

# Towards a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas conference

The conference *Towards a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas*, organised on behalf of Natural England by CMS Ltd, was held on the 2-4th October, 2007 in Scarborough. One hundred and ninety delegates attended the event bringing together a wide range of expertise including that of European Marine Site Officers, conservation agency's staff, policy makers, marine scientists and sea user groups. The aim was to bring together those involved in management, designation, monitoring and the science of Marine Protected Areas (MPA).

## The conference objectives were:

- To share the latest policies, science and best practice in management of MPAs within the UK.
- To provide a forum for the exchange of information and experience including between those studying scientific aspects of MPAs and marine nature conservation and those managing sites and marine resource management.
- To investigate new approaches for taking forwards MPAs in the UK.

## What was done

The conference was organised around four themed sessions and all speakers were asked to identify three key steps which they believed were necessary to take the UK MPA network forward.

- Session 1 provided an overview of what MPAs can deliver for a variety of stakeholder interests.
- Session 2 described the current situation in building an MPA network both within the UK and the wider Natura 2000 and OSPAR context. This included cases studies of good practice in managing European Marine Sites.
- Session 3 described a variety of approaches for selecting MPAs.

- Session 4 focused on next steps and in particular what might be needed to achieve the variety of targets for MPAs set at national, European and wider international levels.

A recently published IUCN/WCPA checklist was used to structure feedback from delegates in two ways. Firstly, in order to get an overall impression, delegates were asked to choose up to five statements which most closely described what they believed should be the current focus of efforts to build a coherent network of MPAs in the UK. One hundred and thirty five forms were returned with a total of 754 responses. A second form was used to elicit more detail about the top three priorities identified by each delegate, asking them to explain why these were considered to be priorities. One hundred and twenty-eight forms were returned and 417 priorities were described in detail.

## Results and conclusions

The very clear, overwhelming, message from delegates was that stakeholder participation should be the top priority in building the MPA network. This is already an accepted part of the UK approach and there can be no doubt that MPA practitioners wish this continue, increase, and be an integral part of the process at all stages. It was seen as fundamental to the

## Towards a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas conference

successful selection, establishment, management and delivery of the objectives of individual MPAs and of the MPA network.

The need for clearly defined objectives was also a strong message from the meeting. In some ways this is surprising given the fact that the objectives of MPA networks are stated in various commitments made by the UK or to which the UK is a signatory. However these objectives are, by their very nature, mostly described in very general terms. Feedback from the meeting reveals that practitioners and stakeholders require more than this. Clearly defined objectives are fundamental not only to gaining good understanding of what a network might be like but also the implications of its establishment as well as whether or when it might be judged as being successful.

Political will and leadership scored highly as did institutional and governance structures as priority areas for progress. This was no doubt influenced by the current opportunity of introducing and improving provisions to support an MPA network in the proposed Marine Bill for which progress is very largely dependent on political will and leadership. However it was also seen as essential to delivering an effective MPA network in the long term.

Overall there was some sense of frustration at the meeting about the pace of progress given the considerable evidence base which has been built up over the last two decades on the benefits of MPAs for biodiversity conservation. Nevertheless the positive and constructive mood of the meeting showed both the desire and potential to go forward, at the same time as giving some clear and constructive messages about where delegates see the priorities in the next steps towards building a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas.

The discussions and conclusions from the conference will help inform the proposed Marine Bill and will contribute to Natural England's target of establishing a coherent network of MPAs by 2012.

### Natural England's viewpoint

Holding this conference was a key part of Natural England's commitment to establishing a coherent network of MPAs by 2012 and to inform our policies and strategies for delivering the network. The conference was extremely successful in bringing together MPA practitioners from a wide range of organisations to discuss progress towards meeting our International commitments to MPA networks.

Natural England is committed to both identifying new MPAs for designation and to getting the maximum benefit from existing sites. The presentations reflected both of these themes and were of a high standard. Invaluable lessons from overseas were shared by the keynote speakers, particularly from the example of the Californian Marine Life Protection Act Initiative.

Obtaining delegates thoughts on the priority steps needed to be taken to implement the network was a key aim of the conference for Natural England. Natural England is committed to working with stakeholders to identify the network, evident in the establishment of the Finding Sanctuary project. We are working closely with Defra to influence the development of a fit-for-purpose Marine Bill to ensure that it meets the other priorities for the MPA network listed by the delegates.

At the close of the conference Defra challenged Natural England to establish the network by 2012 and we will continue to lead the way in achieving this.

### Selected references

- BENNETT, G. & WIT, P 2001. The development and application of ecological networks. A review of proposals, plans and programmes. AIDEnvironment/IUCN
- DAY, J.C., & LAFFOLEY, D.dA. 2006. Self assessment checklist for building networks of MPAs. WCPA/IUCN.
- ENGLISH NATURE 2005. Our coasts and seas - making space for people, industry and wildlife. Peterborough, EN.

## Towards a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas conference

Conference presentations website:

[www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/designated-areas/mpa/conf2007/default.htm](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/designated-areas/mpa/conf2007/default.htm).

### Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR006.

### Contact us

Natural England Research Reports and the Research Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk).

For information on other Natural England publications contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0845 600 3078 or e-mail [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk)

### Report authors

Susan Gubbay<sup>1</sup>, Jen Ashworth<sup>2</sup>, Kate Bull<sup>2</sup> and Robert Earl<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent consultant, <sup>2</sup> Natural England and <sup>3</sup> CMS

### Keywords

Conference, Marine Protected Areas, Networks, Stakeholder consultation