



2021: The Marine Super Year? A scorecard for Government progress on ocean health

April 2021

Wildlife and
Countryside



Marine Super Year Scorecard

FOREWORD

In a speech to the Coastal Futures Conference in January, Environment Minister Rebecca Pow declared 2021 to be a 'Marine Super Year', confirming that the UK would use its presidency of COP26 to lead calls for renewed action to restore the marine environment to health.

This vision is very welcome and builds on increasing public and political awareness of the role healthy seas play in building healthy communities, and in fighting the greatest challenges of our time – climate change and biodiversity loss. It is fitting, in this year of the COP presidency, for a maritime nation like the UK to champion the role our seas can play in averting climate and ecological breakdown.

Minister Pow rightly stressed that the UK's global leadership "really starts with our ambition and delivery at home". To make 2021 truly a Marine Super Year, the UK must lead the world on domestic ocean recovery, creating a template for other governments to follow.

The UK Government has already begun making strides towards this goal. As leader of the Global Oceans Coalition it is seeking to ensure at least 30% of the world's seas and oceans are secured within well managed Marine Protected Areas. At home the early action on improved management of 4 offshore MPAs is a welcome step forward, with further action promised across another 36.

But there is much more to do if we wish to restore the health of our seas and oceans. Too many marine sites are protected only in name, too much damage to marine wildlife and habitats continues to be caused by pollution, development and unsustainable fisheries. Law and policy must be improved to stand a chance of marine recovery.

In the following 'scorecard', we set out actions that, if achieved by the end of the year, would allow us to say that 2021 truly was a Marine Super Year.

SCORECARD

This scorecard sets out our assessment of 5 priority areas for the marine environment this year, listed in no particular order, with further detail provided over the following pages. Each priority area includes actions which Government should seek to deliver in 2021.

These will be assessed in December 2021 and given a mark of either:

- Good Progress
- Some Progress
- No Progress

Mark	DELIVER TARGETS FOR OCEAN RECOVERY
○	The Environment Bill must be amended to include a legally binding target to halt nature's decline by 2030
○	The UK Marine Strategy should be revised as a new 'Ocean Recovery Strategy', containing legally binding targets to ensure delivery of at least 30% of UK waters being fully or highly protected by 2030
Mark	PROTECT AND ENHANCE MARINE BIODIVERSITY
○	Begin consultation on the designation of pilot Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) in English & Secretary of State waters by World Ocean Day 2021 and announce designation by year end
○	HPMA pilot sites should be identified that cover a range of habitats including Blue Carbon ecosystems, inshore and offshore waters areas and English coastal regions
○	Deliver and strengthen the Marine Protected Area (MPA) bottom trawling restrictions the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has recently consulted on and remove environmentally damaging fishing activities from all offshore MPAs
○	Publish a detailed roadmap for achieving 30% of our waters being fully or highly protected by 2030 ahead of the COP15 biodiversity conference
○	Deliver a consultation on Remote Electronic Monitoring on fishing vessels
○	Deliver meaningful action to ensure that fisheries are sustainably managed, ensuring that fishing catch limits are not set above scientifically recommended sustainable levels, and allocating all quota fairly across the entire fleet based on sustainability criteria and scientific advice
Mark	OFFSHORE PLANNING REFORM
○	Marine Plans must be urgently updated so increasing demands on the sea are planned to allow nature to recover at the same time as helping to mitigate climate change
○	Commit to a centralised, and cross-departmental, plan led approach to consenting of marine developments
○	Ensure that nature protection, recovery and enhancement are front loaded into strategic marine planning
Mark	ACTION ON BYCATCH
○	Establish clear targets to minimise and where possible eliminate sensitive species bycatch
○	Urgently increase testing and deployment of both alternative gears and effective mitigation measures at the fishing fleet level
○	Ensure effective at-sea monitoring of fishing activity and bycatch reporting
Mark	ACTION ON BLUE CARBON
○	Action to prioritise the creation, protection and restoration of coastal and marine sites with potential for the greatest natural carbon storage
○	At least one of the pilot HPMAs should focus on Blue Carbon protection and restoration, as recommended in the Benyon Review
○	On the international stage, government should advocate for the preservation of Blue Carbon to be recognised as a key nature-based solution and climate mitigation strategy

DELIVER TARGETS FOR OCEAN RECOVERY

The Environment Bill must include a legally binding target to halt nature's decline by 2030 at the latest - on land and at sea. The UK marine strategy must be revised to deliver ocean recovery in the same period:

The Prime Minister has called on world leaders to agree to turn around nature's decline by 2030. In just a few months, governments will come together to try and agree a global target to stop our natural world from being destroyed. But there's no commitment in law to do the same here at home.

The Environment Bill should be amended to set a legally-binding State of Nature target to halt and begin to reverse the decline of nature by 2030 at the latest in law, on land and at sea. This will ensure that the UK Government has the right legal framework in place to justify its claim to be a world leader in Marine Management.

This overarching target should be accompanied by more specific legally binding targets for ocean recovery under the Environment Bill (including targets to restore marine biodiversity inside and outside protected areas) and the UK Marine Strategy.

The UK Marine Strategy is the framework designed to monitor and manage human activity in UK waters, but the goal of achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) by 2020 was missed, failing on 11 out of 15 targets. With the UK now an independent coastal state, there is a once in a generation opportunity to set clear and ambitious targets that not only achieve GES, but ensure the long term restoration of a healthy marine ecosystem, and demonstrate the UK's leadership in marine matters on the global stage.

The Strategy should be revised as a new 'Ocean Recovery Strategy', running up to 2030. Such a revision should lay out a clear path to delivering the 2030 State of Nature target, and ensuring that at least 30% of UK oceans are fully or highly protected by 2030 (30x30).

PROTECT AND ENHANCE MARINE BIODIVERSITY

Ahead of the COP15 Biodiversity Summit, Defra must make sure action is taken to protect and enhance marine biodiversity, prioritising action to ensure that 30% of our waters are fully or highly protected and managed for nature's recovery by 2030, including:

- i. ***Designating Highly Protected Marine Areas.*** In June 2020, an in-depth Government review, led by former Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon, recommended an extra layer of protection for especially valuable marine habitats – Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs). Following the publication of the review, the Government announced plans to pilot HPMAs, but action is still pending. The Government should begin consultation on the designation of pilot HPMAs in English and Secretary of State waters (the English inshore and offshore and Northern Ireland offshore zones) by World Oceans Day 2021 (8th June), and announce designation by year end. Pilot sites should be identified that cover a range of habitats including Blue Carbon ecosystems, inshore and offshore waters areas and English coastal regions.
- ii. ***Removing environmentally damaging fishing activities from all offshore MPAs within English and Secretary of State waters.*** In February 2021, the Marine Management Organisation launched a consultation on imposing partial restrictions on bottom trawling in two offshore English MPAs, and completely prohibiting bottom trawling in two others. Following completion of this consultation, measures to ban bottom trawling in these areas should be enacted as soon as possible.

However, this is only a start. There are 40 offshore MPAs in English waters, where damaging fishing activities need to be stopped. To be a credible leader on ocean recovery at the UN Biodiversity COP in October, the Government must protect nature by restricting industrial fishing techniques across the network of protected sites. A detailed roadmap for achieving full or high protection of 30% of our waters by 2030 should be published ahead of the conference.

- iii. ***Ensuring that fisheries are sustainable and effectively monitored.*** The Government must ensure that fishing catch limits are not set above scientifically recommended sustainable levels. It should also deliver a consultation on Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) in 2021 to ensure that all fishing activity is fully documented. It must ensure that all fisheries activity takes an ecosystems based approach, managed as part of wider marine planning and conservation measures, and that all fishing quotas are allocated fairly across the entire fleet based on sustainability criteria and scientific advice.

OFFSHORE PLANNING REFORM

To deliver its ambitions for the deployment of offshore wind, the UK Government must urgently revise the marine planning system to deliver a clear hierarchy of decision making, with climate and nature as the top priorities:

Marine Plans must be urgently updated to ensure that the cumulative environmental impacts of our increasing demands on the sea are planned to allow nature to recover at the same time as helping to mitigate climate change. Better spatial planning is needed to deliver 40GW of offshore wind capacity in a way compatible with nature's recovery.

Marine plans should provide a clear road map to delivering net zero targets and supporting ocean recovery following an ecosystem-based approach. Strategic and holistic marine plans, which identify the most suitable locations for offshore wind, require a shift from a project by project approach.

The UK Government must commit to a centralised, and cross departmental, plan led approach to consenting of marine developments. Nature protection, recovery and enhancement must be front loaded into strategic marine planning to facilitate the timely rollout of the UK's new generation of offshore wind. This is vital to ensure a truly green energy transition which avoids further damage to our degraded marine environment and contributes to healthy seas.

ACTION ON BYCATCH

Effective and urgent action is required to minimise bycatch, particularly of sensitive species, across UK fisheries:

Wildlife continues to be caught and killed in UK fisheries. The Government must take urgent and effective action to address this, including:

- i. establishing clear targets for reductions in sensitive species bycatch in order to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch within a set timeframe
- ii. establishing a programme to urgently increase testing and deployment of alternative fishing gear and effective mitigation measures at the fleet level
- iii. ensuring effective at-sea monitoring of fishing activity and bycatch reporting to improve knowledge, using human observers and/or Remote Electronic Monitoring. This would help to ensure that there is sufficient data to determine and reduce bycatch rates.

Bycatch minimisation plans must be robust, enforceable and contain the detail required to meet the 'ecosystem objective' of the UK Fisheries Act (2020).

ACTION ON BLUE CARBON

The UK Government should promote nature-based solutions to the climate and ecological crises, prioritising the protection and restoration of Blue Carbon Habitats through site-based measures:

The UK will play a leading role on the international stage this year. The Government should use the opportunity to advocate for the preservation of Blue Carbon. Coastal and marine habitats should be recognised as a key nature-based solution to climate change and scientific work prioritised to properly account for Blue Carbon sources and sinks. This must not however be a substitute for real term emissions cuts through ending the use of fossil fuels. The Government should promote new policy to prevent Blue Carbon emissions from habitat degradation and to maximise carbon sequestration from the restoration and improvement of coastal and marine habitats.

Domestically, the Government should identify areas with potential for the greatest natural carbon storage around the coast of England and prioritise the creation, protection and restoration of these sites based on their potential to capture carbon. As a first step, at least one of the pilot HPMAs should focus on Blue Carbon protection and restoration, as recommended in the Benyon Review.

This scorecard has been compiled by Wildlife and Countryside Link in April 2021. We will publish an update in December 2021, highlighting progress across these actions and using this data to analyse whether 2021 truly was a Marine Super Year.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 58 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. This document is supported by the following Link members:



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