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Marine Conservation Zones at risk

Big Society has spoken up for our seas – but will Government listen?

The wildlife in England's seas is facing a serious threat, warns Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

The long-awaited network of marine protected areas, promised by Government for 2012, is in danger, according to Cumbria's largest voluntary conservation organisation, which has been instrumental marine campaigning and research. Cumbria Wildlife Trust is urging the public to write to Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries, Richard Benyon MP, in support of Marine Conservation Zones.

After years of pressure from NGOs, and with huge public support, the Marine and Coastal Access Act of 2009 promised a coherent network of protection around the coasts by 2012. Now 127 marine sites around England's coast, including 15 proposed for the Irish Sea, have been recommended by four regional stakeholder groups to become Marine Conservation Zones next year.

The recommendations are the result of two years of consultation with more than one million stakeholders involved including fishermen, conservationists and businesses. This has been the first 'Big Society' experiment where local stakeholders have decided together which areas of the sea should be protected.

There is concern that Government's Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee) will recommend to Government that only a fraction of the 127 recommended sites are designated. This would result in a much smaller and less effective network of Marine Conservation Zones, leaving vulnerable and precious areas unprotected.

Cheryl Nicholson, Marine Conservation Officer for the North West Wildlife Trusts, said:

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“It would be a disaster if all 127 recommended sites weren’t designated. A huge amount of work has been done to get a broad agreement on this network of sites, ALL are needed for the health and future productivity of our marine environment.

“Now, however, in the final stages the Government has completely lost its direction and is proposing to over-ride the recommendations of local stakeholders and cut the 127 sites down to an unrealistic 30 in contradiction with the aims of the new Marine and Coastal Access Act. The process has cost the Government £8.8 million to date. One million stakeholders / marine users have made full use of their opportunity to engage and contribute to the process at great personal cost resulting in a network which has a great deal of consensus.

“Our seas are a shadow of their former selves we must act now to protect them before it’s too late.”

Recommended sites off Cumbria include:

Mud Hole

A 73 square kilometre zone at the western edge of the Eastern Irish Sea mud basin. The muddier seabed is heavily burrowed by Dublin Bay prawns, angular crabs and several species of mud shrimp. Large green echiuran worms form volcano-like domes in the mud and the seabed supports diverse populations of molluscs and worms. Burrowing brittle stars colonise the surface of the sandier seabed. Quill-like sea pens are found here, although there is evidence that sea pens and burrowing sea urchins used to be more abundant in these habitats.

Allonby Bay

Within this 39 square kilometre zone, Dubmill Scar includes one of the best examples of honeycomb worm reefs in Cumbria and the UK. The scar also supports blue mussel beds and a rich diversity of marine life. The zone also includes part of Maryport Roads, an area of shallow subtidal ‘cobbles’. These honeycomb worm reefs also support breadcrumb sponges, baked bean ascidians, kelp, oarweed, sea lettuce, sea mats and crabs. The Regional Stakeholder Group identified this zone to protect a variety of habitats and species including intertidal rock, honeycomb worm reefs, blue mussel beds, peat and clay exposures and subtidal sand, gravel and coarse sediments. The aim is to maintain these features in their current condition.

Cumbria Coast

The Cumbria Coast Marine Conservation Zone extends roughly 27km from just north of St. Bees Head south to the Ravenglass Estuary. It extends from the mean high water mark to the mean low water mark, apart from around St. Bees Head where it extends 1km from the mean high

water mark. The bedrock and boulder shores around St. Bees Head are nationally important, rich in marine life and unique within the Irish Sea project area. The cobble and boulder scars support extensive honeycomb worms reefs and blue mussel beds. The sandy seafloor supports rich communities of burrowing animals. The cliffs at St. Bees Head support around 10,000 pairs of breeding seabirds, including England's only breeding colony of Black Guillemots. The zone includes the waters around St. Bees Head specifically to benefit Black Guillemots.

West of Walney

The mud seabed in this 156 square kilometre zone is heavily burrowed by Dublin Bay prawns, angular crabs and several species of mud shrimp. It also supports diverse populations of small clams and worms. High Densities of burrowing brittle stars colonise the surface of the sandier areas of seabed. Some sea pens are found here and there is evidence that sea pens and burrowing sea urchins used to be more abundant in this area.

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Cheryl added:

“With Wildlife Trusts all around the UK, we are lobbying hard for the successful completion of a process that will make the difference between the life or death of our seas. We need to demonstrate the weight of public support for Marine Conservation Zones to Government. This is a once in a lifetime chance. We can't afford to let it slip away.”

Cumbria Wildlife Trust is urging people to write to Richard Benyon and ask for Government to create the proposed network of 127 in England. It has produced some guidance on writing to the Minister, which can be found at www.wildlifetrusts.org/saveourmczs

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