

Nature 2030: A Plan for the Marine Environment

Wildlife and Countryside Link's 'manifestos' are policy briefings which provide detail about how the five policy asks made by the Nature 2030 campaign could be applied to benefit different aspects of nature. This manifesto covers the marine environment.

Introduction

The next Parliament will be a critical turning point for the marine environment. In 2022, the UK signed a global agreement to halt and reverse the loss of wildlife and manage 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030. In England, that promise is backed by legal duties to recover Marine Protected Areas and to stop the decline of species by the end of the next Parliament. These targets are not easy to meet.

Our seas are facing unprecedented pressures which demand urgent action to safeguard marine life. A combination of continued bottom trawling and overfishing, and recent record UK sea temperatures of 4-5°C above average have placed extreme pressure on sealife. Government assessments continue to show that the majority of our Marine Protected Areas are in an unfavourable condition.

This forms part of an ongoing failure to protect our most iconic wild marine species such as seals, seahorses and dolphins, as well as rare and vulnerable marine habitats such as cold-water coral reefs and seagrass beds. This is a failure of environmental stewardship as well as impacting our economy and vulnerable coastal communities. The Office for National Statistics estimates that UK marine natural capital assets currently have a value of £211 billion,¹ which includes the value of significant marine carbon sequestration; this value is at risk while the state of the marine environment continues to deteriorate.

Our message to all parties is that nature and climate targets are not 'nice-to-haves': on land and sea alike they are essential to maintain a habitable planet, rich in wildlife, with a viable, functioning global economy. Immediate action is essential. Nature 2030 is a challenge to all political parties to take action, proposing five ambitious policies to get Government back on track to meet the targets and restore biodiversity.² For the marine environment, this means:

¹ [Marine accounts, natural capital, UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

² [Nature 2030 Campaign \(wcl.org.uk\)](https://wcl.org.uk)

- **A Pay Rise for Nature:** Ensuring sufficient resources for effective monitoring and management of marine and coastal environments.
- **A Nature Recovery Obligation:** Driving reductions in harm caused to the sea by developers and other marine industries.
- **A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project:** Safeguarding sea life through a stronger, coherent Marine Protected Area network where bottom trawling is restricted, delivering new Highly Protected Marine Areas, and setting catch limits in line with or below the independent scientific advice provided by ICES.
- **A National Nature Service:** Equipping sufficient people with the skills and funding needed to create, manage and restore blue carbon habitats.
- **A Right to a Healthy Environment:** Ensuring clean water is firmly at the heart of decision-making, from planning to permits, driven by a new legal right to healthy, high quality blue spaces.

This is the UK's opportunity to create a better state of nature. Our seas and their wildlife cannot wait.

A Pay Rise for Nature

The policy in brief

The Government must deliver greater funding to support effective management, monitoring and protection of our marine environment.

This should align with and accompany an increase in public funding for nature's recovery on land, as set out in the first ask of the main Nature 2030 report.

Supporting marine recovery

We cannot improve the state of the marine environment without urgently improving how we manage our most important marine sites. Most Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) will soon have byelaws in place to protect them from bottom trawling, but agencies will need the resources to enforce these effectively. Further, our MPAs are generally lacking monitoring which should show clear evidence of both good management for nature and that the site is either in good condition or showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. Fishing activity is currently largely unmonitored, making it hard to assess fish stock levels and to evaluate levels of bycatch. More funding is also needed to protect seabirds around our coasts which are at risk from pressures including invasive species and biosecurity risks such as avian flu, leading to sharp declines in their populations.

A Pay Rise for Nature would provide Government agencies with the increased financial support needed to deliver effective management and monitoring of our coast and seas.

To meet the Government's legally binding MPA recovery targets, MPAs will require additional management and monitoring which necessitates a funding boost for the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), Natural England, and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). Appropriate regular scientific and ecological monitoring is vital, but only a small proportion of our MPAs have monitoring plans in place.³ Therefore, to a large extent we do not know whether current management measures in our MPA network are delivering their objectives. Around £90m per annum in additional funding is required, a figure extrapolated from

³ 13%. Correct as of December 2016, see [Developing an ecologically-coherent and well-managed Marine Protected Area network in the United Kingdom: 10 years of reflection from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee: Biodiversity: Vol 19, No 1-2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

research which found that effective MPAs require active management and dedicated staff to oversee the work.⁴

Observer coverage on fishing vessels is at less than 1% and is constrained by staff and financial resources. Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM) on vessels has been shown to be a cost-effective way to supplement observer data collection. It can deliver fully documented fisheries, informing measures to benefit fish stocks, sensitive marine habitats and species vulnerable to bycatch. The Government's recent consultation on REM noted estimates that the cost of the technology is between £6,138-£10,521 per vessel⁵. With REM costs decreasing year on year, it represents an excellent investment in monitoring the health of our seas.

Further, funding is required for an English island biosecurity programme. All our islands are wild and beautiful places, but there are 42 around the UK coast that are particularly important for seabirds and, as such, are internationally protected. These include Lundy Island and Coquet Island, which are important for breeding puffins and common and Arctic terns, which would benefit from the funding of this programme. For the greatest benefits, this should be expanded to a UK-wide programme.

Further marine benefits from the Pay Rise for Nature include:

- A boost to evidence-driven fisheries management. Monitoring fishing boats not only supports compliance, but also has the ability to capture much needed scientific data which can be used in the creation of effective fisheries management policies, contribute to stock assessments and provide insight into the type and frequency of other species incidentally caught in fishing gear.

⁴ [North Devon Marine Protected Areas Cost Evaluation - Final Report.pdf \(ukseasproject.org.uk\)](https://ukseasproject.org.uk)

⁵ [Technical guidelines and specifications for the implementation of Remote Electronic Monitoring \(REM\) in EU fisheries | European Fisheries Control Agency \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

A Nature Recovery Obligation

The policy in brief

Those profiting from the marine environment must contribute to halting the decline of nature at sea. Sectors which are engaged in industrial activity at sea should be subject to a Nature Recovery Obligation. This regulatory requirement should require private sector funding for nature's recovery, sharing out the effort required to meet key Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets.

Supporting marine recovery

Our seas are facing widespread damage from fishing and large-scale developments such as oil and gas production and the deployment of offshore renewable energy. New obligations on the private sector will be necessary to ensure that marine activities support nature's recovery in addition to delivering on economic and climate change ambitions.

The Nature Recovery Obligation would establish regulatory requirements for companies to reduce harm caused to marine environments.

Large companies with marine operations would have a legal duty to prepare plans which assess and disclose company impacts on the marine environment, setting out proposals to ensure that those impacts accrue to a positive contribution to marine recovery. For example, industrial fishing businesses would be required to set out plans to transition away from more destructive gear types and more polluting fuels towards low-impact alternatives.

Based on their environmental performance, large companies with operations at sea would then be required to fund nature's recovery. This cannot mean that companies can simply compensate for irreplaceable habitats lost in construction. Rather, as for other habitats and species, the mitigation hierarchy should be followed with compensation as a very last resort. Compensation funds should be spent on delivering for nature close to the damaged site and should not undermine the coherence of the UK MPA network; for example the North Sea cannot lose protections with associated compensation implemented in Welsh seas. It should also ensure no net loss in the extent, connectivity and coherence of the network. If no suitable compensation exists, the development should not take place.

This system of plans and the mitigation hierarchy (including compensation payments where appropriate) will incentivise companies to change practices that damage the marine

environment. The more effective companies are at embedding plans to make their impact on the sea a positive one, the easier they will find it is to operate and the less they will have to pay in compensation.

The Nature Recovery Obligation will also apply to large companies in land-based sectors whose activities or resource use can damage marine habitats, including supermarkets.

One of the key harms the Nature Recovery Obligation would reduce is the accidental entanglement of marine mammals in fishing gear, known as bycatch. A recent Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee inquiry highlighted bycatch, as the “biggest single threat” to marine mammals. To rectify this, Nature Recovery Obligation plans and funds should promote bycatch monitoring and mitigation on all fishing vessels, primarily through the use of REM. This is essential to delivering Government’s goal to “minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch”,⁶ accompanied by strong SMART targets and mandatory bycatch monitoring.

⁶ [Marine wildlife bycatch mitigation initiative - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project

The policy in brief

The next Government should prioritise a new “30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project” to fulfil its commitment under the CBD Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030 and to secure an environmental legacy for the future. At sea, the project would consist of three pillars:

1. **Strengthening the MPA network:** Protecting the network from all damaging activities, including new developments and pollution, and completing the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) programme to halt damaging fishing activity in offshore MPAs, delivering this across the whole of MPA sites.
2. **Expanding the MPA network:** An expansion of the current MPA network to deliver an ambitious suite of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) and to fill the gaps in the network for habitats and species, especially seabirds.
3. **A Public Nature Estate obligation:** New duties and purposes for public bodies (such as the MMO and Crown Estate) to ensure they care for the seas they own and manage for nature’s recovery and climate change mitigation.

Supporting marine recovery

We cannot meet international commitments to manage 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030 without improving the condition of our most important marine sites. Research has revealed just how poorly our Marine Protected Area (MPA) network is performing. Bottom trawling is still permitted in over 90% of offshore MPAs.⁷ Indeed, a new assessment suggests that just 16.4% of England’s MPAs have all their marine features in favourable and/or recovering condition.⁸ The Government’s new legally binding target requires that at least 70% of protected marine features are in a favourable condition by the end of 2042.⁹

The 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project will drive a suite of ambitious actions to improve the condition of MPAs and roll-out greater safeguards for nature across our seas.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/may/31/fishing-industry-still-bulldozing-seabed-in-90-of-uk-marine-protected-areas>

⁸ The Wildlife Trusts MPA Recovery Check Assessment, currently unpublished

⁹ [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-01-24/debates/BE258E23-1CA7-4607-804B-FD42A0EC3DEE/EnvironmentalTargets\(MarineProtectedAreas\)Regulations2022#:~:text=The%20regulations%20create%20a%20legally,the%20recovery%20of%20protected%20features](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-01-24/debates/BE258E23-1CA7-4607-804B-FD42A0EC3DEE/EnvironmentalTargets(MarineProtectedAreas)Regulations2022#:~:text=The%20regulations%20create%20a%20legally,the%20recovery%20of%20protected%20features)

This should include the completion of the MMO programme to halt the use of bottom towed gear and other damaging fishing activity across England’s offshore MPAs. The programme aims to assess and appropriately manage fishing activities by the end of 2024 to protect valuable marine habitats and species. It is vital that byelaws are implemented across all offshore MPAs without delay, with protections being fully implemented to schedule. Protections for the initial four sites were delayed, which raises fears that the 2024 deadline for protecting the whole offshore network will be missed. To complete the required strengthening of the network, the programme must implement whole-site closures from bottom towed gear for MPAs protected for the seabed.

In addition, across Government policy, measures must be implemented to address displacement. This requires new assessments of overall fleet capacity and addressing both fisheries and MPA policy as a whole. In 2023, only 40% of catch limits for the UK’s main fish stocks were set in line with scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). The Government should commit to setting all catch limits in line with scientific advice in order to maintain or restore fish populations to sustainable levels and keep them flourishing for the future and should set out a strategy for how it intends to achieve this.

It is vital that catch limits are set in line with or below the independent scientific advice provided by ICES. Strong, meaningfully protected MPAs provide havens for wildlife which are crucial in giving marine life a chance to recover – and allowing fish populations to rebound and spill out into surrounding areas. However, progress will be undermined unless the Government acts to stop the continued high levels of overfishing which currently takes place throughout UK seas.

More widely, some key sites and species are still omitted from the MPA network in England. Beyond the existing sites, it is critical to conduct a sufficiency review to assess where the gaps remain so they may be addressed and ensure that the network of MPAs across English waters is ecologically coherent and truly supports species recovery. This is particularly vital with seabirds and SPAs, with critically endangered species such as the Balearic shearwater excluded from the network as well as key breeding sites and most foraging sites. The last UK SPA Review published by JNCC highlights that ‘review of SPA provision in the marine environment is needed for at least 49 species’.¹⁰ This is particularly urgent given the continued failure to achieve GES for seabird populations and the catastrophic impacts of avian flu.

The expansion of protected sites at sea should include the designation of new Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs). HPMAs are essential for providing safe havens for nature where wildlife can recover and thrive, without pressures from human activities. The current

¹⁰ [The status of UK SPAs in the 2000s: the Third Network Review \(jncc.gov.uk\)](https://jncc.gov.uk)

HPMA programme is set to deliver 3 sites covering 0.42% of English seas; this is not sufficient to deliver 30x30 goals. By 2030, at least 10% of English waters should be designated as HPMA, enabling nature's recovery by prohibiting all extractive, destructive and depositional activities.¹¹

The final part of the 30x30 Rapid Delivery Project at sea would create a Public Nature Estate obligation, on the Crown Estate and MMO as public sector bodies whose actions significantly impact the health of the marine environment. This would require the Crown Estate to prioritise the integrity of the MPA network, the protection of vulnerable habitats and species, and delivery of the UK's climate obligations when considering seabed licensing activities. The obligation would importantly also place a priority purpose on the MMO to contribute to the delivery of Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets, as well as wider environmental recovery.

Further benefits from the 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project at sea include:

- An increased contribution to net zero - The marine environment is crucial for tackling climate change. According to the Office for National Statistics, "Marine carbon sequestration is significant and requires more research to fully understand it: it is estimated at between a little over one-third and more than double the carbon removed by terrestrial habitats".¹² More protected marine sites means more carbon sequestration, and the protection of vital long term seabed sediment stores of carbon.
- More opportunities for sport and recreation - Primarily for inshore HPMA, there is the potential for increased participation in non-damaging activities such as non-motorized water sports like swimming, scuba diving, and kayaking, all of which lead to positive outcomes for participants' physical and mental health. This can also help foster public engagement with and commitment to protecting the marine environment.

¹¹ In addition to protecting biodiversity, HPMA can contribute to climate mitigation if blue carbon habitats such as mud habitats, seagrass, kelp and saltmarsh are protected, as well as natural coastal defences and nursery grounds for fish.

¹² [Marine accounts, natural capital, UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

A National Nature Service

The policy in brief

A National Nature Service should be established to deliver practical experience and hands-on training in nature recovery skills and qualifications for thousands of people. It would combine on-the-job skills training with a programme of capital investment in habitat restoration around the country.

The NNS would fill the nature recovery skills gap¹³, create and support thousands of employment opportunities, and provide a skilled workforce to deliver nature restoration which can help to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030.

Supporting coastal and recovery

An ambitious programme of large-scale blue carbon habitat creation and restoration will be vital to creating a better state of nature for coastal and marine habitats and wildlife.

Blue carbon habitats are highly threatened and it is estimated that the UK has lost 85% of its saltmarsh, 95% of its native oyster reefs, and up to 92% of seagrass over the last 100 years.¹⁴ Losses of these habitats have reduced the carbon sequestration potential of our seas, and continued disturbance of marine ecosystems, such as from bottom trawling, may result in releases of stored carbon and thereby contribute to climate change.

It is vital that the Government supports the restoration of seagrass beds and saltmarsh. Action must be taken to deliver the creation and restoration of a minimum of 22,000 hectares of saltmarsh in the UK – every single hectare will be filled with wildlife, providing a much-needed boost to biodiversity. 22,000 hectares of restored saltmarsh would capture and store around 460,000 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year (considering the latest estimates for restored European saltmarsh¹⁵).

A significant programme of capital investment in habitat restoration, delivered through the National Nature Service, will start to repair these damaged marine and wetland habitats. Newly funded habitat restoration projects and an increase in people with the rights skills to

¹³ [Closing the UKs green skills gap.pdf \(green-alliance.org.uk\)](https://green-alliance.org.uk/Closing-the-UKs-green-skills-gap.pdf)

¹⁴ [Natural solutions to the climate crisis: sea grass | The Wildlife Trusts](#)

¹⁵ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gcb.16943>

improve and manage blue spaces will drive wide-scale restoration, improving sites of strategic importance for marine systems.

This programme of habitat restoration at sea could also boost funding for ReMeMaRe, an Environment Agency initiative that aims to reverse centuries of decline of our estuarine and coastal habitats by Restoring [seagrass] Meadows, [salt] Marsh and [oyster] Reef. The project has funding for restoration of 800 ha of saltmarshes, 25 ha of seagrass meadows and 50 ha oyster beds, plus a pilot study for restoring 2 ha of kelp forests. They also have £4m for the setup of aquaculture facilities that will be able to scale-up production of oyster seed and seagrass seedling required for realising the ambition of ReMeMaRe to restore 15 % of our estuarine and coastal habitats by 2043. However, the project has not received the required funding in recent spending rounds and is therefore lacking the resources to support a long-term plan for estuarine and coastal restoration.

Further benefits from the National Nature Service include:

- Long term sustainability for fish stocks - Measures to protect, create and restore saltmarsh and seagrass for carbon storage would also provide valuable habitats for fish nurseries. These nursery habitats will boost fish numbers and support commercial fisheries, as well as benefiting other marine species within the ecosystem.

A Right to a Healthy Environment

The policy in brief

The pollution of our seas degrades a natural asset, impairs our shared experience of the natural world and threatens everyone's health.

A new Environmental Rights Bill would create a human right to a clean and healthy environment for all. Combined with greater investment in environmental improvement, it would help clean up our seas and empower people to hold public bodies who allow marine pollution to account.

Supporting marine recovery

Human health and wellbeing are intertwined with the condition of the marine environment.

Access and exposure to natural spaces benefits both physical and mental health, with research suggesting that increased access to these natural spaces is key to mitigating socio-economic health inequalities.¹⁶ Millions use the aquatic environment every year for wild swimming, paddling, angling and more, with 7.5 million people engaged in paddling in 2022 alone.¹⁷

The full health potential of these activities is being held back by marine pollution. Water users at sea remain at risk of contracting illnesses such as E. coli and gastroenteritis due to water pollution.¹⁸ These pollution issues are so severe that 57 participants in a global triathlon tournament this summer fell ill after swimming in the North Sea off Sunderland.¹⁹

Under the provisions of the Environmental Rights Bill, authorities would have to be much more careful about the pollution they allow in blue spaces under their control.

¹⁶ White et al. (2020). 'Blue space, health and well-being: A narrative overview and synthesis of potential benefits'. [Blue space, health and well-being: A narrative overview and synthesis of potential benefits - ScienceDirect](#)

¹⁷ Watersports Participation Survey 2022. (2022). [Watersports Participation Survey 2022 \(britishmarine.co.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ [Sickness Report Case Studies - Surfers Against Sewage • Water Quality Report 2022 \(sas.org.uk\)](#)

¹⁹ [Fifty-seven swimmers fall sick and get diarrhoea at world triathlon championship in Sunderland | Pollution | The Guardian](#)

The Bill would require public bodies delivering services connected to the environment to demonstrate that decisions they make are compatible with everyone's right to clean water (along with other environmental rights). Public bodies would be required to have due regard to the right to clean water in all relevant decision-making processes, from housing developments through to sewage permits and offshore oil and gas licences. This would significantly increase the weight that the need for clean water is given in decision-making, across both Central and Local Government

Further marine benefits from a Right to a Healthy Environment include:

- Empowering local people and communities to hold polluters to account. The Environmental Rights Bill would give people the right to take legal action against environmental decisions which damage water quality without risking huge personal costs. This would be achieved by a cap on legal costs in such environmental cases.

Knitting it all together: More effective marine targets and strategies.

Marine policy is guided by the UK Marine Strategy which sets out a framework for delivering Good Environmental Status (GES) in UK seas. The forthcoming update to the strategy will be ‘part 3’, the programme of measures, which outlines the steps the Government will take to recover the marine environment. The consultation on part 3 closed in November 2021, however the Government has yet to respond with an updated strategy.

The continued delay, with the consultation website’s last update stating that “we now aim to publish by the end of 2022”, means that a central pillar of cross-UK marine policy is missing²⁰. This delay is indicative of wider inertia on improving the management of the UK’s marine environment. To drive truly ambitious, holistic action, the above Nature 2030 actions must be aligned and built around a reformed UK Marine Strategy; a new ‘Ocean Recovery Strategy’ running up to 2030.

The Ocean Recovery Strategy should include ambitious interim targets and policy programmes to move the policy regime to a state of recovery, laying out a clear path to delivering the 2030 State of Nature target and achieving the effective protection of 30% of England’s seas by 2030. The strategy process should include a comprehensive impact assessment of the measures required, quantifying the expected contribution of each measure towards achieving GES over the cycle.

Across our seas, there is a desperate need for a new Marine Spatial Prioritisation programme, which can develop a holistic and strategic vision for our seas by 2050, and which should include consideration of all activities and developments. Doing this will also help to consider wider incidental environmental impacts, including the displacement of fishing activity. The programme, with its holistic mandate, could look into fishing quotas allocation, fleet capacity and fishing sites, to assess the scale and level of impacts and, as such, the level of net gain required from the sector.

As part of this process, England’s Marine Plans must be urgently revised to reflect the climate and nature crises. Marine Plans should ensure that climate and nature recovery is at the heart of policy and spatial planning, following an ecosystem based approach. They must ensure that areas for nature are effectively protected, and that the cumulative environmental impacts of our increasing demands on the sea are addressed to enable nature to recover while helping to tackle climate change.

²⁰ [Marine strategy part three: programme of measures - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/marine-strategy-part-three-programme-of-measures)

Further, an effective marine species target is currently missing from the Environment Act. The species abundance metric, which will be used to assess progress and achievement of the species abundance target, has a very limited number of marine species.²¹ This should be rectified to ensure that action in the marine environment is not overlooked.

Advances in the health of our marine environment from the Nature 2030 policies set out above would align behind this and other crucial targets.

A flourishing marine environment in 2030

We cannot achieve a better state of nature without protecting, restoring and enhancing the state of our marine environment. If implemented, Nature 2030 policies will deliver the future that our seas - and the people and wildlife who rely upon them - so desperately need.

A future of abundance for marine species, where charismatic and much-loved animals such as puffins, dolphins and whales can thrive. A future where marine ecosystems can flourish in areas protected from all harmful activities, offering us a vision of a pristine natural environment. Where our sand dunes, saltmarshes and seagrass meadows are better cared for and their habitats protected, and where people can rightfully enjoy all the benefits that healthy seas can deliver.

The Marine Manifesto has been published as part of the Nature 2030 campaign, supported by over 100 environmental, climate and health organisations. You can support the Nature 2030 campaign [here](#).

For questions or further information please contact:

Matt Browne and Matt Dawson, Wildlife and Countryside Link

E: matt@wcl.org.uk Matthew@wcl.org.uk

Wildlife & Countryside Link, Vox Studios, 1 – 45 Durham Street, Vauxhall, London, SE11 5JH
www.wcl.org.uk

²¹ See [WCL Evidence OEP Improving Nature Delivery 08_08_2023.pdf](#)