Marine Conservation Zones – Conservation Objectives

What is a conservation objective?

A conservation objective is a statement describing the desired ecological/geological state (the quality) of a feature for which a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) is designated. The conservation objective establishes whether the feature meets the desired state and should be *maintained*, or falls below it and should be *recovered to favourable condition.* Therefore 'favourable condition' is the overall aim and whether the feature requires 'recovery to' or to be 'maintained in', is the action needed to achieve the objective.

Protected sites in the UK use the term *Favourable Condition to* represent the desired state of their features. A 'feature' is one of the habitats, species or geodiversity interests that MCZs are intended to conserve.

Why are they important?

Conservation objectives describe the ecological ambitions for each feature within each MCZ. This provides the framework for the identification of appropriate management measures to achieve favourable condition. Therefore the conservation objective informs stakeholders of the potential implications of a MCZ designation.

Who advises on conservation objectives for a site?

Natural England and JNCC advise Defra at the time of designation on the 'action' part of the objective. Over time as management measures are implemented the number of 'recover' objectives should reduce and change to 'maintain' objectives and features begin the process of recovery. These changes are informed by assessments of condition undertaken by Natural England and JNCC.

Achieving 'favourable condition' is the aim for all designated MCZ features.. The action part of the objective (to maintain or recover) will change over time as knowledge improves on the condition of the feature and on how pressures can impact features and how they can recover from impacts. Also, should effective management measures be implemented to remove or reduce pressures associated with potentially damaging activities we would expect the feature to begin the process of recovery towards meeting its objective.

Who uses the conservation objectives?

Public authorities (such as the Marine Management Organisation, Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, harbour authorities) are required to take active steps to further (or, if not possible, least hinder) the conservation objectives for MCZ features when exercising their functions. They also have to consider the effect of proposed activities on MCZ features before authorising the activities;

As Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies, Natural England and JNCC will also use conservation objectives:

- to advise public authorities, developers and other stakeholders on how to adapt activities (if deemed necessary) in order to ensure designated MCZ features achieve favourable condition;
- to establish monitoring of designated features to assess if favourable or reference condition is being reached;
- to regularly report, on behalf of the appropriate authority, on the extent to which the conservation objectives are being achieved, as is also the case for existing sites within the MPA network.

What information is used to develop conservation objectives?

Ideally, recent survey data would be available to assess the current condition of features in MCZs under consideration. Where data are available, that describes the feature's condition, it will be used to assess condition and set the objective action.

When time and resources are constrained, there may not have been a detailed survey of each proposed MCZ feature to establish its current condition prior to site designation. In many cases survey and monitoring data are not available for an area and it has been necessary to determine feature condition indirectly. This is undertaken through an assessment of vulnerability which identifies whether there are any activities currently occurring or are likely to have caused damage to the feature.

This assessment follows existing MPA approaches which consider information on the feature's sensitivity to pressures, combined with evidence (including local knowledge and information) of current exposure to activities exerting those pressures to derive the feature's vulnerability. The feature's vulnerability is a proxy indicator of its likely condition and allows for condition to be inferred.

There are inherent limitations with the use of the vulnerability assessment approach which is recognised in the low confidence in the evidence for the majority of the condition assessments. JNCC and Natural England are undertaking surveys to increase the knowledge of the current condition of features in MPAs.

What are the differences between maintain and recover?

Developing conservation objectives is an iterative process; from initial drafting through to the formal version adopted at designation, continuing with subsequent reviews and revision post-designation taking newly available information into consideration. The process requires both evidence and expert judgement since our understanding of the effect of human activities on marine ecosystems is imperfect.

If a feature is assessed to be in unfavourable condition and therefore require the 'maintain' action to be revised to 'recover'; this serves as a trigger to review the adequacy or appropriateness of prevailing management regimes and any management measures already in place, and/or the definition of favourable condition. A recover objective does not automatically mean that activities will be restricted, but acts to highlight that pressures (from those activities) may be occurring that need further investigation by the appropriate authority. Conversely just because a feature is considered to be in favourable condition (and therefore has a maintain action) does not mean that any activity can occur and no management will be required.