



## **Response to consultation on proposed Marine Conservation Zones in Northern Ireland**

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**Areas of interest:** Nature conservation, recreation (SCUBA diving), academic and scientific, voluntary/community group.

In general we welcome these new pMCZ which we feel will build towards the development of an ecologically coherent network. We appreciate that our proposal for Waterfoot has been considered and is being proposed as a pMCZ. It is excellent that proposed management options have been stated in the consultation document alongside proposed designated areas as this is the most logical system for consultation and public understanding of these areas and their value. In general we found the documentation provided for the consultation clear and easy to follow.

One of our major concerns is that the current condition of all proposed sites is being considered as good baseline and this may not be appropriate where good spatial and temporal data is lacking.

In addition to this MCS, which has been involved in the developing network of MCZs in England and the ncMPAs in Scotland, doesn't view the 4 current NI proposed sites as being an ecological network when combined with existing MPAs. There are too many gaps in the offshore - particularly for muds and muddy sands and gravels. There are two offshore MCZs recommended by the 'ISCZ' stakeholder project (2010 – 2012 – see appendix) that would capture mud habitat in deeper water (between NI and the Isle of Man – see appendix). We would like to see these sites proposed in a second tranche of MCZs. These include the muddy habitats and gravel habitats that are used by prawn trawling and scallop dredging. These are functionally different communities that what used to exist in these seas. The top (fish) predators have effectively been removed. MPAs should provide measures to recover the seabed and associated mobile species in the wider Irish Sea. The further areas of search that should be used with a second tranche of MCZs are; The Maidens; Outer Ards; Lough Foyle and Dundrum Bay. Inclusion of the offshore MCZs, and these areas of search would (1) greatly increase the biodiversity and recovery of Northern Ireland's waters, (2) help achieve OSPAR and MSFD measures to achieve favourable conservation status of key threatened habitats, recover modified ecosystems, and (3) move Northern Ireland's seas towards Good Ecological Status.

Please see below for specific comments on each area.

### **Waterfoot pMCZ.**

We welcome the inclusion of an additional area of subtidal seagrass in the MCZ network. Though it is a small geographical area the habitat contained within is critical and relatively rare in Northern Irish waters. As well as protecting what is probably the largest seagrass bed in Northern Ireland, the inclusion of this area this improves the connectivity and resilience of the existing MCZ network – providing an additional area of seagrass between those protected on Rathlin and in Strangford. The area proposed for the MCZ would seem, from our experience of surveying the site, to encompass the entire seagrass bed in Waterfoot bay and is therefore probably adequate. However, as seagrass can be susceptible to damage from adjacent disturbance a buffer zone around the actual bed might be preferable.

In terms of management we support the exclusion of mobile and static fishing gear as these have been shown to significantly damage seagrass by uprooting plants. We fully support the exclusion of anchoring within the pMCZ as this has been shown to cause significant damage to seagrass elsewhere in the UK. As stated in the management document it is unlikely recreational activities such as kayaking, small boating, and SCUBA diving which do not involve anchoring or mooring will impact the seagrass bed and we welcome that these activities are not to be excluded. In our experience there is very little recreational SCUBA diving that takes place in the bay so if there were to be a ban it would be unlikely to impact many divers. However, excluding divers or other recreational users without good cause may result in loss of support for the MCZ process.

We have the following specific comments:

*Page 14. 'Potential management Options. Management measures are recommended to reduce or limit pressures associated with new finfish farms and the expansion of existing aquaculture areas where they are likely to impact the Seagrass bed'.*

Emphasis from the Department should be on avoidance and exclusion of new pressure associated with new or expanding fish farms, rather than reduction or limitation.

*Page 17-18. Subtidal seagrass has a high sensitivity to the following pressures associated with oil/gas extraction: physical removal (extraction of substratum) and sub-surface abrasion/penetration and medium sensitivity to introduction or spread of non-indigenous species and translocations. It is considered that the risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for the proposed features is high should exploration occur within the pMCZ. We wish to see 'adjacent to the pMCZ' in addition to within the pMCZ.*

*Page 22. Although there is no direct spatial overlap with the pMCZ, the outfalls are close to this site and the discharges could adversely impact the Seagrass bed (see Figure 7). There is, therefore, a risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for the proposed features if there was an increase in waste water pollution from agricultural sources.*

However there is no further mention of management of agricultural sources in the area on page 23 management options, other than to refer to directives the DOE is already has responsible for. Linkage to WFD for this protected area could be emphasised in future River Basin Management Plans, with prioritisation of catchment management due to the risk factor for this protected area. Detail of how the Department could maximise protection through powers it already possesses should be explained.

*Table 1. Nutrient status.* Green algal mat - should be expanded to include opportunistic brown filamentous algae which are more prolific and indicative of nutrient enrichment on subtidal seagrass beds, green algal mats being more significant indicators in intertidal habitats. Alternatively opportunistic algae could be referred to.

*Page 39. For Seagrass beds a survey of its distribution and species counts in sample areas will provide sufficient information.*

Seagrass shoot density should also be recorded and monitored. It is not clear if distribution and species counts are the only monitoring which the Department is committing to undertake, or if they are going to fulfil the monitoring list in table 1, which it deems necessary for assessment - please clarify.

*'The Seagrass bed will be monitored within a 6-yearly rolling cycle to assess biotope distributions and species abundances. This will determine whether the conservation objectives are being achieved.'*

Has enough quantitative data of occurrence, distribution and density been collected to enable adequate monitoring from the current baseline? A lack of quantitative data is a weakness in existing monitoring programmes for features in the SAC designated areas. More robust monitoring should be a critical component of the MCZ programme. Seasearch is able to assist with surveillance of this MCZ between the six-yearly cycle of visits, with the use of volunteer divers, but will require support to cover the costs of boat charter.

## **Rathlin pMCZ**

We welcome the inclusion of Rathlin as a pMCZ. Rathlin has a large number of important species and habitats which make it significant in both a Northern Ireland and a wider context. The large site proposed, encompassing both the existing SAC and an area of deep-water in the North Channel, would be a valuable addition to the existing MCZ network.

I note that 'All PMFs within the pMCZ boundary will be afforded a level of protection based on vulnerability and risk assessment.' Although species already afforded protection by the SAC are not mentioned in detail here we hope that in the future an integrated management strategy affording protection to all the PMF features listed will be developed.

Management measures:

Scallop, dredging, demersal fishing and potting. We welcome the legislation currently in draft from DARD banning the use of mobile gear within the SAC boundary as this had been shown to be harming important habitats (for example the sponge communities on the east coast of Rathlin) and had potential to significantly impact protected species such as the UK BAP anemone *Arachnanthus sarsi*.

The closure of O'Byrne Bay to static fishing gear by DARD could potentially be a useful management measure. However, we question the validity of also closing this area to SCUBA divers as we believe there is little evidence they have a significant impact. The site is occasionally used by divers, particularly when weather prevents access to more exposed sites on the island. We appreciate the importance of the marine communities, particularly sponge communities, in this bay but feel that good evidence of harm would need to be presented for this management measure to be welcomed by the diving community.

Marine traffic/SCUBA diving: Rathlin is an extremely important area for diving tourism in Northern Ireland and this has significant benefits to the local island and wider Northern Ireland communities in terms of generating revenue. In practice recreational SCUBA divers are unlikely to themselves cause any significant damage to temperate marine habitats and we feel that this has been recognised here. We appreciate the need for a speed restriction zone to protect Black Guillemots and potentially restriction of anchoring of dive boats to protect vulnerable features. We feel that any restrictions would need to be well publicised to the SCUBA diving community, preferably by distribution to local dive organisations of clear laminated charts/leaflets detailing any areas of restrictions. We feel that this would be the easiest way to aid compliance. We welcome the development of a divers' code of conduct and Seasearch would be happy to aid with the development of this.

Again Seasearch is well placed to assist with volunteer surveillance of some of the features of the Rathlin MCZ, subject to funding for boat support and organisation.

### **Outer Belfast Lough – Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*) and associated habitat Subtidal (sublittoral) sand**

We welcome the inclusion of this pMCZ to protect the long-lived bivalve *Arctica islandica*. We welcome the restriction of mobile fishing within the pMCZ as this will protect the bivalve and associated sediment communities. As far as we know the site is not frequented by the SCUBA diving community: the main targets within Belfast Lough tend to be the wrecks and the nearest of these (S.S. Lagan) is well outside the pMCZ.

### **Carlingford Lough – Subtidal (sublittoral) mud containing Sea-pen and white sea slug communities.**

We welcome the inclusion of this pMCZ in the network. The *Virgularia mirabilis* in this area is the most abundant in our experience within diving depths in Northern Ireland and this and the associated high density of *Philine aperta* make the habitat unique in a Northern Irish context. The pMCZ boundary seems to include the densest areas of seapens and is probably adequate.

Management measures: we are concerned that the management measures proposed are not adequate. There needs to be further investigation, particularly of the potential impact of vessels under 10m whose activity is not currently fully understood. As fishing activity for blue mussels and flatfish was not available the risk cannot be understood or therefore categorised – however, the document states that risk is low. As stated *Virgularia mirabilis* is fairly resistant to damage by pot fisheries with dislodged individuals able to re-anchor providing the basal peduncle remains in contact with the sediment (e.g. Kinnear et al., 1996). However, the majority of sea pens found in the pSAC tend to be quite short and this may indicate that disturbance is preventing them from obtaining maximum growth and consequently the community is functioning at a sub-optimal level. Additionally plough dredging is considered low risk unless use changes – however, as this activity is not regulated by the department it is therefore hard to quantify and could be having an impact. Accepting the current proposed area as baseline and setting conservation objectives is very risky when we have little temporal data on this habitat. Further research into these and other pressures is necessary for the management of the pMCZ.

The area is not used by recreational SCUBA divers due to the nature of the substratum: to our knowledge most diving in Carlingford occurs around the mouth of the lough.

### Ardglass gullies area

We appreciate that it was decided not to pursue the area around Ardglass that we proposed as a separate pMCZ but that the area around Gun’s Island which contains a similar geological feature will be incorporated into the Strangford Lough MCZ. Is there a consultation process for this?

Appendix. Offshore MCZs recommended by the MCZ process. The two sites recommended in NI offshore waters are ISC26 and 27 – South Rigg and Slieve Na Griddle:

