resilience to, and reduce the impact of, anthropogenic pressures;
* Instigate strong and appropriately resourced biosecurity measures to keep invasive non-native species out of UK waters, and where possible remove or control (as appropriate) invasive species which are significantly impacting on marine biodiversity (including seabird colonies);

Delivering recovery and restoration

* Build climate change resilience into marine planning and management.
* Monitor climate change impacts on the UK marine environment and establish major programmes for protection and restoration of vulnerable species and habitats.
* Deliver a transformational programme of ecological restoration and recovery, including of carbon rich ecosystems such as seagrass and saltmarsh to increase carbon sequestration, and the recovery of seafloor integrity.

Ensuring sustainable fishing and aquaculture

* Delivery of a full and ambitious Fisheries Bill which must ensure effective integration of fisheries and marine conservation management, a critical part of achieving long term sustainability for both the fishing industry and the marine environment on which it depends. Reform management of aquaculture so that all impacts, including those on migratory fish, are effectively controlled and assist their recovery;
* Work to eliminate bycatch (of cetaceans, seabirds and other non-target species, such as sharks).

Delivering an effective marine planning system

* Marine plans take an ecosystem based, truly spatial approach and incorporate all activities, including fisheries and environments, including marine, estuarine, and freshwater to better reflect the continuum across the land/sea interface.
* Future spatial and temporal requirements for sea use and conservation must be taken into account into marine spatial planning to secure ambitious and sustainable marine planning.
* Marine plans should be independently reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Reducing pollution of our seas

* Introduce an integrated, comprehensive suite of measures to adopt circular economy approaches, reducing waste at source and so preventing litter. Measures should include an all in Deposit Return Scheme, an ambitious Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme and a tax on packaging of all materials that contains less than 30% recycled material.
* Complete a UK wide soil and herbage pollutant survey to build understanding of diffuse source of harmful pollutants and outline a strategy for safely clearing these sources.
* Commit to exploring the presence of microplastics to broaden our understanding of contaminants in seafood.

Cutting ocean noise pollution

* Introduce a comprehensive Noise Reduction Strategy for UK seas, working with countries with shared seas and linked to OSPAR noise management policies.
* The UK Noise Reduction Strategy should be underpinned by monitoring of both ambient and impulsive noise. All noise measurements should be entered into the UK Marine Noise Registry. This should give certainty of no adverse effect on marine life and drive innovation and investment by both government and industry in noise reducing technologies.
* Research should be implemented to understand and manage cumulative underwater noise effects and this should include stakeholder engagement to develop tools and ensure underwater noise management is practical and fit for purpose.