



## **Chief Executive's report on topical issues**

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## Joint Nature Conservation Committee

### Chief Executive's report on topical issues

Paper by Marcus Yeo

#### 1. Key achievements

- 1.1 Several significant milestones towards the establishment of a coherent network of marine protected areas (MPAs) in UK waters have been reached over the last few months:
  - i. on 18 July, Natural England and JNCC submitted [formal advice on Marine Conservation Zones](#) (MCZs) to Defra. The headline message is that JNCC and Natural England broadly support the MCZ recommendations made by the four regional projects, subject to some amendments;
  - ii. on 1 November, SNH and JNCC submitted formal advice to Marine Scotland on the identification of nature conservation MPAs in Scottish waters. The advice contains 32 MPA proposals; five MPA search locations have not yet been fully assessed;
  - iii. eleven new marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) have been submitted to the European Commission, including eight sites identified by JNCC in offshore waters. The submission also includes [Skerries and Causeway](#) in Northern Ireland, which is the first SAC in UK waters to be designated for harbour porpoise.
- 1.2 A new [UK biodiversity framework](#), endorsed by the four environment ministers in the UK, was published by JNCC and Defra on behalf of the Four Countries Biodiversity Group on 17 July. The framework is a response to the global biodiversity targets agreed by the Convention on Biological Diversity at Nagoya in 2010. It describes the UK-level co-ordination and action that is needed to build on the work undertaken in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and ensure that the UK can meet its international commitments.
- 1.3 JNCC's long-standing work on terrestrial biodiversity surveillance has yielded updated information on the status of birds in the UK:
  - i. the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is run jointly by JNCC, the British Trust for Ornithology and RSPB in association with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. It provides information on population sizes and trends for non-breeding waterbirds, including data for individual sites. The latest [data](#) show the effect of the harsh winter in 2011/12, when large

numbers of some species arrived from continental Europe, and also highlight continued declines in certain species, including Pochard and Ringed Plover;

- ii. the Seabird Monitoring Programme is a partnership co-ordinated by JNCC. The 2012 report on [seabird population trends](#) and causes of change presents information for the UK as a whole and for individual countries. Data show continued declines for a number of species.
- 1.4 In the international arena, JNCC staff formed part of the UK delegation to the [11th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity](#) in Hyderabad in October. One of the key decisions was an agreement by developed countries to increase funding for developing countries to help them meet the 2020 biodiversity targets. Other issues discussed included marine biodiversity and national biodiversity plans.

## **2. Political and institutional changes**

- 2.1 There was a major Cabinet reshuffle in the UK Government in early September. [Owen Paterson](#) has replaced Caroline Spelman as Defra Secretary of State. There are two new junior ministers within Defra, but Richard Benyon remains in post and retains responsibility for JNCC. In terms of policy there is likely to be an increased emphasis on how the department can contribute to economic growth.
- 2.2 There were also ministerial changes in Scotland in early September. Stewart Stevenson has been replaced by [Paul Wheelhouse](#) as Minister for Environment and Climate Change.
- 2.3 The establishment of the [new environment body in Wales](#) is proceeding at pace, and several important appointments have been made recently. Professor Peter Matthews has been appointed as Chair of the new organisation, and Emyr Roberts as Chief Executive. The ten non-executive directors include Morgan Parry and Professor Lynda Warren. The body will be called Natural Resources Wales.
- 2.4 [Terry A'Hearn](#) has been appointed as Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and will take up his post in November. Within the Department of the Environment a new Marine Division has been established that will include responsibilities for nature conservation.

## **3. Advice on offshore renewables**

- 3.1 Discussions with Defra, DECC, Treasury and windfarm developers are continuing, with the aim of reaching agreement on a long-term funding arrangement that will enable JNCC to meet current and anticipated demand from developers and regulators for advice on offshore windfarms. An oral update will be given to the Joint Committee meeting on 15 November.
- 3.2 At present, JNCC's capacity to advise on offshore windfarms remains severely depleted. However, with Defra's agreement, JNCC has recently appointed several new specialist staff to work in this area and further recruitments are underway.

**4. UK Nature and Landscape Office**

- 4.1 Following Committee's decision in June to close the UK Nature and Landscape Office in Brussels, plans are on track to close the office in December.
- 4.2 Some of the savings arising from the office closure have been used to support a modest increase in staff resource to ensure that JNCC can continue to deliver European intelligence and advice to government and the country conservation bodies.

**5. JNCC website and branding**

- 5.1 The single government website ([GOV.UK](http://GOV.UK)) was launched on 17 October and will eventually subsume the existing websites of all central government departments and the vast majority of their arms length bodies. Following discussion with Defra and the devolved administrations, Cabinet Office has agreed that JNCC should maintain an independent website that will not be absorbed within GOV.UK.
- 5.2 More recently, Cabinet Office has agreed that JNCC can retain its logo and branding, and will not be required to comply with the unified government branding initiative.