

JNCC and Natural England's advice on recommended Marine Conservation Zones

Supplementary advice on the Marine Conservation Zones feature of conservation importance subtidal sands and gravels

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2.0	22/03/2013	Hannah Carr	Incorporation of amendments from document sign off and rationalisation of version control table for publishing.
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Electronic	1.0	12/03/2013	Sue Wells, Jen Ashworth, Jon Davies, Amy Ridgeway and Ollie Payne

Context

In July 2012, JNCC and Natural England submitted advice to Government on the recommendations made by four regional Marine Conservation Zone projects on Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ)¹. Since the submission of *'JNCC and Natural England's advice of recommended Marine Conservation Zones'* (JNCC and Natural England 2012a), JNCC and Natural England became aware of some factual errors and omissions within the advice document and subsequently published *'JNCC and Natural England's advice of recommended Marine Conservation Zones – Amendments Report December 2012'* (JNCC and Natural England 2012b). The amendments report highlighted the regional MCZ project Finding Sanctuary had taken a different approach with regards to the feature of conservation importance (FOCI) subtidal sands and gravels. The amendments report stated that a conclusion had not yet been reached and that after further work, a supplementary advice paper would be provided. The present document provides this supplementary advice that should be read in conjunction with the original advice document (JNCC and Natural England 2012) and the amendments report (JNCC and Natural England 2012b).

Background

The regional MCZ project Finding Sanctuary stated in their final recommendations report “One exception that applies across the whole network² is that no conservation objectives have been included for the FOCI habitat ‘subtidal sands and gravels’, either for inshore or offshore sites, even where the habitat has been recorded. It is a very widespread and broad-scale feature, and we consider that by including conservation objectives for broad-scale habitats listed in the ENG, any conservation requirements of this habitat would be met. (Lieberknecht *et al.* 2011 - page 134)”. The report further states that “...subtidal sands and gravels was not treated as a FOCI habitat during the planning process - it was not included on FOCI maps or reported against during stakeholder meetings. This is a very broad category and we were confident that the network would meet the requirements for this habitat through focussing on the relevant broad-scale habitat targets (Lieberknecht *et al.* 2011 - page 172)”. Finding Sanctuary was the only regional MCZ project that decided not to list the FOCI habitat subtidal sands and gravels as a feature within their recommended sites.

The Ecological Network Guidance (ENG) (Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee 2010) recognises the overlaps and linkages between many marine features such as Annex 1 habitats (under the EC Habitats Directive), broad-scale habitats (the European Nature Information System (EUNIS) habitat classification³ level 3) and features of conservation importance FOCI (UK BAP priority habitats and OSPAR list of threatened and/or declining habitats). There are a number of different habitat classification schemes. The marine section of the EUNIS classification is based on, and is fully compatible with, the Marine Habitat Classification for Britain & Ireland⁴. JNCC has developed a correlation table (JNCC 2010) between the latest EUNIS marine classification (2007) and habitats in other classification schemes, showing the relationships between the habitats in the different schemes. Annex 3 of the ENG provides specific detail on the relationship between the EUNIS broad-scale habitats and FOCI to be protected by MCZs.

¹ More information available at <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-6228> and <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/marine/mpa/mcz/advice.aspx>

² The phrase “whole network” in this paragraph refers to the suite of rMCZs in the Finding Sanctuary project area. Other projects identified subtidal sands and gravels as a feature for protection in some of the rMCZs where this features occurred and consequently developed Conservation Objectives for this feature.

³ <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-3365>

⁴ <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-1584>

There are two possible relationships between broad-scale habitats and habitat FOCI as described in Annex 3 of the ENG: the habitat FOCI only occurs within one broad-scale habitat type, or where the habitat FOCI occurs within more than one broad-scale habitat type. Subtidal sands and gravels is a unique case where the FOCI has a broader definition than the broad-scale habitats with which it directly correlates (subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal sand) and so the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels may contain both these broad-scale habitats. Due to the direct correlation between these habitats, for the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels to occur, the subtidal coarse sediment and/or subtidal sand broad-scale habitats also need to be present.

JNCC and Natural England's advice on the Marine Conservation Zone feature subtidal sands and gravels

Although subtidal sands and gravels habitat was listed as a FOCI within the ENG due to its presence on the UK BAP priority list of habitats and species, JNCC and Natural England are content with the approach taken by Finding Sanctuary. The ENG criteria for both subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal sand broad-scale habitats were achieved within the Finding Sanctuary regional MCZ project final recommendations, and so the ENG criteria for the FOCI habitat have also been met. By protecting both of these habitats there are 30 recommended sites within the Finding Sanctuary area which, if designated will afford protection to the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels. Of these 30 recommended MCZs, Defra has indicated that 4 sites⁵ are good candidates for designation in 2013.

JNCC and Natural England recommend to Defra that this approach is applied across the whole MCZ Project area and advise that where the habitat FOCI subtidal sands and gravels has been recommended, it is not listed as a separate feature. We also advise that, for the purpose of assessing progress towards an ecologically coherent network and future network reporting wherever subtidal coarse sediment and/or subtidal sand broad-scale habitats are a feature of an MCZ it is recognised that the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels will be protected within that site. We suggest that only the broad-scale habitat(s) are listed within the Designation Order as a feature, and that an 'Explanatory Note' should be included to explain that the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels will automatically be afforded protection under the designation of the other feature(s).

Subtidal sands and gravels data

Although there is a direct correlation between the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels and the two broad-scale habitats as described above, there were differences in the data layers used by the regional MCZ projects to map the recommended extent of the FOCI and the two broad-scale habitats (JNCC 2010⁶, Natural England & the Joint Nature Conservation Committee 2010)⁷. As a result, the recommended extent of the FOCI and the broad scale habitats within an rMCZ may not always align.

At the time of writing *JNCC and Natural England's Advice on Marine Conservation Zones* (JNCC and Natural England 2012), a conclusion had not been reached on which data should be used for the assessment of confidence in the presence and extent of the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels. The assessment for all features was carried out on the recommendations as submitted by the regional MCZ projects, and so the confidence in subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal sand broad-scale habitats may differ to that of the FOCI habitat subtidal sands and gravels. JNCC and Natural England advise that when either one or both

⁵ East of Haig Fras, South-West Deeps West, Isles of Scilly and The Manacles.

⁶ Please note that the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels is listed in this correlation table as a BAP habitat.

⁷ Further detail on why these differences occurred can be provided to Defra separately if required.

of the broad-scale habitats, subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal sand, are recommended for protection within an rMCZ, then best available evidence for the extent of these broad-scale habitat(s) should be used to define the extent of subtidal sands and gravels in the future.

As there were differences in data for the extent of subtidal sands and gravels and the correlated broad-scale habitats within some of the rMCZs when assessments of feature presence and extent were originally carried out for the SNCB Advice (JNCC and Natural England 2012), if this advice is followed there are potential implications for the outcomes of future assessments of feature presence and extent, including those features in the first tranche for designation in 2013. In some cases the differences between the data meant that the FOCI and the broad-scale habitat had significantly different extents and so there are complexities that need to be considered on a site by site basis. In other rMCZs broad-scale habitats were not recommended as features for designation by the regional MCZ projects but the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels was recommended, and so by designating the broad-scale habitat instead of the FOCI it may result in a difference in feature extent to that recommended by the regional MCZ project. There are five inshore rMCZs in tranche 1 (Stour and Orwell, Thanet, Folkestone Pomerania, Fylde Offshore and Aln Estuary) and three in the offshore (North of Celtic Deep, Swallow Sands and Rock Unique) which contain the FOCI subtidal sands and gravels which was recommended as a feature for designation by the regional MCZ projects and so issues may arise. Similar issues may also arise with future sites that are designated which had subtidal sands and gravels recommended as a feature by the regional MCZ projects.

JNCC and Natural England will consider these data issues when they review the recommendations following the public consultation on the MCZ recommendations. JNCC and Natural England will provide their advice to Defra ahead of any sites progressing to formal designation.

References

JNCC (2010) *Correlation Table showing Relationships between Marine Habitat Classifications (2004 and 2007 versions) and Habitats Listed for Protection*. Available from: http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/EUNIS_Correlation_2007-11_20101206v2.pdf (accessed October 2012)

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