

# Marine conservation is about proper management – not numbers

Critics argue that more areas should be protected, but the first set of designated zones is far from the end of our ambitions



A lobster caught by sustainable fishing methods in Dorset. The UK's sealife will be protected by 31 new conservation zones. Photograph: Kristian Buus/Alamy

Just off Beachy Head there is an area of the Channel where sea bream reproduce.

This remarkable [fish](#) pairs with its mate and creates an area of seabed that it will defend for around six weeks until spawning has ceased. This is one of the reasons why I would like to designate this as a [Marine Conservation Zone](#) (MCZ). If we get this right there will be more sea bream for our fishermen and a precious, species-rich area will be preserved forever.

This is just one of the [31 MCZs I want to see around England](#) that would add up to an area of sea three times the size of Cornwall.

Over the last three years, the government has been changing the way we manage our seas, introducing marine planning, setting up new organisations to police our seas, improving marine licensing, reforming domestic fisheries management and, vitally, introducing MCZs. Alongside this we are leading efforts in the EU [to reform the appalling common fisheries policy](#).

The furore around the designation of the first set of MCZs is the disappointment that we are not proposing to designate more. But this is far from the end of our ambitions.

For some it's a binary issue. Designate all 127 or you're a penny-pinching minister who's in the pocket of the [fishing](#) industry. In fact, it would have been easy to designate vast areas of the UK's waters that are of little ecological value because it would have looked good on a map.

Instead, we are doing this properly. We have found some of the most fragile and special sites and will designate them with proper management plans to ensure they will be protected.

Lyme Bay is an example of what we want to achieve. Fishermen working with conservationists, with support from my department, to manage a marine protected area. There are also plenty of examples around the world of how not to do it. I visited the Pacific and heard many boast of plans to protect areas of the sea but, noble though the intention may be, I was left with the clear belief

that many of these areas were no more than lines on maps. Here, we will be requiring agencies such as the Inshore Fisheries and [Conservation](#) Authorities and the Marine Management Organisation to police these sites and prosecute any wrongdoers.

There is another problem. Many of the proposed sites extend or exist beyond our six nautical-mile line. There are historic fishing rights held by fishermen from other EU countries, just as our fishermen fish in other countries' waters. It's vital that any restrictions we apply are respected by all fishermen.

Can you imagine the spectacle of a UK skipper watching a Belgian trawler fishing in UK waters when he can't? We need to secure agreement with other EU countries if it's going to work.

Another myth is that I have raised the bar of scientific evidence so high that it is next to impossible for proposed sites to qualify. Not true. I'm not a scientist and I depend on independent scientific advice. All 127 proposed sites were looked at and, to my disappointment, many of the sites did not have enough evidence to support designation.

Then there is cost. When I received the bad news about the lack of evidence, we set about finding it. We found an extra £3m to carry out new survey work and have made good progress. The additional burdens we will impose on agencies to deliver enforcement will add to the cost. But we're still going ahead.

I had a conversation with [Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall](#) and explained that it was quite an achievement to have got this far at a time when government budgets were being cut. I asked him to suggest, if I ignored the science and designated all 127 sites at a cost of millions, where should I get the money? He didn't think he would trouble his viewers with matters of cost. I don't have that luxury.

The problem with a running a short series on this issue is that a complicated argument is condensed to a few minutes. I understand that, it's the world in which we live. Don't get me wrong: I am grateful to Fearnley-Whittingstall and others for the popular support they got for our efforts to see an end to the discarding of fish. I am, however less worried about TV programmes and am far more concerned with creating meaningful marine protection.

I am very serious about signing off designation of as many of the realistic sites as possible as soon as possible. This network will join up with the other marine protected areas that have already been designated. Around a quarter of our inshore waters (out to 12 nautical miles) are in some form of marine protected area.

As this process rolls out across the English waters joining up with that being done in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as neighbouring countries across the North Sea, Channel and Irish Sea - it starts to make ecological sense.

Yes, I am being given a rough ride by parts of the fishing industry on this. I am also being put under pressure from other sea users. On the whole, I find realism across the spectrum from conservationists to those who derive a living from the sea.

In a national park it is perfectly possible to farm or run a variety of businesses as long as it is in keeping with what makes that landscape so special. I see MCZs in the same way. If we work together it can work to the benefit of all, and most importantly, benefit marine habitats and the species that are fighting for survival.

- Richard Benyon is the environment minister