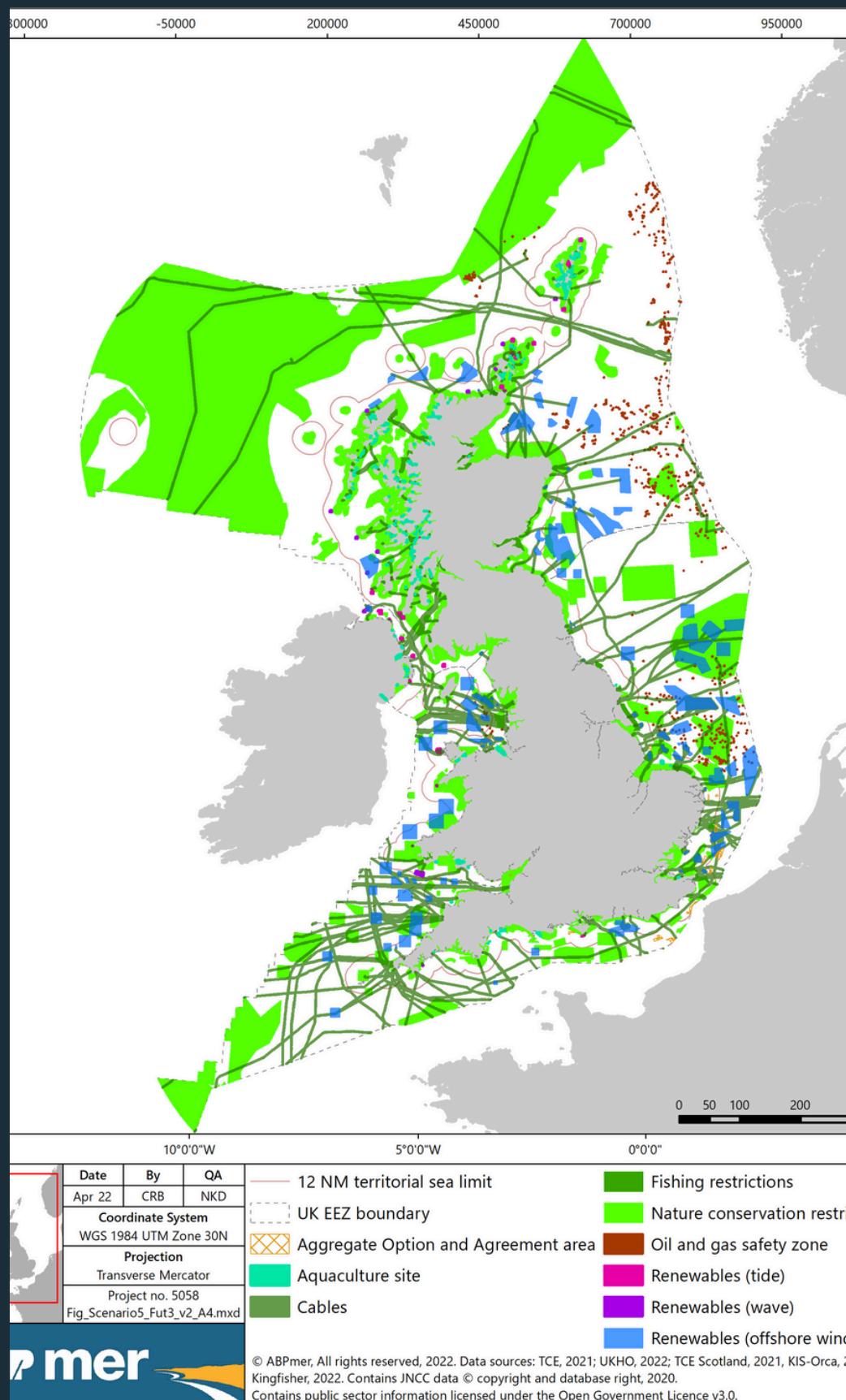


Setting the national security balance: food, energy & nature

Vulnerable marine habitats and species require protection and marine protected areas – of various types – can be an effective way to provide that protection.

Nearly 40% of the UK's exclusive economic zone is now designated as a marine protected area of one type or another, although their labels vary – marine protected areas, marine conservation zones, sites of special scientific interest, highly protected marine areas, special areas of conservation. This figure rises to nearly 50% for inshore waters.

With such an enormous proportion of the UK's seabed designated in this way, it is important to understand what this means – not least because the marine environment is also a major contributor to our food security.



ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND FOOD SECURITY

The potential tension between environmental protection and food supply need not be framed in binary terms. It is vital in fact, that these two objectives are not framed in opposition to each other. All systems of food production are dependent on functioning ecosystems and have an ecological footprint, including fishing. Fishing's footprint must be managed and minimised, but in ways that ensure the viability of our fishing industries, fishing communities and the supply of wholesome food. The alternative is to force more consumption into land-based production which in general carries higher environmental costs. There is a balance to be struck.

Regrettably, in recent years the process of finding and implementing that balance has been skewed by a vociferous lobby inside and outside government that has promoted MPAs as a kind of panacea. This article illustrates that such a fundamentalist approach does more harm than good.

CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

The danger is that MPAs become an end in themselves – a means of virtue signalling – rather than a practical way of protecting biodiversity whilst maintaining food supply.

That such a vast area of the UK's waters was designated as MPAs could only have been done on the explicit understanding that it would be possible to twin conservation objectives with sustainable fishing. At no point was it ever suggested that 40% of the UK's waters should be denied to fishing. Such an edict would have been a death sentence for many fishing communities and (because of displacement) would lead to the degradation of seabed features outside MPAs. Allowing fishing to continue within large parts of designated MPA was a given during all the preliminary discussions to their establishment; albeit that there was an understanding that there would have to be enhanced monitoring on activities within MPAs, and with management interventions where particular fishing gears were found to be incompatible with those objectives.

For example, it was understood that scallop dredging and bottom trawling might not be possible in areas of seabed characterised by fragile corals. But even the heavier mobile fishing gears have minimal impacts on sandy bottoms where tide and wind reshape the seabed on a daily basis. In other words, the size, location and boundaries of MPAs and the management measures within them must be carefully calibrated to achieve conservation objectives, whilst allowing fishing to continue wherever possible.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Many of the most challenging issues in fisheries management have their origins as unintended consequences of previous policies. The issue of unintended consequences now looms larger than ever before. Management measures within MPAs, along with potential displacement by the huge amount of marine space required for offshore renewable energy, has the capacity to displace fishing vessels from their customary grounds on an enormous scale. One third of mobile gear fisheries (best case) or a half (worst case) could be displaced according to the ABPmer study commissioned by NFFO/SFF in 2023. The scale of unintended consequences flowing from this shift is likely to be of a magnitude so far unseen.

Consequences arising from displacement from customary fishing grounds may be unintended but many are foreseeable. Some of the more obvious consequences include:

- Overcrowding of adjacent (or distant) fishing areas, creating conflicts between existing fisheries and displaced fishing activities (gear conflicts)
- Sub-optimal fishing patterns, including obliging vessels to steam further to get to fishing grounds, with higher fuel consumption with increased carbon emissions
- Undermining the basis for rational fisheries management by degrading fish-stock assessments (which use historic patterns that are then extrapolated into the future to make estimates of biomass and fishing mortality)
- Higher costs and lower incomes, jeopardising resilience of individual fishing businesses, fishing communities and the whole value chain
- Obliging vessels to fish harder (longer) in order to maintain economic viability and pay crews
- Making the task of designing and implementing fisheries management plans infinitely more complex

·Degradation of the marine environment outside the MPA network through displacement effects

·Diverting resources from fisheries management – as has been the case with Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities, as the risk-assessments necessary to defend sustainable fisheries have swallowed budgets and staff

MIS-SELLING MPAS

Whilst MPAs have an important role in safeguarding biodiversity, it is also true that parts of the conservation lobby have mis-sold and over-sold marine protected areas. In particular MPAs have been promoted as a kind of panacea for all sorts of ills, including the (alleged) decline of fish stocks and climate change. Campaign literature has routinely skipped over fishing's role in food security to create in the public mind the notion that no fishing should take place within MPAs. In an increasingly adversarial and litigious climate, government has been slow to robustly challenge this notion and some ministers have actively encouraged it. This is starkly in contrast to the approach on land, where national parks are promoted as areas in which sustainable farming, forestry and an array of other rural activities are pursued as desirable aims.

These distortions have been at their most visible in media and campaign attacks targeted on large pelagic vessels (“super-trawlers”) who make an easy target because of their size but whose gear never touches the sea bed, operating as they do, far up in the water column. As a rule of thumb, it can be taken for granted that if the word “supertrawler” is used ignorance or mischief are at work.

HIGHLY PROTECTED MARINE AREAS

Government has not been immune from lapsing into overselling MPAs from time to time. Persuaded by parts of the conservation lobby within the governing party, in 2021 Defra initiated a pilot to introduce Highly Protected Marine Areas in six locations in English waters in which no fishing would be allowed. Shortly afterwards electoral politics led the Scottish government policy to also announce that 10% of Scottish waters would be designated as Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs).

This shift away from the previous careful evidence-based approach was replaced by policies more politically driven, more rushed, with less consideration given to consequences, and with more reliance on a fundamentalist interpretation of the precautionary principle. HPMA as promoted in this “revised approach” had no clearly defined purpose, were selected with seriously limited baseline data to understand what they might achieve. Consultation was of the cosmetic type. For example, the selection of Dolphin Head off the Sussex coast as a candidate HPMA was simply bizarre. Despite its name, the area has no more or less dolphins present than any other part of the English Channel and anyway, what would a closed area actually do for a highly mobile species like dolphin? Evidence and rationality were not prominent in the selection process as organisations like the NFFO and CFPO pointed out at the time.

This change of policy backfired. Local community groups and national organisations rebelled and mounted a strenuous campaign of resistance, especially in Lindisfarne. Churches and local councillors pointed out the harm that would follow closure of these areas to fishing. Scottish coastal constituencies also rose up in protest at the manifest consequences of this poorly thought through, politically driven, and short-sighted application of MPAs. A rapid government retreat followed both south and north of the border, with only some of the less contentious areas going ahead in England, mainly those which primarily impacted EU vessels.

The debacle of HPMA may have ultimately done some good by flagging up the importance of implementing MPAs in a systematic, careful, and inclusive way. Governments will always want to cover themselves in green credentials but when sound evidence-based approaches are replaced by slipshod, rushed, politically driven PR initiatives, trouble will follow.

TICKING BOXES – FORM OVER SUBSTANCE

There is a danger in environmental protection – particularly acute in relation to marine protected areas – of mistaking surface image for substance. Designating an area as an MPA is a first step in providing protection for the conservation feature, be it coral reefs or maerles.

It is the design and implementation of management measures that will apply within each MPA that will ultimately determine the level of success within the MPA and the consequences of displacement (when this is the result) into waters outside the MPA. There is much to be said for not waiting until the last piece of evidence is available before taking action. Pre-empting damage makes sense. This is the precautionary principle. Trouble arises, though, when this sensible guideline is applied without precaution – in other words when proportionality is abandoned. Precaution can and has been used to justify a range of arbitrary measures, including management measures within MPAs.

The importance of avoiding the misuse of the precautionary principle can be seen vividly in the work undertaken on behalf of the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation to estimate the true value of fishing in social and economic terms. The estimates of the broader benefits of fishing are eye-opening. The first sales landings provide one important indicator of value but the so-called multiplier effect of those landings – the social and economic value across the supply chain, and across the regional community is truly remarkable. Every job at sea generates 15 on land. £50 million in landings into Cornish ports translates into 8000 jobs across the region and supply chain. Above all, the fish landed in Cornwall in 2022 provides the basis for around 400 million meals on the table.

TAKING STOCK

The massive and rapid expansion of offshore wind and the huge expansion of the network of MPAs are taking place in the absence of a coherent and integrated policy and planning framework. Chaos looms and fishing finds itself in the most vulnerable position possible – with an existential threat hanging over access to fishing grounds. All the work currently going into the development and implementation of post-CFP fisheries management plans is potentially jeopardised by displacement.

Marine plans, which are supposed to fulfil this role have not been up to the scale of the challenge, or the rapidity of policy change. Much, to protect access to fishing grounds, can be achieved through rational dialogue and the CFPO and NFFO have taken the lead in initiating ground-breaking discussions with the offshore renewable sector to protect our most important fishing areas.

These conversations continue and have shown results. No such dialogue has been possible in relation to marine conservation because stop-start government policy on MPAs which has been politicised to an unhealthy degree.

The incoming government after the general election faces a choice. It can continue to flirt with the more fundamentalist wing of the conservation movement, or it can work with the fishing industry and other major players on a coherent approach which balances food security with environmental protection. These, to restate the point, are not objectives that are in conflict with each other – they are two vital aspects of sustainable development.

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UK Marine Protected Area network statistics

JNCC calculates statistics for the whole of the UK Marine Protected Area (MPA) network to assess progress in MPA designation.

UK waters	UK waters area (km ²)	Number of MPAs	MPA area (km ²)	UK waters covered by MPAs (%)
All UK waters	885,430	377	338,729	38
Inshore	163,302	329	77,003	47
Offshore	722,128	78	261,726	36