

WHAT DOES THE PROPOSED MARINE BILL MEAN FOR OUR COASTS AND THE OCEANS?

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Britons appreciate our marvellous coastline and also the world's oceans, as we learn to understand them from the marvellous TV programmes of Jacques Cousteau and David Attenborough. Millions of people visit the coasts every year, and even more might do so if they were easier to reach in every region of the UK. However, the whole country benefits economically (upwards of 30 billion pounds per year) from our oceans and the ocean floor around our shores, which provide fish and seafood, energy (wind, wave and oil), highly efficient bulk transport by means of shipping, and a good fraction of the sand and gravel used for building. Under-sea rock formations will be major repositories for carbon dioxide, thereby helping UK meet its international climate change obligations. The seas are still used to dump too much of the water and air pollution from industry, shipping, agriculture and sewage. Regulations are generally regarded as being too weak and inadequately enforced. This was ACOPS' primary concern, when Lord Callaghan founded our NGO in 1952, and we maintain, with the Marine and Coast Guard Agency, the ACOPS survey of waste along the coasts coming from shipping and the off-shore industry.

Throughout the world, these uses are damaging the marine environment. Indeed, experts and politicians in the USA, Japan and Africa regard the degradation of the marine environment as being a global problem which is just as urgent as that of climate change. Even in the open seas around the UK, the fish are becoming scarcer and smaller, limpets and sea anemones in rock pools are disappearing, and global carbon emissions damage and transform ocean ecology through warming and acidification. On some of our coasts there is rapid erosion by many meters per year and ever more building and industrial development is crowding out the natural sites and habitats above and below the sea surface.

However, a worse future may be in store for us if we look at the enclosed seas near the coastlines of America, Europe and Asia, where large areas are suffering a gradual ecological death. Not only may the livelihoods of communities be destroyed, but also the growth of algae may lead to increased warming of the surface waters, which could trigger severe weather events extending over even wider areas.

After ignoring all these issues over many decades, Parliament is now looking into the preservation and planning of the marine environment. A pre-legislative scrutiny committee has been examining the Draft Marine Bill, which was published in April.

A central proposal of the Bill is finally to create an identifiable national focus for coasts and oceans, both for Government and also for a wide range of national interests. A new body could well become the 'champion' called for in the recent report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, a proposal that was supported widely by industry, NGOs and research institutions. Specifically, the Marine Management Organisation (a semi detached body reporting to the Secretary of State for Environment) would be formed from an existing fisheries agency, and joined by officials from several departments.

Working with Natural England, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Countryside Council for Wales, marine conservation areas would be established, some extending out to well beyond the six-mile limit, within which UK controls its fisheries. There will certainly have to be some negotiation with the EU beyond this limit, as the EU develops its own marine policies. In some areas, all significant activity will be banned (sensitive off-shore coral reefs), while in

others certain activities will be permissible (e.g. wind energy sites or shipping) and some not permissible (eg. commercial fishing). Conservation areas have been a great success around New Zealand over the past 30 years, where they are particularly popular with the sea-food industry. These areas may extend over 20-30% of the UK coastline- the estimate of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. In addition, the MMO will work with the reformed local sea-fisheries committees to ensure that their policies reflect the goals of economic and environmental sustainability. They are expected to pay more attention to the rapidly growing leisure and tourist interests. The committees will have a broader remit than in earlier legislation going back to the 1880's, which mainly focussed on balancing the interests of sea fisheries and the guardians of salmon movement up rivers.

Balancing of scientific evidence and socio-economic interests is envisaged for improving the planning of future building development (especially for ports and offshore energy systems), both in relation to the coastal environment, and to UK's international commitments, notably to reduce carbon emissions and to preserve biodiversity. For example, harbours need to expand to accommodate more shipping. Shipping has the ecological advantage of producing less CO₂ emissions than the equivalent land transport. However, harbours in estuaries tend to be adjacent to sites of special scientific or ecological interest such as those for migrating birds. Some commentators wonder whether the kind of integrated planning seen in Rotterdam with its engineered flood defences, large wind generators on the concrete dykes and large harbour expansion, will be facilitated in future in the UK, through collaboration between the MMO and the newly formed Integrated Planning Commission, whose substantial powers are being proposed in other legislation.

What might this stronger UK marine agency look like as it takes on responsibility for our coasts and oceans? One hopes it will be as effective as the other quasi-independent and highly visible bodies, such as the Environment Agency, the Food Standards Agency and the Meteorological Office, which like the others came from a merger. It was formed in 1854, largely to help shipping. In 1920 Winston Churchill banged the table, and a unified Meteorological Office was set up at the Air Ministry incorporating the three military forecasting services, which had been established in the First World War. As it developed, the Met Office became an international centre of excellence, while providing essential services to the government for weather forecasting, research and related policies.

Through its leadership the new MMO could mobilise the considerable UK capabilities in marine science, engineering and marine business. In the USA and India, marine policies and international representation are led by an Admiral and a senior civil servant - which may now happen in Whitehall as well. Such seniority will help UK to participate more effectively and visibly in the global and European initiatives to reverse the degradation of the marine environment. At the same time the MMO will have a heavy responsibility for leading the necessary coordination and planning in our coastal regions.

What about resources? Many organisations have already commented that national, devolved, and local governments will need to increase their commitments. This will be necessary just for the minimum proposals of the Bill to be put into practice and properly followed through. But much more could be achieved with an agreed long-term plan and a steady increase in expenditure based on stronger political support. Just like the 'blue' beaches, an improved coastal environment both onshore and offshore and better access for everyone will be very popular. A commitment to work with local landowners to provide footpaths along all our coasts is an essential element of this aspect of the Bill.

Just as the non-partisan Climate Change Bill has led the way internationally, this Bill should support a vigorous European and global campaign to deal with the critical state of the marine environment. Ignoring the serious degradation of the marine environment makes global sustainable development impossible.