

Uncertain future for UK seas as Marine Conservation Zones delayed

22 November 2011

On 14 November, the Minister for Environment, Richard Benyon MP made an announcement on England's Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs)¹.

Although the Minister confirmed that all of the 127 recommended MCZs would go to public consultation, he stated that the process will be delayed while the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commission further work on the evidence base for MCZs.

The consultation on the 127 sites is now expected to take place at the end of 2012 with the first MCZ designations happening in 2013. Although Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link)² is pleased that all 127 recommended MCZs will go to public consultation, we are very concerned with the delay and with the issues surrounding the evidence requirements for sites which will result in only a subset of the 127 recommended sites being designated initially. The announcement confirms that the designation of MCZs for English waters will now be delayed beyond the internationally-agreed 2012 deadline, a policy reiterated in the UK Marine Policy Statement³. A delay in the designation of MCZs will result in our seas and the wildlife within them going unprotected for longer.

The 127 recommended MCZs are the culmination of two years work by four stakeholder-led Regional Projects around the UK; it was society that decided on the size, number and distribution of these MCZs. The Minister's statement undermines the hard work, determination and dedication of these four Defra sponsored Regional Projects, not to mention the £8.8 million spent on the process to date.

The site recommendations were made using the 'best available evidence', as advised by Defra from the outset of the project. Joan Edwards, Chair of Link's Marine Working Group said, "The fact that the goalposts have now been moved at this late stage in the process is hugely frustrating. We are now facing a delay of at least 12 months and real uncertainty on how many sites will eventually be designated, due to a change in the levels of evidence requirements stipulated by Defra."

Link believes that a precautionary approach to the management of our seas is essential; waiting until further damage is done is not good enough. MCZ's provide a real opportunity to give our marine wildlife the protection it needs to secure it for future generations.

Sharon Thompson, Vice Chair of Link's Marine Working Group added, "Each MCZ is vital on its own - but they are as important together, creating an ecologically coherent network of sites that will help return our seas to a healthy and productive state. Even with 127 sites, there are still gaps to be filled in order to complete the network."

¹ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2011/11/15/wms-marine-conservation-zones/>

² Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 of 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.

³ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/marine/protect/planning/>

The Government has an unprecedented opportunity to make great gains for marine conservation in England and meet its commitment to protection of marine biodiversity, as well as on striving to be the Greenest Government Ever.

Given the Minister's statement, and the uncertainty that we now face, Link questions how committed the Government really is to achieving its vision of "*clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas.*"

This statement is supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Humane Society International
- Marine Conservation Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- WWF-UK

