



ENVIRONMENT NGOS CALL FOR A WELL-MANAGED, ECOLOGICALLY COHERENT NETWORK OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN UK SEAS

A joint position statement from Wildlife and Countryside Link, Scottish Environment LINK, Wales Environment Link and the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force

September 2016

This statement sets out our views on the action needed by UK Governments and the principles that must be adhered to in order to achieve an effective ecologically coherent network of well managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) across the UK by 2020 – one of the most important mechanisms to protect and restore our degraded marine ecosystems.

Environment Links UK is comprised of the combined membership of Wildlife and Countryside Link, Scottish Environment LINK, Wales Environment Link and the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force and collectively represents more than 8 million supporters across the UK. This statement is supported by 26 organisations of the Environment Links UK (see [Annex I](#)).

Why urgent action is needed

Marine biodiversity is in decline and needs urgent action to recover our seas. Environment Links UK are seeking for all Governments across the UK to work together to put in place an Ecologically Coherent Network (ECN) of well managed MPAs as soon as possible. Such a network should help protect habitats and species from damage and degradation and help to restore and build resilience into our marine environment. A well-managed coherent network will ensure that we have a healthy and productive marine environment that we can sustainably enjoy and be proud of.

Furthermore, a coherent well-managed network is required so that we can meet domestic, European and international obligations, in particular the Aichi targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity, wider coherence of the OSPAR¹ MPA network and Good Environmental Status by 2020 under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). Progress across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales towards these obligations is varied – collectively, existing measures and the current MPA proposals still fall short of the UK's commitments and the protection that our marine environment so urgently needs. We are concerned that the 2020 deadline for a completed network will not be met unless continued ambition leads to urgent designations and effective management.

Negotiations around the UK's future relationship with the European Union must not hinder or delay the UK from completing pre-existing processes to designate additional European marine sites, as well as designating additional MPA sites under the relevant Marine Acts. It is paramount that existing European and domestic protected areas maintain existing levels of protection for nature and are well managed regardless of the future relationship with the European Union.

Benefits (ecological, social and economic) of an effective, completed network

Ensuring long term sustainable management of our seas will enable nature to thrive, current and future generations to enjoy our marine heritage and marine industries to remain viable for generations to come. We are concerned that MPA designation processes across the UK, have often given undue weight to short term socio-economic factors which has effectively thwarted action that is needed ecologically and has not recognised the benefits which are not easily priced or accounted for. There must be acknowledgement of the important role these protected areas play in recovery

¹ OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic.

and sustainable management of our seas and the cumulative, long term, multiple benefits arising from them, especially the natural capital benefits and ecosystem services.

What action must be taken to complete the network

In order to protect, conserve and restore the UK's marine species, habitats and ecological processes, we believe that the network must incorporate the following MPA design and implementation principles².

Design principles

Representativity, of both habitats and species: Both existing and proposed MPAs across the UK do not adequately represent the full range of marine habitats, species, ecological processes and biological communities in the UK marine area. Key gaps that must be addressed to provide sufficient representativity in the network include: seabed habitats, pelagic habitats, estuarine habitats, mobile species, and invertebrate species.

Replication: To ensure a robust and resilient network, there must be replication of features, both within a biogeographic area and across biogeographic regions. This will safeguard natural variation in our seas and ensure that risks, such as localised damaging events, are mitigated. Gaps exist where protected features are not replicated across the current network.

Adequacy: The network of MPAs across the UK must be of a sufficient scale, with adequate connectivity and representativity addressed to ensure that the network is able to achieve its ecological objectives and ensure the long term viability and integrity of habitats, species, populations and ecological communities.

Viability and resilience: Individual MPAs need to be of sufficient size to maintain the integrity of the protected features particularly in relation to management and the potential impacts of activities outside the site boundary.

Connectivity: There must be adequate protection for species at different stages of their life cycle, ecological processes (such as nutrient cycles), and providing structural integrity to areas by recognising and protecting dependent or interlinked habitat types. The network needs to ensure that protection is well distributed and that there are good linkages between marine ecosystems in order to accommodate that some species and habitats depend on processes that occur outside the MPA.

Adherence to the precautionary/preventative principle: OSPAR and MSFD require the UK to pay regard to the precautionary principle (or preventative principle as it is interpreted in Wales) when establishing a network of MPAs. This is particularly important as frequently the ecological links between communities on different habitats or between mobile species and habitats are not well understood.

Implementation principles

Effective protection and management: Sites must have appropriately progressive, effective and ecosystem-based management plans and proactive regulation of potentially harmful activities, including cumulative impacts. There should be ecological and surveillance monitoring, measures towards recovery and adequate compliance and enforcement. To ensure that appropriate and comparable levels of protection provided for each part of the network, a strategic and integrated approach across the entire network is required. Recommended sites should be managed as designated to prevent damage before designation.

Effective intergovernmental cooperation: An effective UK wide network will only be achieved if there is coordination of existing and potential sites within the network across administrations, and a joint strategy on both designation of sites and implementation of protection and management measures.

² These principles have been devolved from: OSPAR Commission, 2006-3: Guidance on developing an ecologically coherent network of OSPAR Marine Protected Areas, and Natural England and JNCC (2010) Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance.

Environment Links UK organisations who support this position statement

