

## **FAQs on the Ecological Network Guidance: November 2010**

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Questions have been sourced from the regional MCZ projects and a number of stakeholders.

### **1. GENERAL**

#### **1.1**

**Q:** What is the Ecological Network Guidance?

**A:** The Ecological Network Guidance (ENG) is to be used by the regional stakeholder groups and regional MCZ project teams to enable them to identify Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs). It contains practical guidelines to enable groups to identify MCZs that will contribute to an ecologically coherent Marine Protected Area (MPA) network. The ENG is Natural England's and the JNCC's statutory advice on what is needed to achieve the goals set out in Part V of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and associated policy to establish an ecologically coherent network of MPAs. Defra accept this document as statutory advice. It does not cover the consideration of socio-economic interests in MCZ identification.

### **2. FEATURES**

#### **2.1**

**Q:** What does the acronym FOCI stand for?

**A:** Features of conservation importance (see section 4.2 of the Ecological Network Guidance).

#### **2.2**

**Q:** Where does the list of species/habitats come from and who decided on them?

**A:** There are thousands of habitats and species in our marine environment and our knowledge on their distribution is often limited, making it unrealistic to select MPAs for each one. As such, JNCC and Natural England have used the European classification scheme (EUNIS), which groups habitats and species together into broad-scale habitats to represent the diversity of the marine environment. We have also paid particular attention to identifying threatened, rare, or declining species and habitats – referred to together as FOCI. Natural England and JNCC derived the FOCI list from the UK Biodiversity Action Plan List of Priority Species and Habitats, the OSPAR list of threatened and/or declining species and habitats, and Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (see section 4.2 of the Ecological Network Guidance for further information).

#### **2.3**

**Q:** The guidelines state that geological and geomorphological features of interest (section 6.4) 'should be considered' for MCZ identification. What does this mean?

**A:** The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 provides for sites of geological and geomorphological interest to be designated as MCZs, and the Government would like to see the provisions of the Act being used to protect such areas, although any sites designated as MCZs for these reasons alone would not form part of the ecologically coherent MPA network. However, areas that contain both features of geological and geomorphological interest and habitats and species in the ENG could present a win-win situation for ecological and geological reasons. In the nearshore area Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are being looked at to see where geological features extend seawards of existing SSSIs and where MCZs could play a role in conserving the entire geological feature (see section 6.4 of the Ecological Network Guidance).

## 2.4

**Q:** What is the current rationale for keeping blue mussel and native oyster beds in the ENG if they may be deemed commercial species?

**A:** Native oysters are classed as FOCI due to their listing as both an OSPAR and a BAP species, which reflects the decline in this species at both a European and UK level. In England, native oyster catch has decreased from 20,000 tonnes a year in the 1920s to between 106-120tn from cultivation (including Orders) in 2006. The reasons are varied over this timescale and include harsh winters, the impact of non-native species both as competitors (*Crepidula fornicata*) and predators (*Urosalpinx*), disease (*Bonamia*) and pollution (particularly tributyltin). Overfishing at unsustainable levels is also widely accepted as a major factor. The large biogenic reefs present in the North Sea and the Wash 50-80 years ago have now disappeared and the east coast fishery relies on fishermen restocking the area. The remaining largest self-sustaining oyster population in the Solent has also showed significant declines in the CEFAS annual surveys over the last 20 years.

Blue mussel beds do occur in dense aggregations around the English coast. However, the OSPAR case report notes that 'significant declines in the extent and biomass of intertidal mussel beds have been reported in the OSPAR Maritime Area and particularly in Region II' and identifies that 'the majority of *Mytilus* beds under threat occur in the Waddensea and southern British coastal waters.' As a result, **intertidal *Mytilus edulis* beds on mixed and sandy sediments** were nominated for inclusion on the OSPAR list due to global and regional importance, rarity, sensitivity, ecological significance and keystone role, with information also provided on threat. *Mytilus edulis* beds which are 'natural' and occur '**on a variety of sediment types**' are also listed as a BAP habitat. Artificially created mussel beds and mussel beds that occur on rock and boulders are excluded.

These listings qualify the types of mussel beds which are considered as rare, threatened or declining and therefore warrant recognition as OSPAR and BAP habitat types. It is only these types on which conservation effort must focus to ensure their persistence and ecological functioning, and which therefore qualify as FOCI.

## 2.5

**Q:** Habitat FOCI coastal saltmarsh and intertidal mudflats are excluded from the ENG because they are considered to be Annex I habitats under the EC Habitats Directive. So why are broad-scale habitats coastal saltmarshes and saline reedbeds, and intertidal mud included?

**A:** The FOCI descriptions for coastal saltmarsh and intertidal mudflats are analogous to, or included within, the Annex I habitat descriptions. As such we are confident that these two

habitat FOCI are sufficiently protected through existing Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EC Habitats Directive. However, the broad-scale habitat descriptions are broader than the Annex I habitat descriptions, and as such we need to check how well these broad-scale habitats are represented in existing Marine Protected Areas. For further information see annex 3 in the ENG.

## 2.6

**Q:** The habitat FOCI saline lagoons are excluded from the ENG because they are considered to be Annex I habitats under the EC Habitats Directive, but the saline lagoon species FOCI *Gammarus insensibilis* and *Tenellia adspersa* are listed in the ENG. What does this mean?

**A:** These lagoonal species have a very restricted distribution and do not occur in all lagoons. As such, existing SACs for Annex I Coastal lagoons need to be reviewed to check whether they afford sufficient protection to these two species. For further information see annex 3 in the ENG.

## 3. NETWORK DESIGN PRINCIPLES

### 3.1

**Q:** How can the guidelines for adequacy percentages be so precise?

**A:** The recommended percentage ranges for broad-scale habitats in section 4.4 of the ENG are derived from statistical analyses of each of the broad-scale habitats and the species found within them. The recommended ranges reflect the estimated proportion of habitat required to represent between 70% and 80% of species found within each habitat.

### 3.2

**Q:** Which sections of the Ecological Network Guidance would justify offshore sites or would strongly encourage us to investigate offshore areas?

**A:** The connectivity guidelines (section 4.6) require Marine Protected Areas to be well distributed across the regional Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) project areas, which includes inshore and offshore waters. MCZs only in inshore waters would not meet this guideline as they would not be well distributed.

### 3.3

**Q:** What are the size guidelines for reference areas? Guidance states that they can be part of, or an entire Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ). Does that mean they can be smaller than 5km minimum diameter?

**A:** Reference areas should follow the viability guidelines to ensure they are ecologically viable. For FOCI therefore, they can be smaller than 5km if their viable size is less than 5km in diameter (see section 4.5 of the ENG).

### 3.4

**Q:** Are reference areas the same as no-use areas?

**A:** Reference areas are not 'no-use' or 'no-go' areas. They are areas where all extractive, depositional or disturbing activities are excluded. Those activities that are not extractive, depositional or disturbing are likely to be allowed within reference areas (see section 4.7 of the ENG). As such we anticipate that activities such as wildlife watching, swimming, boating, kayaking and scuba diving will be allowed if they are well-managed. However, the regional Marine Conservation Zone projects will have to demonstrate that features (i.e. FOCI and

broad-scale habitats) within the reference area are not sensitive to the pressures caused by these activities. For example, some features may be sensitive to underwater noise or visual disturbance caused by wildlife watching and boating. The sensitivities of features to various pressures are described in the matrix currently being produced under a Defra-led contract.

#### **4. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

##### **4.1**

**Q:** Were wrecks considered at all as potential habitats for inclusion as they provide pockets of biodiversity?

**A:** Although wrecks may provide habitat for species they are not themselves a natural habitat. They are part of our cultural heritage as opposed to our natural heritage. Areas with wrecks in could be identified but they would have to be designated for the broad-scale habitats around the wreck or FOCI. It's worth remembering that we are keen to look for natural areas where possible (see section 5.3 of the ENG). Wrecks do indeed provide a good surface for species to grow on but those communities may not be representative of the broad-scale habitats around them.

*If you have any further questions about the Ecological Network Guidance please contact:*

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