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# The call of the sea

Safeguarding the future of the marine environment





## A maritime nation

In England, you are never more than 70 miles from the sea. It dominates our history and our culture. But, as an island state, we know remarkably little of the complex habitats and huge diversity of marine life that lie beneath the waves, and understand less about the impact of our activities upon it.

In what are some of the most productive seas in Europe, England also has some of the finest marine wildlife, with dramatic underwater landscapes that are home to over 10,000 different plants and animals. But, out of sight and out of mind, our seas are being changed significantly. Many fish stocks are in real danger of collapse and many habitats are in decline.

Restoring our marine environment to a productive yet sustainable state must be a priority in the 21st century.

The marine environment is a vital cultural, economic and social asset for all sea-users, visitors and the public. We continue to fish, to dredge, to drill, to build and to harness the power of the sea for energy. These are all legitimate uses, which we should not seek to end.

But, unlike on land – where we have planning laws and landscape designations, nature reserves and national park – the overwhelming extent of our marine environment remains unprotected.



© Nick Tyson

# Landmark environmental legislation

The UK has often led the way on landmark pieces of environmental legislation. We were the first nation to put forward legislation with regard to climate change adaptation. It is worth noting that the Marine and Coastal Access Bill will pass through Parliament on the 60th Anniversary of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which safeguarded the nation's finest natural landscapes and opened them up for people to enjoy.

The marine environment provides a range of services on which we all depend – for food, for energy and to regulate our climate. As populations grow and the impact of climate change bites, the pressures on the marine environment will only grow. To safeguard marine

ecosystems and the valuable services they provide we urgently need the network of Marine Protected Areas proposed in the Bill.

Sometimes the environment will have to come first both to secure our natural assets and the legitimate needs of all users of the sea in the long term. The Marine and Coastal Access Bill provides a once in a lifetime opportunity to get this right and set an example to the global community.

Failure to act comes at a high cost. Future generations cannot be expected to pay the long-term price for unregulated exploitation of the marine environment today; some of the changes that have already occurred may be irreversible.

# Ensuring the Marine and Coastal Access Bill is a world leading piece of legislation

The evidence shows that a Marine and Coastal Access Bill is urgently needed. It is vital that adequate time is allocated to enact it safely during the next Parliamentary session.

Previous attempts to put in place a framework for protection of the marine environment have failed. Natural England is proposing that the Bill be appropriately strengthened so that the Government's marine vision is delivered through world-class legislation.

**1** A clear timescale is essential to ensure that urgently needed protection is put in place without delay. The existing Marine Nature Reserve (MNR) legislation, which lacked a clear timetable, has secured a single tiny MNR in England in 27 years.

**2** Natural England is government's statutory advisor on the natural environment and has decades of experience in getting the right level and scale of protection in the right place on land. The duty to designate Marine Conservation Zones, which requires identical skills, should fall to Natural England.


**3** On land Natural England successfully protects Sites of Special Scientific Interest from loss and damage. It is vital that the 'general offence' of damaging or destroying a Marine Conservation Zone is robust and applies without exceptions, just as it does on land. We are well-equipped to take responsibility for prosecuting this vital safeguard.

**4** The Marine Management Organisation, proposed in the Bill, and the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities must have a duty to further the conservation and enhancement of marine wildlife just as terrestrial public bodies have under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2000).

**5** The appropriate Marine Plan Authority must be required to prepare marine plans to ensure a joined up approach to marine conservation.

**6** Natural England must retain the sole competence for notifying and confirming Sites of Special Scientific Interest even when they expand below the mean low water mark.





**Front cover photograph**

Jewel anemone © Sally Sharrock/Natural England

**Back cover photograph**

Herring shoal © Fisheries Research Services

**NATURAL  
ENGLAND**

Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

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