

Marine Conservation Zones

1. MCZ's will be introduced in England and Wales under Part 5 of the Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009 (MACAA) and in Scotland under the Marine Scotland Act 2010. In England the Marine Conservation Zone Project is being led by Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), and in Wales by the Welsh Assembly Government in collaboration with the Countryside Council for Wales. In Scotland, Marine Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and JNCC are working in partnership.
2. Specific proposals have now been set out for the location of Marine Conservation Zones but as far we are aware, not for their management.
3. The following is a summary of the current position based on various reports in the public domain.
 - Marine Conservation Zones will be assessed by an expert panel before the government makes its final decision, probably next year (2012).
 - The Panel will also have to finalise levels of protection in each zone, as the Marine Bill allows regulators a lot of flexibility in which activities to prohibit for which periods of the year.
 - If all proposals are approved, we understand that just over a quarter of English waters would end up under some kind of protection. Currently, the total is under 1%(we have been unable to find a separate figure for Wales). Scotland will pursue a similar policy.
 - The zones are supposed to be designed in such a way as to leave room for other activities such as industries (eg tidal power) and recreation.
 - The Government's ultimate aim is to create an 'ecologically coherent' network of protected areas around all UK coasts, safeguarding important natural habitats while allowing other activities such as recreational angling, commercial fishing, surfing and marine energy to go ahead.
 - Four different groups have been formed to develop the portfolio of proposals in different parts of England and Wales: the South-West (**Finding Sanctuary Project**), Irish Sea (**Irish Sea Conservation Zones**), North Sea (**Net Gain Project**) and Eastern Channel (**Balanced Seas Project**).
 - They have brought together stakeholders that - at least in principle - cover all parties with an interest in the seas.
 - The group covering South-West England, for example, numbered representatives of the minerals industry, renewable electricity companies, charter boat skippers, scuba divers and the Ministry of Defence, amongst a set of 41 stakeholders consulted.

- The hope is that with a lot of the consultation already undertaken, the proposals should chart a relatively straightforward course through the approval process."We will scrutinise the recommendations carefully," vowed Peter Ryder, chairman of the Marine Protected Area Science Advisory Panel that will now assess the bids.
 - MCZ's are designated to protect certain natural features e.g. a particular species or habitat and are not the designated area generally
 - Consequently, activities that will not potentially adversely affect the designated features should not be affected by the designation of a MCZ
4. The degradation of marine life in the World's oceans has already reached catastrophic proportions. In common with UK recreational diving organizations the NAS, as a conservation organization, will support this long-overdue initiative. At the same time the NAS will seek to ensure that a proportional balance is struck between conservation of the natural and cultural environments.
 5. In comparison with the protection of archaeological sites underwater, where a single act, such as the removal of an artifact, could destroy archaeological value, biological conservation is usually 'intensity dependent'. For example, the discharge of sewage from a single boat in the vicinity of a reef system may cause little damage whereas a charter fleet of 100 yachts anchored in the shelter of the reef may cause eutrophication, algal growth and coral polyp death. Thus in the management of Marine Conservation Zones it should not be necessary automatically to ban diving activities, although some control of pollution (eg holding tanks) and of anchoring (eg more use of mooring buoys), may be justified in particular situations.
 6. A key question remains to be answered: how will conservation measures be drawn up in a way that produces a successful biological outcome without unnecessarily proscribing other activities including diving?
 7. It should be noted that diving in a MCZ provides a means of monitoring the health of the underwater environment and in that respect might be encouraged.
 8. As "the Marine Bill allows regulators a lot of flexibility in what to prohibitfor which periods of the year" there is obviously a danger that an over-zealous Panel may see an outright ban on diving as a default position.
 9. As far as we know, specific proposals on management regimes for the different zones have yet to be set-out. NAS will therefore try and gain access to the Panel process and/or identify lines of communication that would give an advance warning of over-stringent controls that might affect NAS's activities and interests.

November 2011