

Marine Conservation Zones

October 2010

Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together the UK's leading voluntary organisations united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

Link supports the four regional Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) projects established to select MCZs in English inshore waters and offshore waters adjacent to England, Wales and Northern Ireland¹, and the valuable work being done to bring together stakeholders in the discussions around where MCZs should be designated. We recognise the benefits of securing a high level of support for MCZs from the range of stakeholders that use and have an interest in the marine environment. Some Link member organisations have been closely involved with the regional MCZ projects so far. Now that the regional projects have produced their first 'iterations' of sites, and are receiving feedback from the Science Advisory Panel (SAP) on their work so far², we believe it is a good opportunity to share our thoughts on how the work to identify potential MCZs needs to be adapted for the next and future iterations.

The selection of sites and the inclusion of socio-economic factors

Link still firmly believes that science should be the primary consideration in the selection of MCZs, with the social and economic consequences of designation being only optional, secondary factors, influencing only choices between alternative sites of equal ecological quality, and only where such choices do not hinder the achievement of an ecologically coherent network. This is the stated intention of the legislation as the UK Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009³ passed through Parliament.

We have therefore been concerned over the apparent exclusion of some areas from consideration for the regional projects' first iterations, based on the socio-economic use or value of the area. For example, the exclusion of high density fishing areas to minimise the socio-economic impacts of designation on fishermen. The SAP, in their general feedback to all the regional projects, recognises that this approach carries several risks:

- 1) That sites will be chosen for MCZs that are currently second rate from an ecological perspective;
- 2) That avoidance of such areas could undermine connectivity of MCZs; and
- 3) Other stakeholders may feel that unfair advantages are being given to fisheries in the planning process.

The general advice from the SAP to the regional projects is not to exclude high socio-economic value sites right from the outset, but to ensure that if an area contains ecologically important habitats or species, it is considered for the establishment of an MCZ: "Socio-economic data on uses and pressures will be useful in deciding among candidate sites for MCZs of similar ecological value. However, such data should not be used to narrow the initial choice of possible places to protect." We fully support this advice from the SAP and urge the regional projects to adopt this approach in generating future iterations of site proposals.

¹ Link's sister organisations, Wales Environment Link, Scottish Environment LINK and the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force, are working to ensure the designation of MPAs in Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish inshore waters and the offshore waters adjacent to Scotland. Together we are calling for a UK-wide ecologically coherent network of MPAs.

² For example, the advice provided by the SAP to Finding Sanctuary's first progress report, which contains detailed comments specific to Finding Sanctuary and general comments relevant to all the Regional Projects: <http://www.finding-sanctuary.org/page/news/357>.

³ Hereafter referred to as the 'Marine Act'.

Link views on the feedback from the Science Advisory Panel

Ecological Importance

We were also very pleased to see that the feedback to the projects from the SAP covered areas such as the need to include more biodiversity information and the need to highlight areas of additional ecological importance (e.g. biodiversity hotspots, or high productivity areas, such as feeding or nursery grounds). The SAP feedback acknowledges that many of the areas selected for the first iteration from the regional projects may have little ecological importance, “especially if they are selected by stakeholders primarily to minimise socio-economic impacts”.

Additional species and habitats

A further issue is that the projects so far have used principally the information on the distribution of the broad-scale habitats defined by the Ecological Network Guidance (ENG), and very little information about other biodiversity, or species/habitat features has yet been incorporated into the analysis. Broad-scale habitats such as rocky reef and gravel beds can vary considerably in the species they support. As such, Link believes (in line with the advice from the SAP) that it is very important that additional data and knowledge about a much wider range of biodiversity – including the species and habitat ‘Features of Conservation Importance’ listed in the ENG as well as other species and habitats for which information exists – must be used to ensure that site selection decisions are well-informed, and therefore that: “areas that are of ecological importance (and worth protecting) are the locations ultimately chosen for inclusion within a MCZ”.

Data

The feedback from the SAP highlights several additional data layers that the projects either already have access to, or should soon have access to and offers some advice on how to use these additional data layers in the analysis of which sites are best designated. We would like to see more details of when the projects are going to get these additional data, and how they plan to incorporate the new information into future iterations.

Additional guidance on co-location of sites

The Statutory Agencies have recently published additional guidance on the designation of MCZs, dealing with the issue of co-location of MCZs with areas where socio-economic activities already occur or are licensed⁴. Link welcomes the publication of this guidance, and in particular the statement that: “no part of the regional MCZ project planning area should initially be excluded from the stakeholder process”.

We are also pleased that in looking for ‘win-wins’, this guidance emphasises that: “The priority in MCZ planning is satisfying the requirements of the ENG”. While we agree that co-location of MCZs with existing or planned socio-economic activities should not be automatically ruled out, we believe it is vitally important that the regional projects and the stakeholders involved in those projects do not lose sight of the overall requirement to designate an ecologically coherent network of sites, and to ensure that those sites are adequately protected. In general terms, Link feels that co-location of sites with known socio-economic activities (e.g. wind-farm construction) is more likely to be suitable for those MCZs designated to meet the broad-scale habitat criteria, rather than those that are selected to protect particular species and habitats.

Long snouted seahorse
(*Hippocampus guttulatus*)
Photograph by
Andrew Pearson



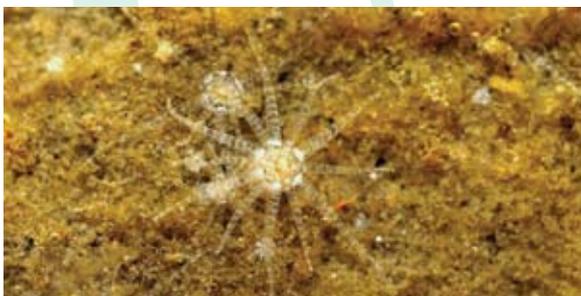
⁴ JNCC & Natural England (July 2010) *Marine Conservation Zone Project: Additional guidance for regional MCZ projects on planning for areas where licensed, planned or existing socio-economic activities occur*: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/marine/protectandmanage/mpa/mcz/default.aspx>

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Impact Assessment process

The four regional projects each produced first draft Impact Assessments to accompany their first iteration submissions to the SAP. Link supports the Impact Assessment process but does have some concerns about the first draft documents produced by the projects. In general (and reflecting the fact that their development is still at the very early stages) the Impact Assessments produced so far contain generic information about socio-economic uses of the marine environment (usually at the UK/England level rather than the regional level) but relatively little information about the social or economic value of the environment, whether that be in terms of the monetary value of the ecosystem goods and services that the marine environment provides to society, the value in monetary terms that the public place on marine conservation or the non-monetary value of the marine environment such as its amenity and intrinsic values, which support health and well-being.

We were also concerned to see, in at least one draft Impact Assessment, judgements being made on whether or not potential MCZs were suitable for designation based on the predicted socio-economic impacts of the site. This goes beyond the remit of the Impact Assessment which is not required to judge whether or not a site should be designated, based on analysis of the compatibility of ongoing activities with proposed features for conservation. This kind of judgement should be the job of the regional project stakeholder group, and ultimately the Secretary of State.



Starlet sea anemones (*Nematostella vectensis*)
Photograph by Rob Spray.

Setting conservation objectives for sites

As the regional projects progress, the next stage of considering conservation objectives and associated management measures for proposed sites will become extremely important. Clear, relevant and strong conservation objectives and management measures are essential to ensure that sites are actually conserved rather than simply ending up as 'paper parks'.

The Marine Act requires that conservation objectives are set for each site, and detailed in the designation order for the site. Conservation objectives should be drafted for the purpose of conservation of marine flora and fauna, marine habitats, or features of geological or geomorphological interest - where the interpretation of conservation includes enabling the recovery or increase of a feature (s.117). As a whole, the MCZ network is expected to contribute towards the conservation or the improvement of the marine environment in the UK area (s.123), and the conservation objectives set for individual MCZs should reflect this. Link believes that MCZ conservation objectives should therefore aim, as a minimum, to achieve 'favourable conservation status' or 'favourable condition' for all MCZs. We also believe that numerous sites will require more rigorous objectives, such as where a site or its features need to recover to former status. Link believes such reference sites are critical for ensuring resilience within networks, and in addition to a minimum of one site for each broadscale habitat and 'Feature of Conservation Importance', they should also consider such protection levels for sites offering good ecological benefits, and all sites that are rare, threatened and endangered. In addition reference sites should be distributed to take account of biogeographic variation of features.

Link believes it is vitally important to ensure that clear, relevant and strong conservation objectives are proposed for sites, and that work to consider suitable conservation objectives starts soon. The SAP advises that the projects should start drafting conservation objectives for potential MCZs as soon as possible – and that this information should be included with the second iteration coming out of the projects.

For further information, please contact **Joanna Fisher, Marine Policy and Campaigns Coordinator, Wildlife and Countryside Link** at joanna@wcl.org.uk or on **020 7820 8600**

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