

CCN briefing note on Highly Protected Marine Areas

The Coastal Communities Network (CCN) is a coalition of community-based organisations that want to see a stronger community voice in the planning, management and conservation of Scotland's coastal and marine area. The Network aims to bring together and support community-led efforts to protect, restore and sustainably use coastal and marine resources for the benefit of nature, people and climate. Each member is rooted in a place-based community and encompasses a broad constituency of members and supporters.

The shared policy programme between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party includes a commitment to designate by 2026 a suite of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs), covering at least 10% of Scottish Seas. CCN has prepared this briefing note to set out our agreed views on this proposal.

The principle of HPMAs

1. CCN recognises the value of HPMAs to:
 - a. Allow ecosystems to regenerate towards full natural biodiversity and abundance
 - b. Support recovery of ecosystems which support blue carbon and essential fish habitats.
 - c. Allow everybody to see & appreciate how rich our seas can be in the absence of human exploitation.
 - d. Provide resilience in this time of biodiversity and climate crises
 - e. Through the above provide societal and economic benefits and opportunities and help support sustainable use of marine resources

Members of CCN are therefore supportive, in principle, of the proposal to designate HPMAs in Scottish waters to contribute to sustainable management of marine resources within the context of a wider spatial management framework for Scotland's Seas.

Concerns

2. CCN is concerned that if HPMAs are pursued in isolation from other approaches to protecting and managing Scotland's seas, then they may have unintended consequences for both the marine environment and coastal communities. Specifically:
 - a. HPMAs will disadvantage particular sectors / individuals and therefore have the potential to be locally divisive.
 - b. Displacement of fishing activity to other areas will put greater pressure on seabed habitats and marine life elsewhere.
 - c. Potential public opposition to marine conservation measures more generally may arise if the above are not addressed.

Overall approach

3. CCN considers that:
 - a. HPMAs should be seen as a specific type of spatial measure nested within a framework of broader spatial management for the whole of Scotland's inshore waters. There needs to be clarity on how HPMAs fit with current policy, including how they can best complement existing MPAs and other spatial measures, to provide the greatest environmental, social and economic benefits. CCN would like to see buffer zones established around HPMAs where only certain activities at certain levels can take place (these could be existing MPAs).
 - b. To deliver the greatest benefits from HPMAs, the selection of HPMAs needs to:

- i. recognise and encompass the role they can play in wider ecosystem recovery, and not focus solely on protection and/or recovery of specific Priority Marine Features (PMFs).
- ii. make best use of existing science to optimise site selection and maximise ecosystem recovery and socio-economic benefits in conjunction with other spatial measures (including MPAs, other marine spatial management (such as a limit on bottom-contact fishing), and coastal terrestrial initiatives).
- iii. deliver protection and recovery of essential fish and shellfish habitats and blue carbon habitats.
- iv. contribute to delivering sustainable fisheries and other maritime activities.
- v. consider how designation can support existing environmental and socio-economic policies and initiatives, including for adjacent terrestrial areas. This includes opportunities for science and education.
- vi. make an ecologically coherent contribution in both inshore and offshore areas, ensuring an equitable proportion of HPMA are designated in both regions.

Process

4. CCN members want to see a recovered, healthy and productive marine environment that enables sustainable marine-based activities and supports community-based enterprise and well-being. While in principle we support the concept of HPMA, as a network of place-based coastal community groups, we are very concerned that HPMA proposals could be highly contentious and divisive within our local communities with long-term repercussions.
 - a. It is essential that the HPMA process involves local sea users and the wider community from the start and enables open discussion to explore available evidence, options and opportunities with those who will be most directly affected by the proposals.
 - b. HPMA can help support sustainable fisheries; it is therefore essential that site selection directly involves local fishermen and considers how proposals can best provide fishery benefits and support an associated, just transition to low impact fisheries.
 - c. Whilst complete agreement for individual HPMA proposals is highly unlikely, developing sites with greater community and other stakeholder support will deliver a more sustainable network of sites.
 - d. Opportunities for co-management of HPMA (and any associated buffer areas) with local communities and organisations should be considered wherever possible.

Management

5. There needs to be a well-funded programme of monitoring across the MPA/HPMA network (and within any associated broader spatial inshore limit). It will be essential to establish a baseline condition for sites and maintain long-term monitoring to maximise learning for future management decisions.
6. There needs to be a publicly-available compliance and enforcement strategy for HPMA.
7. Management needs to identify and address all pressures on HPMA, including off-site activities where impact pathways have implications for an HPMA, e.g. runoff and pollution from onshore and offshore activities and noise pollution.