Coastal Communities Network Brief

A Community Vision for Marine Restoration in Scotland

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Background

Marine habitats such as seagrass meadows and native oyster reefs provide food, shelter, and nursery areas to commercial fishery species and countless other marine organisms; improve water quality, and potentially capture and store carbon. They have a role to play in meeting Scottish Government commitments on climate change and biodiversity loss.

Many of Scotland's marine and coastal habitats have suffered catastrophic declines as a result of pollution, habitat destruction, bottom-contact fishing, and climate change. For example, Scottish seagrass extent has declined almost 60% since the mid-nineteenth century and native oysters have been all but extirpated.

Restoration is fundamentally about the recovery of ecosystems. It tends to involve one of two strategies, although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first involves man-made interventions to initiate or accelerate the recovery of species and habitats. Seawilding is the UK's first community-led native oyster and seagrass restoration project, aiming to release over 1 million native oysters and plant up to one half of a hectare of seagrass annually to Loch Craignish. The second approach involves removing existing pressures and allowing marine habitats to recover naturally, such as in Lamlash Bay following the campaign for and designation of a No-Take Zone by the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST).

There has been a surge in interest to restore marine habitats and several community-led restoration projects are already underway. This reflects a broader desire for coastal communities to have a say on how the inshore marine area is protected and managed. It offers exciting, locally-specific visions of marine habitat recovery. But in order to replicate and scale up recovery, these pioneering initiatives need support.

The challenges

Local level restoration faces numerous challenges. These include limited community capacity for setting up and running projects, a lack of long term funding security, onerous permitting and licensing processes, knowledge gaps and, fundamentally, a lack of community influence in the management of the marine area.

A community vision for marine restoration

Whilst community-led projects have developed to address local environmental challenges, with their own goals and objectives to suit site specific contexts, community groups leading on restoration have come together through the Coastal Communities Network Restoration Forum to define a shared vision for marine habitat restoration. This vision provides a foundation on which to communicate and build support for a community-led model to marine biodiversity recovery across Scotland.

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Our vision is for a Scotland-wide network of community-based groups leading marine habitat restoration projects, which deliver benefits for both nature, climate and people, now and for future generations, including sustainable livelihood opportunities, food security, and community empowerment.

Achieving the vision

To achieve our vision, we will:

- Develop and disseminate best practice in marine restoration knowledge, approaches and techniques to other communities
- Create opportunities for others to experience and learn about our marine environment and to become involved in its protection and enhancement

What we are calling for?

While community groups have a vital role with on-the-ground, hands-on restoration, these projects needs to be enabled and supported by policy and other measures that promote long-term progress, replication, and scaling up. This includes:

1. Leadership from decision makers in tackling the key threats to marine biodiversity in the first instance
2. Policy recognition that community-led marine restoration projects are a legitimate and valued use of the marine area (e.g. in marine spatial planning)
3. Greater opportunities for ownership and stewardship of the inshore environment by local communities
4. Additional financial support to enable more local restoration projects
5. A streamlined consents and licensing system that is easy to navigate

Current marine restoration projects (July 2022)
1. Dornoch Environmental Enhancement Project (DEEP)
2. Wester Ross Native Oyster Restoration Project
3. Lochaline Native Oyster Restoration Project
4. Kilchoan Native Oyster Restoration Project
5. Seawilding - Loch Craignish Native Oyster Project / Seagrass Restoration Project
6. Restoration Forth
7. Firth of Clyde - Wild Oysters Project

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