

Marine Conservation Zone Project

Summary of the Conservation Objective Guidance

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August 2011
Version 2

Written jointly by Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Summary of the MCZ Conservation Objectives Guidance

1 Context

Achieving an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) means that the designated features of each MPA need to achieve an acceptable quality (in biological or geological terms) to ensure they contribute to the network. The UK has an international obligation under the OSPAR Convention to develop an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas.

MPAs are considered an important instrument to assist the UK in meeting its obligation under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive to aim to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status in the marine environment by 2020. For Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) to make their contribution, their features should aim to reach the desired quality by 2020 to support the UK's obligations. Evaluating the current state of MCZ features is essential to establishing how MCZs will contribute to the UK's international obligations.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Natural England – the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) - have produced guidance on the development of conservation objectives for MCZ features: the Conservation Objective Guidance¹. This guidance is intended to help the Regional Stakeholder Groups (RSGs) and the regional MCZ project teams, who will be developing the draft conservation objectives.

This document provides a non-technical summary of the conservation objective setting process and outlines the regional stakeholder groups' role in developing the draft conservation objectives.

2 Summary of key points

- A conservation objective is a statement describing the desired quality of the feature(s) (habitat, species, geological or geomorphological formation) of an MCZ. Existing MPAs in the UK use the term *Favourable Condition* to represent the desired state of their features. This term has also been applied to MCZ features in order to promote consistency with existing MPAs as they all contribute to the same MPA network.
- Due to the sensitivities of habitats and species, some pressures caused by human activities may stop the feature attaining favourable condition if present at sufficient intensity. The stakeholder groups will need to make a decision, based on the level of activity and risk, as to whether the objective will be to **maintain** (features are not sensitive to the current type and level of activities taking place at the site and therefore not vulnerable to damage), or to **recover** (features are sensitive to the activities occurring at the site and likely to be vulnerable to damage).
- A small proportion of MCZs will also be identified as reference areas (this could be a whole site or part of a site)². These are places in which all extractive, depositional or human-derived disturbing or damaging activities are removed or prevented (wherever

¹ The Conservation Objective Guidance is formal advice to regional MCZ projects and Regional Stakeholder Groups to assist the development of draft conservation objectives for MCZ features.

² JNCC & Natural England, 2010. Draft Marine Conservation Zone Reference Areas: Guidance document for regional MCZ projects. http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/MCZ-regional-guidance_tcm6-23451.pdf.

feasible³) in accordance with guidance provided², allowing the feature to achieve reference condition representing the unimpacted condition of a feature.

- Conservation objectives highlight those activities likely to damage the feature and for which management may be required. Management could range from allowing an activity to continue, ceasing an activity or allowing an activity to continue but with some modification.
- The RSGs will propose high-level draft conservation objectives to accompany their recommendations on possible MCZs. The SNCBs will work with stakeholders to refine these objectives over the period from initial identification of potential MCZs in 2010/11 through to publication of the final objectives at formal MCZ designation, expected in late 2012. The final conservation objectives for a site will be determined by Ministers in the designation order.
- The relevant public authorities will use the conservation objectives and associated advice from SNCBs to determine appropriate management measures. Any proposed byelaws will be subject to public consultation⁴.

3 Roles of Regional Stakeholder Groups and Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs)

Stakeholders have a central role in the process of defining conservation objectives since they have the up-to-date knowledge on the current levels of human activities in an area. Discussions within the regional stakeholder group will try to ascertain if the activities currently present in an area could damage the feature(s) present, putting the features at risk of not achieving favourable condition. This means that regional stakeholder groups are best placed to make the decision as to whether the draft objective will be to **maintain** or to **recover**.

The key roles of the regional stakeholder groups are to:

- Discuss and agree, wherever possible, a draft conservation objective for each feature, based on their knowledge of the current level of human activities in the area;
- Decide those areas to be proposed as reference areas and provide any additional quantitative information on feature attributes whenever possible (specialists within the RSGs);
- Review draft conservation objectives after advice from Natural England, JNCC and Regional Project Teams.

The draft conservation objectives for each feature within a site once determined are included together with additional information that explains decisions taken and any outstanding disagreements, as part of the package of recommendations submitted to Natural England and JNCC by 31 August 2011.

The SNCBs are seeking the active input of the RSGs, regional MCZ project teams and public authorities in developing the draft conservation objectives alongside the MCZ recommendations.

³ 'Wherever feasible' is included in this context as recognition that there may be some circumstances where it is simply not practicable to prevent absolutely all human-derived impact, such as diffuse pollution, in a reference area.

⁴ Public consultation for emergency byelaws is undertaken after the byelaw is put in place.

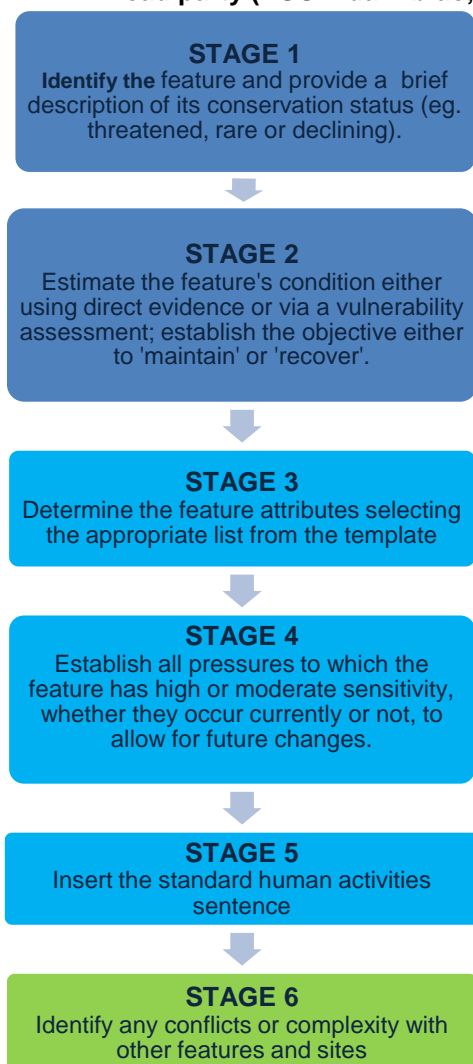
JNCC and Natural England will continue to review the draft conservation objectives following submission by the RSGs and refine the objectives wherever information becomes available that provides new evidence. In particular, the draft objectives will be reviewed if evidence is brought forward during the public consultation.

Following formal consultation in 2012 the draft conservation objectives will be finalised by Government, informed by the recommendations of the regional MCZ projects, SNCBs and responses during formal consultation, and the MCZs will be designated in late 2012. There may also be modifications to the terminology and language used in the conservation objectives to ensure that they conform with the requirements of a statutory instrument.

4 Steps to draft a conservation objective

Conservation objectives will be developed following the process in Figure 1 (simplified from Figure 1 in the Conservation Objective Guidance) for each proposed MCZ feature. Depending on whether or not the feature being considered lies within a proposed reference area, one or other of the standard templates in the Conservation Objective Guidance will be completed. The result will be a conservation objective in the format shown in Table 1. Most stages of the process simply require text to be 'cut and pasted' into the standard templates, using information from the guidance provided by JNCC, Natural England and the regional MCZ projects.

Figure 1 The process for creating a draft conservation objective – the box colour indicates the lead party (RSG – dark blue; Regional Project team - light blue; SNCB – green).



Notes: The feature name should be accompanied by a brief description of its status (e.g. threatened, rare, declining, or representative). Determine if any part of the area could be designated as a reference area

Determining whether the conservation objective should be to 'maintain' or 'recover' the feature to favourable condition, will depend on its current status and the desired outcome for that feature. A status assessment will either use direct evidence, if available or follow a risk-based approach using the vulnerability of the feature to pressures (from activities). Vulnerability can be determined by assessing the sensitivity of the feature to pressures, and the exposure of the feature to those pressures. For reference areas see MCZ Reference Area Guidance on this subject (currently under development by JNCC and Natural England).

The attribute list appropriate to the feature (habitat, species, geological or geomorphological) should be selected from the template. JNCC and Natural England should be contacted for advice if the feature is one that is not listed in the Ecological Network Guidance.

The list of all known pressures affecting the feature can be extracted from the sensitivity tables provided by JNCC and Natural England. This stage is not required where the feature lies within a proposed reference area.

The standard human activities text appropriate to the template being used should be inserted into section 4 of the table.

Table 1 An example of a conservation objective

Conservation Objective	
1 Conservation Objective	The sea-pen and burrowing megafauna community contains all three sea pen species which are on the list of Threatened and/or Declining habitats. Subject to natural change, maintain the sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities at favourable condition , such that:
2 Attributes ⁵ (insert the attributes list specific to the feature)	The <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extent, • diversity, • community structure, • natural environmental quality, and • natural environmental processes <p>representative of the sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities in the biogeographic region are all maintained, such that the feature makes its contribution to the network..</p>
Advice on operations	
3 Pressures	The sea-pen and burrowing megafauna community is sensitive to the following pressures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organic enrichment • Physical loss (to land or freshwater habitat) • Siltation rate changes (low) • Temperature changes - regional/national • Temperature changes - local • Salinity changes - local • Physical change (to another seabed type) Structural abrasion/penetration: Structural damage to seabed >25mm • Shallow abrasion/penetration: damage to seabed surface and penetration ≤25mm • Surface abrasion: damage to seabed surface features • Physical removal (extraction of substratum) • Removal of target species (lethal) • Removal of non-target species (lethal)
4 Human activities	Human activities which cause these pressures will need to be managed, if they prevent the conservation objectives from being achieved., to ensure the MCZ contributes to an ecologically coherent and well-managed network of Marine Protected Areas.

Please direct any further enquiries to:

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⁵ Definitions of attributes are provided in the glossary of the COG