

The UK's role in protecting the marine environment

Dr Thérèse Coffey

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment

It is a great pleasure to be here today to mark the 25th anniversary of the Coastal Futures Conference. As we reflect on 25 years of marine environmental management successes, I am delighted to highlight our ambitions for the next 25 years, encapsulated in our 25 Year Environment Plan that we published last week. We have set out how we will fulfil our ambition to leave the environment in a better state than we found it, building on existing strategies and identifying key areas of focus. We want even cleaner air and water, richer habitats for more wildlife and an approach to fishing, agriculture and land use which puts the environment first.

By using natural capital thinking and embedding the principle of net environmental gain for new development, our plan goes hand in hand with our Industrial and Clean Growth strategies. To protect the natural world that sustains human life and industry in the long term we must take action today to embed sustainable thinking and properly recognise the inherent value of our natural assets.

Thinking specifically of the coast, as we look out to the great seas and oceans, ensuring the future of clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas has been prioritised repeatedly and emphatically as a fundamental starting point. Oceans supply nearly half of the oxygen we breathe, absorb over a quarter of the carbon dioxide we produce, play a vital role in the water cycle and climate system, and are vital to biodiversity and ecosystem services. Oceans are our greatest natural asset and must be protected for the health of our planet and for the prosperity of future generations.

With over 10,000 miles of mainland coastline, the UK has some of the most varied marine habitats of any coastal waters. As well as their critical contribution to biodiversity and ecosystem services, our seas support the national economy with jobs, provide us with seafood and raw materials and beautiful, irreplaceable recreational destinations. The fresh air, empty horizons and bursting sea life provide a place of relaxation for millions of people every year.

Indeed it is because of the irresistible draw which the sea has for us as a people, that we are seeking to complete the England Coast Path by 2020. This ambitious programme will create the world's longest coastal walking route establishing a 2,700 mile 'National Trail' around all of the English coast and we have future proofed it to take account of coastal erosion. Natural England have made good progress across the country; 314 miles are now formally open, a further 600 are in the last stages of approval and the pipeline is well loaded.

Working together with everyone here today, this Government is determined to restore the health of our seas and to reverse their decline by reducing environmental pressures and by using our marine assets in a sustainable way. After EU Exit, we can embrace the opportunities to enhance marine environmental standards and we intend for Britain to be a global leader for marine environmental policy.

Our successes to date

We have already achieved many successes in pursuit of this ambition. Measures announced over recent decades have seen a gradual yet marked improvement in health of our seas and environment in general. Most particularly:

- Our rivers, beaches and air are considerably cleaner than they were 50 years ago.
- 35% of England's seas are now within designated marine protection areas, safeguarding important and vulnerable habitats and species.
- Since 1970, emissions of potentially damaging sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides have fallen by 94% and 69% respectively.
- Over 95% of our terrestrial and freshwater protected sites in England are now in good condition, or have management in place to ensure that they will recover.
- More species are being fished at sustainable levels;

- The Environment Agency has worked hard with partners like Natural England, water companies, landowners, farmers and rivers trusts, to improve river habitats such that we have more freshwater species thriving and otters are now found in every English county.

Tackling marine litter

We must also tackle the plastic pollution that simply does not belong in the marine environment. This Government will lead by example by removing consumer single use plastics across all central government offices.

We have regulated for the world's toughest ban so far against plastic microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products – an easy target as there are so many natural alternatives available so we will continue to assess how to reduce other kinds of pollution and waste, plastic or otherwise.

We must reduce the global reliance on plastics, as well as incentivise the recycling processes to improve waste management, and promote maritime practises that prevent harmful materials entering the seas.

How will we deliver the 25YEP and build on it?

The 25 Year Environment Plan highlights a number of priorities for the Government in relation to our coasts and marine environment. Our policies must follow strong environmentalist principles while also allowing marine industries to thrive. The UK Marine Strategy sets out our overall ambitions for the marine environment, the targets we want to achieve and how we aim to do so.

Following this strategy, we will:

- Later this year, we will have completed a major assessment of how far our seas have moved towards good environmental status since 2012. We will use that assessment to review our targets and put in place an updated strategy that will deliver the objectives of the 25 year plan, including regular review dates.
- We will develop a marine online assessment tool to look at the marine environment and the pressures affecting it that will be made available to all.
- We will deliver the marine spatial planning and licensing systems to support proportionate management of the marine environment, whilst enabling growth and providing greater certainty for industry.
- We will complete the full series of England Marine Plans by 2021 and ensure they work cohesively with adjacent marine plans, whether they are developed within the UK or by neighbouring countries.

The UK welcomes Canada's decision to focus on the oceans and Blue Economy in its G7 Presidency. The G7 will build on the work of the Future of the Seas and Oceans Working Group. At a regional level, we are continuing to work with the other members of OSPAR, to further the protection of the North East Atlantic marine environment. We will use our influence and resources to help strengthen the role OSPAR plays and ensure that the principles and marine objectives of the 25 YEP are reflected in the new OSPAR North East Atlantic Strategy that will be agreed in 2020. It is through collaboration on a regional and global scale that we can address the issues affecting our seas and oceans.

Marine Protected Areas and Marine Conservation Zones

We now have nearly 300 Marine Protected Areas in UK waters. We will consult this summer on our third tranche of marine conservation zones. By 2020, we will deliver a network of Marine Protected Areas that will cover 25% of the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone and we are also on track to protect 4 million square kilometres of ocean across its Overseas Territories by 2020.

I am very aware of the benefits and the challenges that come with such designation as in Suffolk Coastal region, there are a number of Marine Protected Areas but my experience so far is that industry and the environment can comfortably coexist.

Ocean Acidification and Coral Reefs

Climate change is having a direct impact on our oceans too. It increases ocean acidification and causing rises in ocean temperature, both leading to significant damage to the marine environment, particularly to coral reefs.

Ocean acidification is a direct result of CO₂ emissions from human activities around the world and can effectively be tackled only when everyone works together at international level. The “Because The Ocean” declaration, signed by the UK, highlights the relevance of ocean protection in the implementation of the Paris Agreement and calls for all parties to include ocean protection in their Nationally Determined Contributions.

The UK will continue to support the need to monitor and assess the health and state of our oceans, and will work with others to drive innovation in monitoring and the collection of data to support policy and vulnerable ocean states.

Coral reefs are under direct and sustained pressure. The UK’s ambition is to champion and support their conservation and biodiversity in UK and Overseas Territories’ waters and around the world. We welcome the fact that 2018 has been made the International Year of the Reef by the International Coral Reef Initiative, recognised by the UK as the key international body for coral and related habitats. Through increased engagement we will encourage the adoption of best sustainable management practice of coral reefs, as well as its associated ecosystems.

Commonwealth Blue Charter

This year the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is taking place in London and Windsor in the week of 16 April 2018 and will be the biggest gathering of Heads of State and Government the UK has ever hosted. We will use this opportunity to work with the Commonwealth Secretariat and our Commonwealth partners to draw up an ambitious plan for a Commonwealth Blue Charter. This new statement will aim to apply the principles and values of the Commonwealth Charter to oceans and our marine environments.

Coastal Erosion

Coastal erosion is a natural process that always has and always will continue to change the shape of our coastline, but it can be distressing for those living nearby. Central government is responsible for setting the overall national policy, while local councils lead on the management of coastal erosion risk in their areas. A significant decision was taken by the government earlier this decade to formally recognise that it would not be possible nor desirable to defend every part of our coastline from erosion, confirming what had already been happening in practice.

To support councils, the Environment Agency provides a national picture on what is happening on the coast. It has established National Coastal Erosion Risk Maps that provide a consistent assessment of coastal erosion risk around the country and set out a best practice method for calculating this risk. The Environment Agency also ensures different councils take a consistent approach to risk management as actions taken along one part of a coastline can have a direct impact further along the coast. At the same time as the government made the decision formally not to defend the entire coastline, it also made the important decision that any scheme which has a positive benefit cost ratio would be eligible for some government funding. This means that cost beneficial schemes that would not have progressed in the past can now receive some government funding.

Sustainable Fisheries

Closer to home, leaving the EU offers us the opportunity to create a world-class fisheries management system that is based on the principle of maximum sustainable yield and helps to restore and protect the marine ecosystem. As an independent Coastal State outside the EU, the UK will be able to control and manage fisheries in UK waters - out to 200 Nautical Miles or the median line. This will be the basis for negotiations on access to waters and share of quota.

Our new fisheries policy must be forward looking: responsive, sustainable, resilient, competitive and a profitable career choice for a new generation of fishing businesses. It must also bring a cleaner, healthier and more productive marine environment. We will implement science-based plans as

part of our approach to managing fisheries sustainably and to restoring fish stocks to sustainable levels in the shortest time feasible. This Government is committed to promoting the no-discard policy and creating a sustainable fishing industry that promises a sea of opportunity for future generations.

It is important to remember that, overall, many aspects of the UK marine environment are improving. About 30% of fish stocks are now at sustainable levels and the proportion of large fish in the North Sea has climbed steadily since 2010 to levels not seen since the 1980s. We must still seek to ease the impact of human activity, however, particularly on seabed habitats and fish populations. An ecosystem approach to fisheries management will account for, and seek to minimise, impacts on non-commercial species and the marine environment generally, including through technical conservation measures.

Working with devolved governments to implement the plan

Recognising our domestic and global ambitions, we will be an active government working closely with the devolved nations and stakeholders.

Conclusion

I could not finish without referring to David Attenborough and the remarkable Blue Planet 2 which gripped the nation by showing us the beauty, power and vulnerability of our oceans and seas. We were shown the wonderful diversity of what lies beneath our oceans and the complex ecosystems which allow them to survive and thrive. It also showed the impact of human behaviour, specifically the damage but also the opportunity to recover.

As we step into a new era there is scope for Britain to set the very highest standards in marine conservation and be a global leader in environmental policy.

Our 25 Year Environment Plan will be integral to this ambition. It gives us the framework to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. When we succeed, the results will be magnificent and each of us will have played a role in that success.