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Possible new marine Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas in Wales

// February 2015



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This leaflet provides information about sea areas around Wales that are being considered for possible designation as Special Areas of Conservation for harbour porpoise and Special Protection Areas for a number of species of birds. It explains the background to the work and why it is happening, what happens next, how you can find out more information and how to get involved.

This leaflet has been produced by Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Government as part of a process of informal information sharing leading up to a full public consultation on the proposals, which will take place later in 2015.

We are keen to share information before the consultation, in order to help people take part from an informed position and to help us understand people's views and concerns.

Background: what is this about?

The seas around Wales support a rich diversity of marine life. Biodiversity plays a vital part in sustaining coastal communities and businesses that depend on the health of our marine environment, such as fisheries, recreation and tourism.

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are areas of land or sea designated and managed for the conservation of the natural habitats and wildlife species they support. These areas form part of the 'Natura 2000' network of nearly 28,000 sites across the European Union. Protecting and managing the sites in the Natura 2000 network is one of the main ways that all EU member states contribute to the shared aim of conserving biodiversity and ensuring that our natural heritage is sustained for the benefit of current and future generations.

A series of SACs and SPAs has already been designated on land and sea in Wales and across the rest of the UK, but we need to do more in the marine environment to reflect the particular importance of UK and Welsh waters for marine wildlife. This will ensure compliance with the UK's obligations under the relevant European legislation, namely the 1992 Habitats and Species Directive and the 2009 Wild Birds Directive.

The proposals outlined in this leaflet are not connected in any way with Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs). SPAs and SACs have a different legal framework and different objectives.



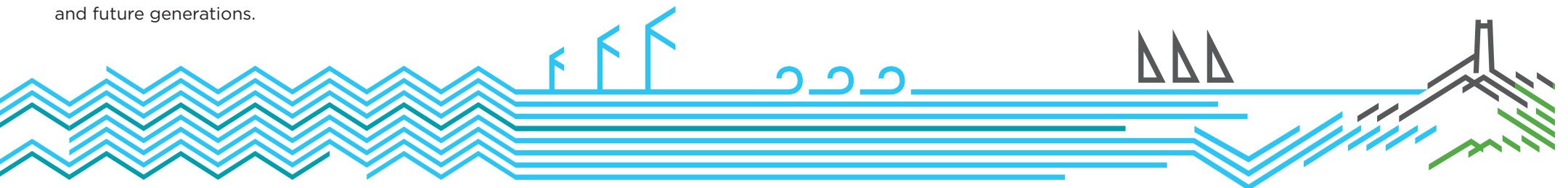
Photo credit - Clive Hurford

The evidence for further marine sites

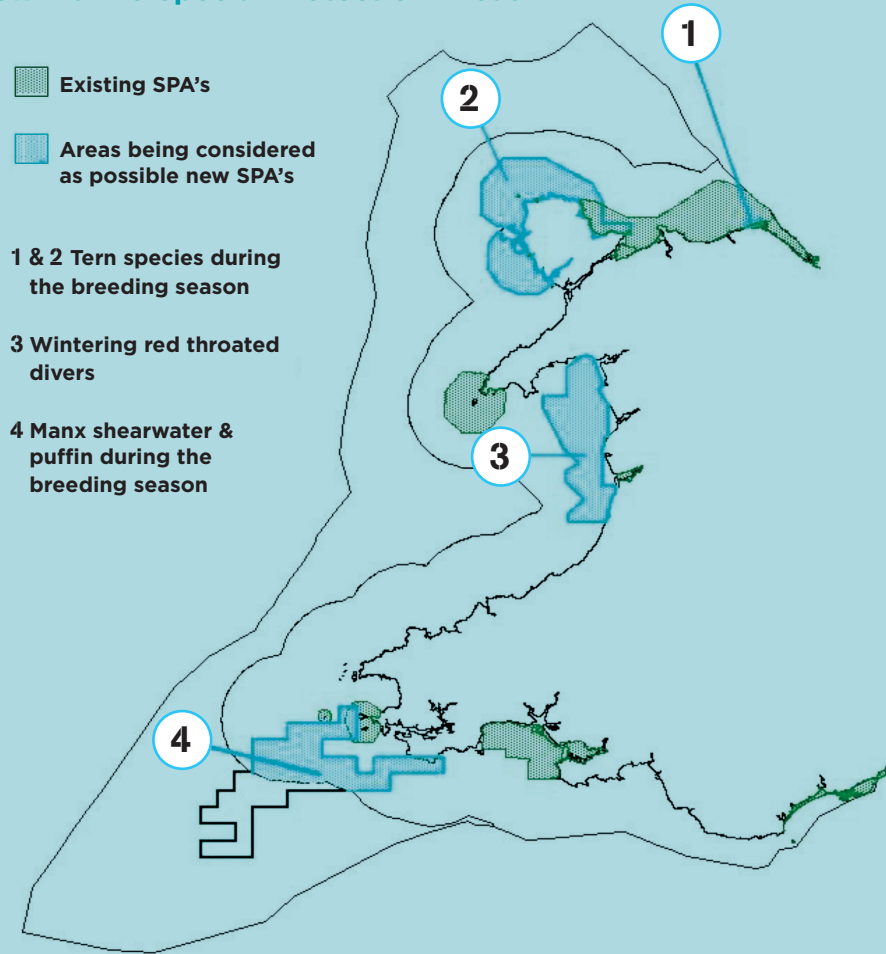
Under EU law, the selection and designation of SACs and SPAs must be made only on the basis of scientific evidence. The statutory nature conservation agencies in the UK are responsible for advising Government on the selection of sites. In Wales, Natural Resources Wales carries out this function. Decisions on whether to designate sites in Wales and Welsh territorial waters are made by the Welsh Ministers in light of the advice from Natural Resources Wales. The cross-border sites (that is, sites which straddle the England-Wales border, or which straddle the 12 mile limit of Welsh territorial waters) are a joint responsibility of Welsh and English/UK authorities.

Led by the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the UK nature conservation agencies have worked together for several years to gather and analyse data on the numbers and distribution of species of marine mammals and birds which are not sufficiently covered by the existing Natura 2000 network of sites. UK and Welsh waters hold significant proportions of the European populations of many marine species, including harbour porpoise, Manx shearwater and other species of mammals and birds.

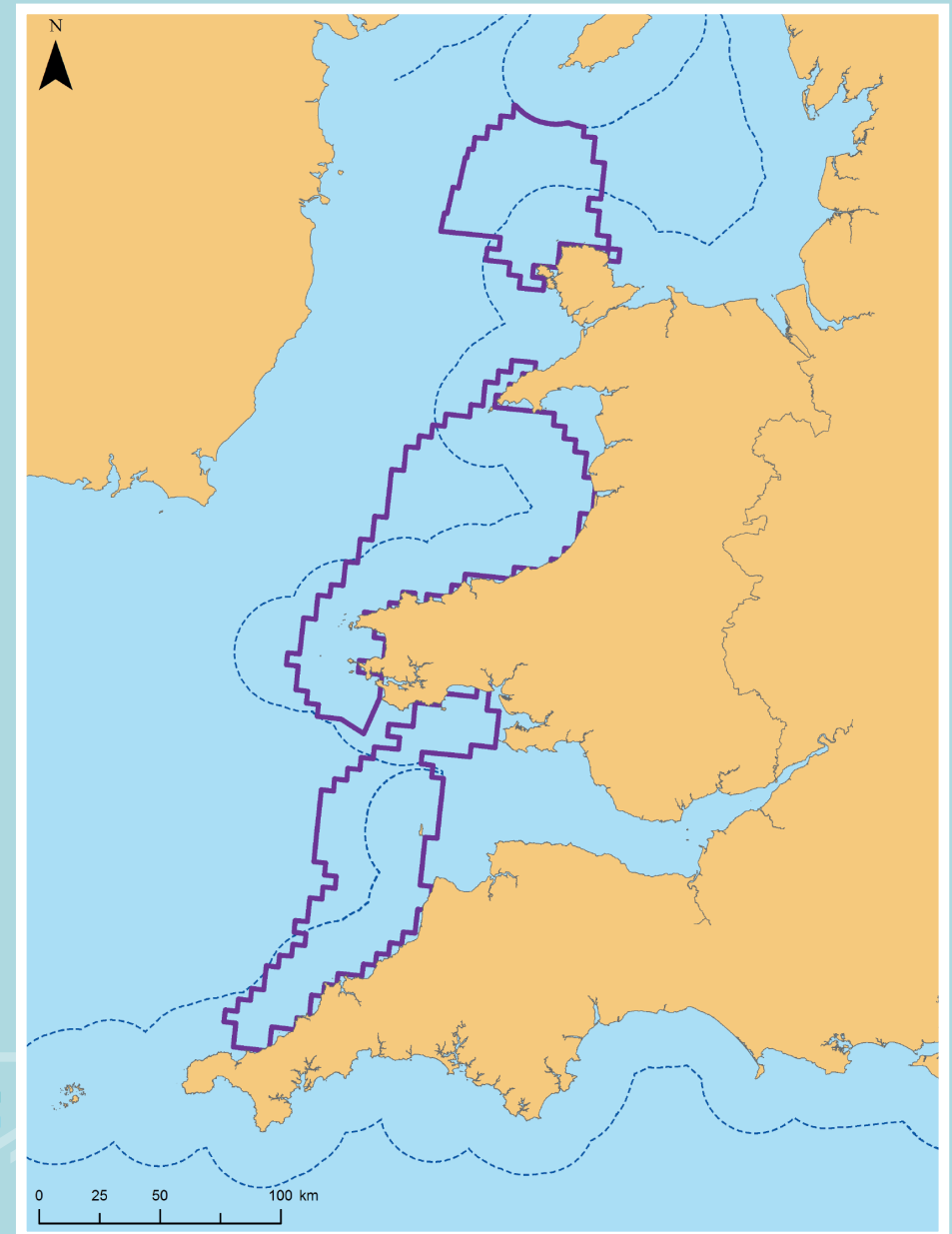
The maps below show the areas around Wales that have been identified from this work and which are now being considered as possible new SACs and SPAs. Work to define these possible areas is still ongoing, so these maps should be considered as indicative only at this stage.



Areas around Wales under consideration as possible new marine Special Protection Areas



Areas around Wales under consideration as possible Special Areas of Conservation for harbour porpoise



What effect would these designations have on existing marine activities?

SACs and SPAs are intended to encourage the sustainable use of the marine environment, not to become 'no-go' areas. Wales' existing network of SACs and SPAs are functioning marine areas with a variety of different uses, including shipping, energy, fisheries and recreational activities. While some activities and developments with the potential to harm wildlife do need additional regulation, many marine and coastal activities co-exist with the conservation of habitats and species. Designation of further areas should not significantly affect the management and regulation of current activities which are shown not to cause a detrimental effect on the species for which the sites are designated. There will be further opportunities to discuss management of any designated sites in the future.

Important areas for birds

The bird populations of these areas are in most cases considered to be in a healthy state, with population numbers generally stable or increasing over the past 10 years. The populations are not thought to be significantly affected by ongoing activities such as fishing, shipping and recreation. Therefore, unless new evidence emerges that our existing uses of the marine environment are adversely affecting these species, it is likely that ongoing activities will be able to continue at their current levels without the need for new management measures. In addition, most of the bird populations concerned are already subject to protection under the existing SPA designations on the Dee Estuary, the Anglesey coast and the Pembrokeshire islands. The important area for wintering red throated divers in Northern Cardigan Bay lies mostly within the boundary of the existing Pen Llyn a'r Sarnau SAC, which is already being managed for the conservation of a range of habitats and species. This means that the areas are already subject to a range of regulations designed to protect marine wildlife, so significant new regulation of existing activities is unlikely to be required.

Important areas for harbour porpoise

Harbour porpoise is a wide ranging species that is already strictly protected under European and UK law, irrespective of whether any SACs are designated for it. The main benefit of designating SACs for harbour porpoise is to increase awareness about the areas that appear to be particularly important to the species, and to ensure that new coastal or marine developments are assessed for their potential implications for the species and the habitats on which it depends. The environmental assessment of coastal and offshore development such as renewable energy schemes must take account of impacts on harbour porpoise and other marine mammals.

As part of the preparations for a formal consultation on all these proposals later in 2015, independent consultants will be preparing an 'Impact Assessment' describing the potential social and economic implications if these are designated. The report of this work will be published as part of the public consultation stage later in 2015. The consultants may contact stakeholders as part of their information gathering exercise.

What happens next, and when?

Ongoing

Any organisations and individuals with an interest in these proposals are very welcome to contact Natural Resources Wales for more information or to arrange one to one meetings. See below for details of how to get in touch.

February – May 2015

Stakeholders may be contacted by the contractors who are preparing the Impact Assessment report.

February – June 2015

Natural Resource Wales, Natural England and JNCC are developing formal recommendations to Government on each proposed site. These will include descriptions of the scientific evidence for each site, why it is considered to meet the criteria for designation as a SAC/SPA and a map of the proposed boundary. Based on this information, Welsh and UK Ministers will decide whether to progress to formal consultation. The Impact Assessment report referred to above will also be provided to Government alongside the scientific recommendations.

July – September 2015

Subject to Ministerial agreement, Natural Resources Wales, working closely with JNCC and Natural England on the cross-border sites, will carry out a three month public consultation on the proposals. This should start around July 2015, and may coincide with consultations on other harbour porpoise areas in English, Scottish and Northern Irish waters.

September – November 2015

The responses to the consultation will be reported to Welsh and UK Governments, along with any changes to the recommendations on each proposed site which may arise from the consultation responses.

By December 2015

Ministers will decide whether or not to formally designate each proposed SPA and whether each proposed SAC should be formally submitted to the European Commission as a 'candidate SAC'. At this point, the sites would become subject to the legal protection required under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives.

The precise timing of these stages may change.



Photo credit - Clive Hurford

If you'd like to find out more...

This leaflet is intended only to give a brief outline of the process. It is our intention to produce more information as the work progresses, in particular for the formal consultation period later in 2015.

If you have any questions in the meantime, they may be covered in a list of Frequently Asked Questions that we have produced to accompany this leaflet. In any case, you are welcome to: email Natural Resources Wales at marine.n2k@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk phone us on **0300 065 3000**. Details of local offices can be found in the 'Contact us' section of our website www.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk.

If you have particular queries about offshore waters (that is, areas outside the 12 mile limit of Welsh Territorial Waters), or the harbour porpoise area in the outer Bristol Channel, you should contact the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee by emailing porpoise@jncc.gov.uk. Likewise, any queries about offshore SPAs should be sent to seabirds@jncc.gov.uk.



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