

Principles for an effective MPA Network Review

28th April 2026

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and sets out the principles that should be followed by the UK Government for the English Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Review.

Purposes of the MPA Network

To deliver an effective MPA Review, the Government must be clear on the purposes of the MPA network and further the contribution of the network to these purposes. The overall purpose of the MPA network is to contribute to the conservation and recovery of marine nature. To do this the MPA network should further the following outcomes:

- **Protect and recover species and habitats:** the MPA network must act as a refuge for species, habitats, and ecological processes threatened by human activities, prevent their decline, and enable their recovery.
- **Provide benefits to wider ecosystem recovery:** by allowing the recovery of species populations and protecting important habitats, the MPA network should provide benefits to wider seas, delivering progress towards Good Environmental Status (GES).
- **Provide ecosystem services:** the MPA network should, as a secondary outcome, deliver benefits to people by protecting ecosystems that provide services such as carbon sequestration and storage, improved water quality, responsible and well-managed tourism, and fish population recovery.

Effective management

Achieving the three outcomes for the MPA network and 30by30 requires effective management to protect the habitats and species within MPAs from human pressures and enable them to recover. We welcome existing progress in MPA management. This includes licensing processes and Stage 1 and 2 fisheries management measures.

The government should undertake a full review of all pressures on MPAs such as fishing, pollution, underwater noise, infrastructure development, recreational activity and cumulative impacts. Specific management measures needed include:

- Stage 3 and 4, and HPMA fisheries management measures by the end of 2026.¹

¹ See here our response to the [Stage 3](#) consultation and [Stage 4](#) call for evidence on harbour porpoise.

- Inshore fisheries management and non-licensable activity management. Current commitments for completion by 2028 and 2030 do not allow for recovery ahead of the 2030 deadline for 30by30 and implementation should be sped up.
- Offshore wind planning and consenting processes must follow the mitigation hierarchy, first avoiding and then mitigating damage to MPAs, and delivering effective compensation only as a last resort.²
- Action on land and at sea to control pollution. MCZs should be designated as Water Quality Protected Areas to ensure targeted monitoring and action on water quality.

The MPA Review is an opportunity to go further in managing MPAs. Currently, almost all English MPAs likely fall into one category of the IUCN protected areas categorisation system: Category IV: habitat/species management area. This is because they are designated to protect particular species or habitat features and management reflects this priority.³ Therefore, current MPAs do not aim to further wider ecosystem outcomes or ecosystem services.

To achieve benefits for both ecosystem recovery towards GES and protection of ecosystem services, the MPA Review should recommend a whole site approach to MPA management to enable recovery. This protects other habitats in the MPAs, functional linkages between habitats, and natural capital, such as carbon stores.⁴ It also ensures that as climate change alters species distributions within MPAs they will remain protected.

Taking a whole site approach to management would also allow progress towards 30by30 to be measured more easily. If whole sites are effectively managed, they may count towards 30by30 in their entirety. By contrast the feature-based management approach creates confusion about which parts of the MPA count towards 30by30 if only portions covering designated features have management measures while other parts allow damaging activities.

The significant exception to the feature-based approach is HPMPAs, but these only cover 0.42% of English seas and do not currently have fisheries management measures. Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, it is agreed that protected areas should strike an “appropriate balance” between areas where sustainable use is allowed and areas where extractive uses are excluded.⁵ The MPA Review should therefore consider management of more MPAs as HPMPAs.

² See here our [general position](#) on marine planning, our response to the [consultation](#) on the Marine Recovery Fund, and our response to the [consultation](#) on offshore wind environmental compensatory measures reforms.

³ [IUCN: Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories](#)

⁴ [Finian Rowe Davies et al., 2022: Ecosystem benefits of adopting a whole-site approach to MPA management](#) & [Blampied et al., 2022: Removal of bottom-towed fishing from whole-site Marine Protected Areas promotes mobile species biodiversity](#)

⁵ [CBD COP Decision VII/5 \(2004\) para. 21 and Annex I, Operational Objective 3.1.](#)

Evidence shows that although MPAs with partial fishing restrictions do have significant benefits for nature and are a key conservation tool, HPMAs where no fishing is allowed have much greater benefits.⁶ HPMAs can also have spillover effects that boost nature in surrounding ecosystems, with benefits for people, including fishers.⁷ Rather than being seen as a restriction on fishing contributing to spatial squeeze, HPMAs and MPAs in general should be seen as an opportunity to benefit small-scale, sustainable, local fisheries that are impacted by overfishing.⁸ This is best delivered when MPAs are designed alongside communities and local fishers.⁹ The [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) contains a commitment that 10% of EU seas should be strictly protected. The UK should incorporate a similar aim into the Review.

Expanding HPMAs and taking a whole-site approach to management should be accompanied by a review of MPA monitoring to ensure it is adequately funded and captures the benefits of MPAs to wider ecosystems and ecosystem services, including to GES, not just changes in feature condition. Currently, only 9 of the UK's 76 offshore MPAs are ever monitored.¹⁰ This must be scaled up to understand the contribution of MPAs to nature recovery.

New designations

Alongside effective management the Review should consider designation of new features in existing MPAs and designation of new MPAs. Achieving the network coherence criteria of representativity, replication and adequacy remains essential, including as climate change alters the distribution of habitats and species.¹¹

The most recent [MPA Network Assessment](#) states that Defra considers the MPA network to be “substantially complete”. This is based on analysis by JNCC prior to and following consultation on the third tranche of MCZ designations. However, JNCC clearly state in their most recent [assessment](#) of progress towards an ecologically coherent MPA network from 2016 that additional MPA needs for “birds and other mobile species were not considered”. Until an assessment of the coherence of the network for mobile species is carried out, the MPA network is not coherent or complete. This is also necessary to align with Target 3 under

⁶ [Sciberras et al., 2013: Evaluating the biological effectiveness of fully and partially protected marine areas](#) & [Lester & Halpern, 2008: Biological responses in marine no-take reserves versus partially protected areas](#)

⁷ [Lorenzo et al., 2020: Assessing spillover from marine protected areas and its drivers: A meta-analytical approach](#) & [Goni et al., 2008: Spillover from six western Mediterranean marine protected areas: evidence from artisanal fisheries](#)

⁸ [Rees et al., 2021: An evaluation of the social and economic impact of a Marine Protected Area on commercial fisheries](#)

⁹ [Di Franco et al., 2016: Five key attributes can increase marine protected areas performance for small-scale fisheries management](#)

¹⁰ [Written Evidence from JNCC](#) - cited within [House of Lords Report, 2023: An extraordinary challenge: Restoring 30 per cent of our land and sea by 2030](#)

¹¹ [JNCC and Natural England, 2010: Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance](#)

the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which emphasises that protected area networks should be ecologically representative.

Coherence for mobile species means protecting “areas for key life cycle stages and behaviours”, such as breeding, foraging, resting, and wintering.¹² Previous assessments noted that “there is no spatial data to support the clear identification of relevant areas” for mobile species but this information may become available;¹³ and that “there may be value in spatial protection measures should additional information become available on important areas to the life history of a given species”.¹⁴ Significant research has taken place since previous assessments that provides that additional information. The current network is not representing key areas for mobile species and steering development away from them, which is leading to negative impacts for species and development slowed by compensation processes. For example, just 0.01% of the UK’s offshore environment has SPA designation.¹⁵

To help protect and restore mobile species, the MPA Review must:

- Implement the findings of the terrestrial [2016 SPA review](#) (which concluded “provisions in the marine environment are needed for at least 49 species”) and complete and implement the findings of a dedicated marine SPA review.
- Review SAC requirements for other mobile species, including protected migratory fish, cetaceans, and seals.

Designating and managing important areas for mobile species will also provide benefits for wider seas and contribute to GES delivery. Mobile species play essential roles in ecosystem management such as nutrient cycling and population management through predation.¹⁶

As well as additional designations for mobile species, the MPA Review should consider opportunities to maximise benefits to people from the MPA network through designations to protect natural capital providing ecosystem services. A priority is blue carbon stores. It is estimated 244 million tonnes of organic carbon are stored in just the top 10cm of seabed sediments and habitats such as saltmarshes, seagrass beds, kelp and intertidal seaweeds in UK seas.¹⁷ Currently, 43% of these carbon stores are held within MPAs, but they receive only patchy, incidental protection.¹⁸ Specific designation and management of carbon stores in

¹² [JNCC and Natural England, 2010: Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance](#)

¹³ [JNCC and Natural England, 2010: Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance](#)

¹⁴ [JNCC and Natural England, 2016: Identifying possible Marine Conservation Zones for highly mobile species: Principles for third-party proposals](#)

¹⁵ [JNCC, 2026: Offshore Regulations General Implementation Report and Technical Annex for the Reporting Period 2019–2024: UK Offshore Marine Area](#)

¹⁶ [WWF: Nature’s Technicians](#)

¹⁷ [WWF, The Wildlife Trusts and RSPB: Blue Carbon Report](#)

¹⁸ [WWF, The Wildlife Trusts and RSPB: Blue Carbon Report](#)

existing MPAs, as well as new MPA designations to protect areas with high concentrations of organic carbon, are needed. This would protect habitats from disturbance that releases stored carbon, and help achieve Net Zero. Consideration should also be given to protecting other ecosystem services, such as key areas for nature tourism, or key habitats for improving water quality. Alongside designating MPAs for climate mitigation, the Review should also take action on climate adaptation by mapping and protecting areas that will be important for habitats and species as climate change alters their distribution.

Risks to avoid

Marine nature remains in decline. UK seas are meeting 2 of 15 indicators of GES, compared to 4 of 15 in 2019, despite a legal requirement to achieve GES by 2020. We need to maximise benefits to marine nature from MPAs, not reduce them. The following would limit progress towards MPA outcomes and should be avoided:

- **Reducing the overall size of the MPA network:** benefits to nature from MPAs are directly proportionate to the amount of seas protected. This should not be reduced from the current 40% of English seas.
- **Piecemeal reshaping of the MPA network:** MPAs should never be de-designated or lose management to permit expansion of human activities. Notwithstanding current lack of provision for mobile species, MPAs were designated because the sites were deemed to best contribute to network coherence. Removal of protections for existing MPAs should not take place in exchange for new designations. The planned reforms to compensatory measures and the one-off compensatory MPA process already risk a piecemeal reshaping of the network so further changes should not be risked.¹⁹
- **Reductions in planning protections for MPAs:** whilst we support the transition to strategic compensation for offshore wind, within the limits set out in our consultation responses referenced above (footnote 2), further changes to the marine planning system that reduce protections for MPAs would leave them unable to protect species and habitats, or recover and contribute to GES and ecosystem services.

Process for an effective review

An effective MPA Review requires frequent and genuine consultation with stakeholders, including eNGOs. We appreciate previous early-stage consultation on the principles of the review. eNGOs have data and expertise, including from citizen science, on key areas for designation for mobile species and ecosystem services and how to achieve effective management. They are therefore well placed to help in developing proposals ahead of consultation. eNGOs also have experience working with communities to engage them with

¹⁹ [OEP, 2025: OEP response to Offshore Wind Compensation consultation](#)

MPA management and could help deliver a more community-driven approach. Formal consultation should take place on policy proposals once developed and on any specific proposed changes to MPA designations or management measures.

The Review process should not hold up earlier progress in both designation and management where known gaps exist. In particular, an SPA review should be started now and we know protections for blue carbon habitats are needed to help achieve carbon budgets. The Review should also be coordinated with other government programmes on MPAs. This includes MPA management processes noted above; MPA compensation processes (including the Marine Recovery Fund, compensatory MPAs, and offshore wind environmental compensation measures reforms); and the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme. The Government must clarify how these programmes will combine to achieve an ecologically representative and effectively protected MPA network.

Conclusion

The MPA Review is a fantastic opportunity to deliver on the potential of our MPA network for nature. It can reaffirm the central role of the MPA network in protecting and restoring habitats and species. By reviewing designations and management approaches it can also turn the network into a force for wider ecosystem recovery towards GES and provision of ecosystem services to people.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 96 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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The following organisations support this briefing:

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