



Gloom or hope? – an update

Blaise Bullimore updates his assessment of the prospects for marine nature conservation which appeared in Natur Cymru 47 (Summer 2013).

The scores are in and it's marine conservation nul points. It is back to the drawing board for possible new Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), and the dashing of any hope that Skomer Marine Nature Reserve (MNR) might become an MCZ with even slightly improved protection in the foreseeable future.

Alun Davies, Minister for Natural Resources and Food, made his expected statement on MCZs and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Wales on 18 July. Welsh Government (WG) aspirations for the marine environment's future were made clear: ensuring Welsh seas and their

biodiversity are healthy and robust enough "to support the demands we put upon them now and in the future", since many people in Wales rely upon and use them "to support their livelihoods and recreational activities". This utilitarian vision becomes even clearer with reference to developing WG's "blue growth agenda". Nothing about biodiversity or wildlife conservation for either their inherent importance or even for the ecosystem support functions that marine biodiversity underpins. It's crystal clear: the economy first, marine environmental conservation a poor second.

The Minister told us we need to

understand more about the wide range of marine habitats and species that are already protected. Yet the MCZ consultation document listed over 140 relevant survey and monitoring reports. We can always do with knowing more, though we'll never know everything our opponents demand.

We're also told that (another) assessment of Wales's current MPAs will be commissioned to identify any gaps and the options to fill those gaps. Is it too much to hope that by "gaps" he means both deficiencies in the protection of biodiversity in existing MPAs and some omissions from the network of sites? But gap filling, we are told, will need to be "proportionate". Could this possibly be code to indicate that long-term conservation measures, of benefit to all of society, mustn't get in the way

Blaise Bullimore



Out of sight, out of mind: few people get to experience marine wildlife in its natural habitat, or to witness its destruction.

To the Editor:

I was interested to read the article "Marine Conservation in Wales" in your magazine no 47. It seems to me there is a lack of interest in this subject because of lack of information. There are frequent references to damage being caused to marine areas but almost no pictures showing mature areas, before and after scallop dredging, with follow-up pictures showing how long it takes for recovery. People, myself included, are left to imagine the havoc caused. What happens under the sea is hidden from the large majority of people and the conservation issues seem not to be illustrated. I feel that all the effects of damaging agents need to be visually publicised to show what is happening and to stimulate interest.

*Yours faithfully
John Ferguson*

of the short-term economic interests of a few? The statement also refers to 125 current MPAs covering 36% of Welsh seas. I mentioned previously how the simple quotation of the percentage of sea that is "protected" is deceptive, but alluding to this apparently large number of MPAs is far more disingenuous.

Most of these "MPAs" are intertidal Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), many primarily designated for wildlife features such as birds, and salt marshes, or

designated sites that are nested one within another. Carmarthen Bay & Estuaries European Marine Site (EMS), for example, includes two Special Protection Areas, a Ramsar site and 17 SSSI within its footprint - so that takes care of 21 of those 125. Each of the five large Welsh EMS includes a similar number of SPAs and SSSIs. If Wales really had 125 discrete, well-managed MPAs we'd be exceptionally well provided for: we don't. In reality we have a handful of MPAs and most are far from well enough managed or effective - as the Countryside Council for Wales's 2012 reports on MPA management to WG made abundantly clear.

The report from the MCZ Task and Finish Group accompanied the Minister's statement. This report faithfully mentioned the divergence of consultee views, but it neglected to include the analysis of MCZ consultation responses that had been in a draft provided to the Stakeholder Group, or to note that 81% of responses supported MCZ designation. Instead it laboured minority beliefs that MCZs would negatively impact on Wales's maritime economy. Bearing in mind this Group included just two conservation representatives but three WG officers (two fisheries) amongst its seven members, its recommendations to dismiss the proposed sites and to repeat much previously completed work are less than surprising. Yet both the statement and the report had conspicuous omissions.

Skomer MNR was not mentioned in the statement, but the pronouncement that all proposed MCZs were being withdrawn

prompted BBC Wales news to report under the headline *New marine zone plans scrapped by minister* that "Skomer was one of the proposed zones but the minister will now look at the 125 existing marine areas." Cue confusion for the public and a splendid potential excuse for anyone intent on mischief-making.

The merger of Welsh Government's marine and fisheries functions, in a new Marine & Fisheries Division within the WG Agriculture and Food portfolio, is another indication of political priorities. Eight of the ten short-term priority tasks for the new division's initial six months are fisheries actions. Alun Davies describes the sea as a "living resource" with "significant sustainable economic potential", albeit "needing careful management"; and the only sector he identifies for helping WG deliver a "healthy and productive" marine environment is the fishing industry. And observe that although the now compulsory word "sustainable" is used, it is associated with the economy and not the environment.

Nevertheless, Alun Davies reassures us that he is "aware of some elements that may need strengthening" and promises to "outline" any necessary changes in a Marine and Fisheries Action Plan scheduled for November. I assume and hope he is speaking about environmental protection and wildlife conservation so I guess we mustn't give up hope yet. But I'm still not holding my breath watch this space.

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