Dear Sirs,

Delivering Marine Conservation and Zones and European Marine Sites
A draft strategy for marine protected areas: Consultation.
Response from the Marine Biological Association

1. The Marine Biological Association (MBA) is a Learned Society established in 1884. The MBA has about 1000 members and runs The Laboratory in Plymouth where 60 staff work. MBA members have been at the forefront of providing scientific information to support marine environment protection, management and education and much of the scientific information that underpins decision-making about environmental protection has come from work undertaken at the Laboratory.

2. The MBA is a founder member of the Plymouth Marine Sciences Partnership, a federation of seven partners based in Plymouth all of whom tackle different aspects of marine science and technology research and training in a complementary way.

General Comment

3. The MBA is pleased to see a commitment to identify and design a well managed network of MPAs. An MPA network is vital in order to improve the health of marine environment through facilitating protection and recovery of key habitats and species.

4. The MBA wishes to stress the importance of working with the devolved administrations to ensure that an ecologically coherent network of MPAs is designed according to the best scientific evidence, regardless of administrative boundaries. We would like to see a firmer commitment to this in the strategy and more details on how this will be achieved. It would be disappointing if a network was compromised due to disagreements in approach and implementation between the different devolved administrations.
What we want to achieve

5. The aims on P21 state that the management of the network will be underpinned by “the best available scientific and socio-economic evidence” and that “the MCZ component of the network will be reviewed, site boundaries altered, new sites identified or where necessary existing sites will be de-designated, based upon the best available scientific and socio-economic data”. These aims go to the heart of what needs to occur for the long-term viability of the network to be guaranteed. There needs to be, therefore, more detail concerning the relative weight given to this evidence and how the ecological scientific and socio-economic data are linked. Firstly, scientific evidence should always be used as the primary basis on which to select sites and for the design of the overall network – socio-economic factors can then be considered for the designation process. Secondly, there needs to be a statement that it is the long-term socio-economic benefits that need to be considered even though these are often more difficult to quantify than short term ones. For example, P25 states that “We intend to meet our conservation objectives in ways which, where possible minimise socio economic impacts, or perhaps even provide synergies between activities that may result in a positive socio-economic impact”. We would argue that the socio-economic impacts will always be positive if it is the long-term benefits which are being considered. Balancing the two strands of evidence will be particularly important when evidence is viewed as “incomplete” (see P30).

Value of Marine Protected Areas

6. As well as improving the prospects for a more sustainable approach to managing our seas, Highly Protected Marine Reserves (HPMRs) in particular will play an important role in allowing scientists to investigate areas free from direct anthropogenic impact. This will be significant in providing a means for scientists to address questions regarding baselines and reference conditions i.e. what does the “natural”, (or at least “more natural”) condition of the marine ecosystem look like”? It will also allow scientists to identify drivers operating at a larger scale such as climate change and to measure natural variation of the marine ecosystem. Understanding the dynamic nature of the marine environment and separating natural change from anthropogenically driven change will deliver information valuable for managing all UK waters so will be a wider societal benefit of an MPA network.

7. We would agree strongly that the network will be most effective in promoting general marine ecosystem health in the context of a well-managed wider marine environment (P22). Marine Spatial planning underpinned by scientific evidence will, therefore, also contribute to the success of the network.

Process for identifying MCZs.

8. The establishment of “a Scientific Advisory Panel to provide independent scientific advice from specialists” (P32) is strongly supported. The inclusion of scientists with
expertise in socio-economics (e.g. those working on ecosystem goods and services analysis) would also be recommended.

Research and development

9. The establishment of the network will provide us with an opportunity to answer many questions concerning rates of recovery, connectivity and dispersal, ecological coherence and numerous other issues related to the functioning of the network. In addition to the basic information needed for site selection and designation (P37) and the surveillance and condition monitoring, it would be useful to have a commitment this more fundamental research. For example, at present the forward aims (P21) only state that “monitoring of site condition and wider surveillance of habitats and species will be carried out and reported in accordance with our national and international obligations”. This sounds like the minimum required rather than using the opportunity to position the UK as leading supplier of scientific expertise related to marine conservation networks.

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