

Case study – Marine Protected Areas

Presented by Tom Hooper, Finding Sanctuary Development Officer

The South West marine environment

The marine environment is particularly important for the businesses and communities in the South West. In a variety of ways, these livelihoods all depend on a sea, which is healthy and productive to ensure a sustainable future.

Lying at the junction of the North Sea, Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, the South West region has a diverse marine community and is considered a marine biodiversity hotspot. Many important species use the area for part or all of their life, including various cetaceans, basking sharks and some rare invertebrates such as fan mussels, pink sea fans and Devonshire cup coral. In addition there are 181 species of fish of which around 50 are commercially landed.

The seas all around Britain are suffering from the cumulative effects of destructive and intensive commercial fishing, climate change, pollution, development and dredging. The effects are clear in the damage to seabed habitats, the poor catches of many fish species and the loss of diverse marine communities. In particular we have lost any sense of what the sea should look like and have long since forgotten the age of thriving and productive coastal and marine ecosystems.

What are MPAs

It is not widely understood that Marine Protected Areas come in a range of guises, from areas completely closed to all extractive use (No Take Zones or Highly Protected Marine Reserves) through to areas where only some activities are controlled such as the Start Point potting agreement. On this basis, many areas of Devon are already MPAs in all but name.

An MPA works by ensuring that an area of the seabed is permanently protected from damaging human impacts. This allows the natural processes of the sea to function productively. Marine animals protected within the MPA can thrive, producing eggs and young, which will spread beyond the MPA boundaries. This ensures that the benefits will be shared through the region and beyond.

On land, we have long recognised the need to provide room for other species that share our living space. In the South West we are proud to have two of England's finest National Parks at Exmoor and Dartmoor, which provide protection for wildlife as well as inspiration and enjoyment for people. However, we have only recently recognised that the sea too needs a similar level of protection.

It is vital to get the right balance between protection for biodiversity and ensuring the future of livelihoods at sea, but we must also remember that a healthy ecosystem is a productive ecosystem.

Lundy

An area of 3 hectares was designated in 2003 through a Devon Sea Fisheries byelaw. It remains the only Marine Nature Reserve in the UK for nature conservation purposes. There was a great deal of support from the local community.

The monitoring started in 2004, and early results are showing a three-fold increase in the number of lobsters over minimum landing size compared to 4 control and reference sites. These results will help to provide support for MPAs and the benefits that they can have for protecting biodiversity.

Finding Sanctuary

Finding Sanctuary is a partnership project, which will work towards identifying, planning and developing a network of MPAs across the region from Dorset in the East to the Isles of Scilly in the West. The project will include the whole sea area from the high water mark out to the 200nm Exclusive Economic Zone or the median line with France or Ireland.

The Planning Process

We need to make sure that we identify each area carefully to make sure that the network gives maximum benefits to conservation and minimises the impacts to those who use the sea.

We will be gathering large amounts of information which will be developed into maps showing, for example different types of seabed or areas which are important for fishermen and anglers. Computer tools and modelling software will help us match the needs of conservation with those that use the sea area.

Communication

The project also has an important component of raising awareness of people in the South West about their local coasts and seas and the important roles that they play in all our lives as a source of food, inspiration and a destination for leisure. Our message will be one of reinforcing these links and showing how it is possible to use and enjoy the sea, whilst also ensuring space and a future for the animals and plants that live there.

Communities and Stakeholders

Most importantly, the process of identifying the network will be guided and influenced by those with an interest in the seas. Over a five-year planning process, the development of each MPA will be shaped by the participation of groups such as fishermen, anglers, conservation and other groups at every stage.

Partnerships

The project has identified a broad range of partner organisations, which will join us in the planning and development process. The project not only needs to harness a range of technical skills and knowledge, but to carry out a discussion and consultation process at a regional, County and local level.

User groups all share, to some degree, a concern about the decline in the quality and productivity of the marine environment, but there is little real agreement on what measures are required to bring improvements. The broad range of activities that take place in the marine environment and the divergent views and perceptions from these groups means that there is little understanding between them.

Through a shared decision making process the project will build trust, openness and mutual understanding out of which opportunities for agreeing measures for restoring and enhancing the marine environment can emerge.

The regional approach will ensure value for money and enable us to maintain an emphasis on looking at the habitats, connections, species and activities in the entire sea area. However, it is important that the project reflects County level priorities and the differences in coastline, economy and community.

The development of County level marine fora are an extremely valuable vehicle to help plan projects like MPAs since they comprise a body with a representation of a broad range of interests. They also help to promote the awareness and discussion of issues such as MPAs, Marine Spatial Planning and look for solutions to manage the increasing pressure of human activities.

Finally, the project will work with communities and individuals at a local level to ensure that their needs are reflected in the project planning, and also that they are fully aware of the planning process for MPAs and how it could affect them. The use of people on the ground will build communications, lead discussions on MPAs and carry out questionnaires and mapping exercises to gather information. Eventually these groups will help shape the shape, size and location of any MPA in areas of sea that they use.

The Future

The project is generating a great deal of interest and enthusiasm from partners, particularly because it aims to deliver real and permanent protection. It is the first regional MPA project for England and one of only a handful in the world, so is a particularly exciting opportunity for the South West.