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Marine Information Network
Friends of the Earth Local Groups

Is the Tide Turning ?

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has produced its 25th Report, titled Turning the Tide : Addressing the Impact of Fisheries on the Marine Environment. It is a landmark document.

Whilst the Royal Commission focuses its main concern on the devastating impact of current fishing activities and policies upon the health of the marine environment, and particularly its ecosystem, the Royal Commission argues for remedies which will, if implemented, have profound long-term implications for the relationship between ourselves and the sea.

Importantly, the Royal Commission argues that fishing should no longer have an unchallenged right to the use of the sea.

Instead a system of planning known as marine spatial planning, which would be similar to the planning system we use on land, should be established. This planning system would cover the whole extent of our seas, and decide how each area should be used to the best advantage.

Significantly, The Royal Commission proposes that around 30% of the entire area of our seas should be designated as Marine Protected Areas. These protected areas would be similar to land based nature reserves and all extractive activity, including fishing, would generally be prohibited in these protected areas. The purpose of these protected areas would be to regenerate the health of the marine environment, including fisheries, and thus they would function as a large expansive, interlinked network of reserves. This system would be centred on the exclusive economic zone which extends as far as 200 nautical miles from the coast.

This network of reserves would be established by means of the new marine planning system which will establish which areas and spaces of sea should be used for which purpose. Hence the term, marine spatial planning. At the heart of this marine planning system will be the "ecosystem approach".

We consider what the ecosystem approach means in practice further on in this newsletter, but the key element of this approach is its recognition that the marine environment is a diverse physical and biological system, made up of many parts, and that the health of this environment is dependent on recognising the fundamental interdependence of all parts of the system. Thus when a particular activity is allowed to take place (fishing, oil extraction, renewable energy generation, aggregate dredging and so forth), this activity must be assessed for its impact on the whole marine ecosystem. Where this impact is damaging, the planning system will consider whether the activity should be restrained, or even forbidden.

Thus the Royal Commission has laid down a blueprint for the future sound management of our seas. If we implement this blueprint, the present tide of destruction will turn. In the Queen's Speech, the Government has announced that it is to prepare a draft Marine Bill. The purpose and content of this Bill is still unknown at the time of going to press. Let us earnestly hope that the Government has paid heed to the Royal Commission, and that the tide is truly turning.

MARINET News.

MARINET Website:

Have you visited our new website yet ? If the answer is no, then do not delay ! The address is www.marinet.org.uk

The webmaster is Hugh Rout, West Norfolk and King's Lynn FOE, and much of the material has been written by Patrick Gowen, Norwich FOE. Special thanks are due to both of them. The website contains information about MARINET's campaigns on Renewable Energy from the Sea, Marine Aggregate Dredging, and UK Bathing Waters. New material is being added all the time . . . . and you can get the latest news, read the latest newsletter and find out contact details. In March we had 131 visits, in April 598 and in May 1,354. **Please tell your Local Group members to visit the website**, and we would be grateful if you would include details about the website in your Local Group newsletters and other communications.

Marine Aggregate Campaign:

The central aim of the Marine Aggregate campaign is to highlight the significant impact that dredging the seabed for sand and gravel can have on both the adjacent coastline and the marine ecosystem, and to persuade the Government that there is an urgent need to improve the quality of the Environmental Impact Assessments which the aggregate companies submit in support of their licence applications. In short, these EIAs are simply not telling the full story.

We have recently had a meeting with the British Marine Aggregate Producers Association (BMAPA) to explain our concerns and to explain to the aggregate companies what they need to do to improve their EIAs. We also intend to meet soon with English Nature. English Nature play an important role through their advice to Government about the conservation importance of dredging areas, and particularly with regard to the large new block of licences that the companies want to open up in the eastern English Channel.

It is essential that the damage caused to the marine ecosystem off the East Coast by aggregate dredging is not repeated in the English Channel, and later this summer MARINET will be organising a public meeting on the South Coast in order to launch this arm of the campaign. **If you would like to help and become involved**, please contact Phil Coombe, MARINET's chairman, who is organising the South Coast campaign, phil@marinet.org.uk tel. 02392-696070.

MARINET's AGM.

The Annual General Meeting of the Network will be held on Sunday 11th September at the Local Groups Conference at Reading. At present, it is scheduled for 9.30-11.00 am in the Conference programme.

If your Local Group is attending the Conference, **will you please ensure that your delegate endeavours to attend the MARINET AGM**. The Meeting elects the officers for the next 12 months, and decides what the policy of the Network should be for the forthcoming year. It is therefore a most important event, and it is your chance to have a direct say. If you want additional information, contact Phil Coombe or Stephen Eades stephen@marinet.org.uk tel. 01249-653972).

Please note: Gina Carrington, Manhood Peninsula FOE and MARINET's present Secretary, wants to step down from this position. The Secretary plays an important role in MARINET and is one of the members of the Steering Group which governs and administers the Network between AGMs. Therefore, if you or another member in your Local Group would like to take on a more active role in MARINET, this is a vacancy that will be of interest to you. **Please mention this vacancy to your members at your next Local Group meeting**. For further details, contact Stephen Eades.

Fish Deaths at Humber Power Station:

Jim Blake has been running a successful campaign to prevent the death of large numbers of fish which are drawn daily into the water intake pipes which provide the cooling water for Humber Power Station. He has secured an investigation by the European Commission, and wants to know whether the same is happening near you. If you would like to know more or believe you can help him, tel. 01472-340588 or mobile 0776-3066712.

Key Facts from the Royal Commission Report.

The problem of By-Catch.

Under the EU Fishery Policy, the catch of most species of fish is now controlled by quotas. This means that it is an offence for a fishing boat to catch more of a particular species than it is allowed under its quota (the quota system is designed to conserve species which are being over-fished). As a result if, when fishing for one species, a trawler catches fish of another species for which its has no quota (or its quota is used-up) then this incidental catch must be discarded and thrown overboard. This is the "by-catch".

The problem with the by-catch is that it is extremely wasteful, and very harmful to the species concerned because, once netted, the catch invariably dies despite being returned to the sea. The Royal Commission observes:

"*Fishing kills many more fish than are landed as a result of discarding and by-catch. Globally, the proportion of fish caught and discarded amounts to about 27% of the overall catch. If industrial fisheries, where all the catch is landed, are not included in this calculation, the proportion rises to over 50% in many individual fisheries . . . In the North Sea the average proportions of discarded cod and haddock are estimated at 22% and 36% respectively by weight, representing 51% and 49% by number. . . . . A feature of heavily exploited fish populations is that the mean size and age of the fish in the population decreases. This results in increased discard rates because a higher proportion of the fish are too small to be legally landed.*" Ref. RCEP sections 5.10 and 5.12.

The problem is not confined to fish. Cetaceans (whales, dolphins, porpoises) suffer mortality.

"*On a global scale, by-catch in fishing gears is believed to be the biggest single threat to cetacean populations. Extrapolation of US figures suggests a global annual cetacean by-catch rate of 65,000 to 85,000 animals with at least 26 different species dying from entrapment in fishing gear*." Ref. RCEP section 5.15

The Ecosystem Approach.

The ecosystem approach is a major step forward in marine management. The concept itself is not new, and the UK Government (DEFRA) has argued that it should have a central place in policy (*Safeguarding Our Seas: A Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of our Marine Environment, DEFRA, 2002*). Unfortunately, there is little evidence so far of the policy being implemented.

In fairness, part of the difficulty lies in the fact that our knowledge of the marine ecosystem is so incomplete. The sea is not like the land, and our understanding of marine life and its interconnections is considerably less advanced. Thus, when we talk about the marine ecosystem we are often talking about something of which, in practice, we have relatively little knowledge or understanding.

As a result, a call to adopt the 'marine ecosystem approach' in marine planning is essentially a call to adopt the 'precautionary principle'. What we are saying is that we know fishing, aggregate dredging and other marine activities have an impact, but because our understanding is still so limited and naïve we should proceed with great caution. In short, we must act with great restraint at all times. At present, we rarely do.

The Royal Commission takes the view: "*The principles of an ecosystem approach are well established. While there is broad consensus that this holistic approach is a better way forward, there has been little progress in implementing the concept. We advocate a pragmatic response that would put the emphasis on robust, practical steps to halt the degradation of the marine environment, rather than a slow, incremental approach to implementation.*" Ref. RCEP section 11.5.

"***We recommend that human impacts on the marine environment should be managed in a fully precautionary manner. Fishing should only be permitted where it can be shown to be compatible with the framework of protection set out in this report***." Ref. Royal Commission Recommendation, section 11.5.

Marine Reserves.

The Royal Commission believes that the main framework of protection, and the main means by which the ecosystem approach to the management of the sea should be implemented, is through the setting up and running of a network of Marine Reserves. The Royal Commission states:

"*The key reason for establishing marine reserves is that unlike other management options they can protect the entire ecosystem, from spawning fish, to the creatures living in the ocean depths, to the seabed itself. Designed in the right way, they can protect commercial fish, non-commercial species and features of the seabed that might be damaged by trawling and dredging. This makes them one of the most simple and straightforward means for implementing the ecosystem approach.*" Ref. RCEP section 8.9.

A key argument for Marine Reserves is that they embrace the whole ecosystem. Thus, given that our knowledge is limited, they provide us with a management tool that is both immediate and effective.

"*Another advantage is that while reserves need to be properly designed, they do not require a comprehensive understanding of individual sites before they are designated, since their objective is to protect a representative spectrum of the ecosystem, rather than individual attributes. This flexibility makes reserves an ideal tool for the marine environment, where data collection can be expensive and slow, and the inter-relationships between species and with their environment are often not well understood.*" Ref. RCEP sec. 8.11.

Other key questions concern whether Marine Reserves are successful, and whether they actually protect the ecosystem ? If they do, how extensive do these reserves need to be ? Also, are they expensive to administer and can we afford them ? In answer to these questions, the Royal Commission observes:

"*In a study of around 80 marine reserves, the biomass of organisms inside the reserves was on average nearly three times higher than in unprotected areas, while organism size and diversity was 20 to 30% greater [. . . .] There is good evidence that reserves do benefit fish. Inside reserves, adult fish populations are larger, longer-lived and more fecund than those in fished areas. Not only do larger and older fish produce more eggs, but the quality tends to be better than for first time spawners.*" Ref. RCEP sections 8.17 and 8.20.

The Royal Commission also believes that marine reserves should not be created in isolation, but rather should be linked to one another in a comprehensive pattern or network, and that this network should cover at least 30% of the sea in order to ensure this inter-connectedness.

"*The scientific evidence suggests that is much more effective to link protected areas together in a network that is better able to accommodate the larger scales on which ecological processes operate*." Ref. RCEP section 8.50.

As a result, The Royal Commission recommends that " ***our view is that 30% of UK waters should be no-take reserves in order to deliver the kind of recovery that is needed to protect the environment and make fish populations sustainable in the long run.***" Ref. RCEP section 8.63.

On the crucial question of what these reserves would cost to administer, the Royal Commission observes:

"*The estimated costs of running a national marine reserve network in the UK compare favourably with the cost of similar measures on land. For example, the National Parks in England and Wales cost around £35 million a year compared with a total of £9.4 to £15 million a year for protecting both the North and Irish Seas which cover a much larger area . . . . Fisheries in the Irish Sea were worth £60 million in 2002, and those in the North Sea were worth £226 million. A 10% uplift in fishery productivity in the Irish Sea and a 2.3% uplift in the North Sea would pay for the running costs of the network.*" Ref. RCEP sections 8.80 and 8.11.

You can purchase the Royal Commission's 25th Report, titled *Turning the Tide*, from bookshops, price £60, ISBN 0-10-163922-8. The cheaper alternative is to borrow it from your Public Library or you can visit the website and read the Report in its various sections http://www.rcep.org.uk/fishreport.htm