

Sea change: securing a future for Europe's seas

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Dr Helen Phillips' speech

According to the World Conservation Union there are now over 100 000 protected areas covering more than 18.8 million km². This figure is equivalent to 12.65% of the Earth's land surface, or an area greater than the combined land area of China, South Asia and Southeast Asia. In contrast less than 1% of the world's oceans are protected.

It is a curious distinction – the protected areas model has been shown to work over more than half a century. But we have collectively failed to apply it to our oceans. Out of sight and out of mind, the world beneath the waves has been ignored by the mainstream. And as a result the seas have been systematically emptied of life – there are 90% fewer large fish than there were 100 years ago; 88% of European fish stocks are fished beyond their sustainable limit; England's 'common' skate is now extinct in the Irish Sea.

The warning signs have been ignored – when one species stopped turning up in nets, we simply moved on to the next. In English the notion of inexhaustibility of the marine environment was so commonly accepted, so widely held that it is a popular proverb - 'there are plenty more fish in the sea'. If we don't act now, jilted lovers the world over will need to look for comfort elsewhere – the fish will have gone!

We are slowly changing our oceans – where once there were massive fish populations, now there are smaller species, jelly fish and plankton booms. Where once there were thriving maritime fisheries and vibrant local economies, now there are too many boats chasing too few smaller fish.

The ecosystem approach

Part of the problem, I think, is that for many people, in England [and Ireland] at least, the sea is where you get the cod from to go with the chips; it makes you sick on the ferry to France; it's the blue bit you fly over on a long-haul flight, and you paddle in it when you go to the beach. Very little thought is given to the wonders of the ocean that lie beneath the blue bit. Or to the wide range of valuable public 'goods and services' provided by a healthy marine environment, which remain a mystery to most people and their importance known only to few.

The role they play in climate regulation. The fact that oceans absorb and retain more CO₂ than the land. A recent IUCN report (by our own Prof Laffoley) showed that healthy coastal marine carbon sinks habitats are essential if we are to limit climate change. Many of these coastal habitats, like tidal salt marshes, remain under significant threat from development and rising sea levels, and urgent action is needed to prevent further damage to their essential carbon storage role.

You will get a preview, I understand, later in this conference from new cutting edge global guidance development on ocean acidification to be launched formally at Copenhagen later this week – This shows the scale and urgency of the task to restore health and resilience to our seas.

The task in hand

The good news is that there is a rising tide of support for action to safeguard the marine environment. Popular campaigns are starting to hit home. And technological advance means that we know more about the oceans than ever before. We have the sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise – much of it in this room - to begin to turn things around. And in the UK we are fortunate that the Government has recently passed a land mark Marine and Coastal Access Act, including a clear commitment to establish an ecologically coherent network of MPAs by 2012.

Let's reflect briefly that the UK's Wildlife legislation of 1981 made it possible to create Marine Nature Reserves, but in twenty years it delivered only 1 in England's inshore waters! – The new Marine Act is a far more potent piece of legislation, and we must guard against repeating past errors in its implementation. I hope that 'Sea Change' will signal the start of a coordinated, concerted pan-European push to put in place the coherent network of Marine Protected Areas that's so urgently needed.

If we can agree a network of Marine Protected Areas that is sufficiently large, diverse and interconnected across the world's oceans then abundance and diversity can return to our seas – to the benefit of everyone – increased fish stocks for fishers, secure protein supplies for rising populations, and greater security from the impacts of climate change.

The Natura 2000 initiative has finally provided some momentum - the UK Government is now consulting on the designation of 12 additional sites (10 SACs, 2 SPAs) in English, Welsh and offshore waters. Designation of these 12 new proposed Sites would provide protection for some of Europe's most important habitats (reefs, sandbanks and sea caves) and most threatened species (Red Throated Diver and Common Scoter). It would increase the coverage of Natura 2000 sites (SPAs and SACs) from 8% of England's inshore waters to 24%; and thereby contribute to the protection of these habitats across Europe. In time they might also provide space for recovery of fish stocks.

But to tackle a problem 200 years plus in the making we need to go beyond implementing the European Habitats and Birds Directives. To succeed in this not inconsiderable task we need to pioneer a new approach to conservation – a collaborative approach that brings together all marine users to agree both the location of new national Marine Protected Areas and the management measures needed to protect their special features.

There will be some highly protected areas, off limits to commercial activity. But only as a last resort when an area is so degraded or a habitat or species so rare, vulnerable and endangered that no other option is available; and where its important to establish reference sites so that we can better understand the processes of ecosystem recovery, and the impacts of man's activities in the wider seas.

In the overwhelming majority of places the focus will/should be on agreeing the right activities, at the right scale for each area. So we need to engage with the fishing industry to help them reduce the impact of their activity, not seek to stop fishing. That's why we have been visiting England's inshore fishing communities, meeting their representative bodies, listening and learning about their business needs and aspirations, and seeking common ground. A healthier marine environment will benefit fish stocks, fishers and processors if we can all take a long term view.

And we must engage with the marine renewables sector to locate offshore wind, wave or tidal installations – not seek to block them. The UK has a binding EU commitment to provide 15% of total energy supply from renewable sources by 2020. To achieve this it is anticipated that around 30% of our electricity generation will have to come from renewables and offshore wind is expected to provide much of this (around 25GW). Marine Protected Areas mustn't be seen as 'no go areas' – wherever possible we will support the co-location of commercial activities like renewable energy generation inside new designations.

In England, with Defra and the JNCC, we have launched a pioneering 'Marine Conservation Zone Project' to identify new sites in our inshore and offshore waters. These local partnerships are led by four independent regional stakeholder groups made up of fishermen and conservationists, aggregates and marine renewable companies and others who together have a central role in determining the boundaries of new sites. But our national contribution will only succeed when it is part of a European and global response – ecosystem or bio geographic region is the correct unit, not nation state.

We have just heard from the French MPA agency that the Marine Protected Areas in the Atlantic (MAIA) project has been accepted for funding by Interreg. So Natural England is now part of an international project worth millions of Euros. We look forward to working with French, Spanish and Portuguese counterparts to deliver a coherent network of MPAs across the North Atlantic bio geographic region. Coherence and resilience of the MPA network will only exist if management outside individual sites is supportive.

Next week marks the 60th anniversary of England's terrestrial protected areas. They have been a huge success – but it is worth noting that when we audited the state of the natural environment outside of these areas, the degradation and decline was clear. This is why integration in the marine environment is so important. We must learn from the successes on land – and we have the opportunity to avoid some of the pitfalls.

The key policy areas of Common Fisheries Policy Reform, the Habitats and Birds Directives, the Renewables Directive, and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive must be appropriately aligned. And we must have effective marine spatial planning and joined up action across Europe using all the delivery tools available. Otherwise we won't be successful in providing the enhanced protection the marine environment so urgently requires.

The sea has been central to Europe's cultural identity since ancient times – it's unthinkable that we should fail to secure its future on our watch.