Proposed legislation will leave two thirds of critical Marine Protected Areas unprotected

- Marine Conservation Society research finds 16 sites of ‘critical importance’ for protection by Government
- Latest Government consultation outlines 13 sites with proposed byelaws
- Just 5 of the 13 proposed byelaws from the MMO are sites deemed ‘critically important’ in the charity’s newest analysis

Last Saturday (14th May) the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) announced a consultation on byelaws to protect and manage 13 offshore MPAs. This follows the banning of bottom-towed fishing gear from four offshore MPAs, including Dogger Bank.

These first four byelaws – effective from 13th June 2022 – are a win for the Marine Conservation Society’s ongoing Marine UnProtected Areas campaign.

The campaign is calling for protection, at long last, of England’s offshore MPAs designated to protect the seabed which is vital for absorbing and storing carbon, buffering the effects of climate change, and supporting biodiversity.

When damaging fishing gear like bottom trawls and dredges are permitted to fish in these MPAs, the health of the planet is compromised; preventing the recovery of ecosystems already lost to decades of exploitation and limiting the seabed’s ability to store carbon and combat the effects of the climate crisis.

Today, the Marine Conservation Society is releasing new research, outlining 16 ‘critically important’ sites for protection. Half of the 16 critically important MPAs experienced disturbance (seabed trawling) on over 90% of the total ‘protected’ area.

Just 5 of the 13 proposed byelaws from the MMO are sites deemed ‘critically important’ in the Marine Conservation Society’s newest analysis.
By analysing fishing data, carbon storage potential, habitat sensitivity and MPA conservation objectives, the charity has ranked the remaining offshore sites in need of legislation from ‘critically important’ to ‘important’.

Of the sites identified as ‘critically important’, the South-West Deeps (East) Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) received the highest score of all sites, making it the most critical for protection. This site – approximately 190 km southwest of the Land’s End peninsula – has not been included in the latest consultation.

The area is vital for carbon storage and is a biodiversity hot spot, experiencing a summer plankton bloom each year bringing wildlife to the area. The Marine Conservation Society’s analysis found that, on average, the area experiences over 5,000 hours of bottom trawling each year. The site has the potential to store up to 1.7 million tonnes of organic carbon; the same amount of carbon as that emitted by over 1 million return flights from London to Sydney.

**Frith Dunkley, MPA Researcher at the Marine Conservation Society, said:** "Many of the sites of critical importance for protection were not initially designated for their carbon storage potential. However, this added element makes ocean protection even more vital. The huge volumes of carbon which can, and should, be stored by these vast Marine Protected Areas could be put at risk by countless hours of fishing, where vessels indiscriminately drag nets along the seabed."

"As we face twin climate and biodiversity crises, it’s of the utmost importance that we allow these sites to recover."

**Dr Jean-Luc Solandt, MPA Specialist at the Marine Conservation Society, said:** "Our new analysis represents a clear path for the Government to take in protecting our seas. We’ve found
16 sites of critical importance. It’s disappointing to see that just 5 of the 13 proposed byelaws being consulted on now are those we’ve identified as critically important. The four byelaws, due to be in place from 13th June, are a step in the right direction, but there’s a long way to go to achieve protection of 40 sites with management measures as promised by UK Government by 2024.”

Join the charity's call for government action by signing the Marine UnProtected Areas petition, pushing for a further 16 byelaws to be put in place.

For more information, and to read the charity’s Marine UnProtected Areas report from January 2021, please visit www.mcsuk.org.

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Notes to Editors

Analysis of English offshore Marine Protected Areas designated to protect the seabed. NB byelaws have now been announced for the sites classed as “In progress” below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservation objective</th>
<th>Fishing/Blue carbon/Sensitivity level</th>
<th>Trawl ban in place?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restore or Restore and Maintain</td>
<td>Very High*</td>
<td>High</td>
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</table>

* not applicable to sensitivity score  ** or ‘Not sensitive’
The Marine Conservation Society campaigns for clean seas and beaches, sustainable fisheries, and protection of marine life. Through education, community involvement and collaboration, the charity raises awareness of the many threats that face our seas and promotes individual, industry and government action to protect the marine environment. The Marine Conservation Society provides information and guidance on many aspects of marine conservation and produces the Good Fish Guide as well as involving thousands of volunteers in projects and surveys such as Beachwatch. www.mcsuk.org.