

UK Marine Protected Areas monitoring: The North Sea and beyond

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The UK has an obligation to monitor the status of the marine environment in accordance with a number of international and domestic policies. A key tool in achieving our obligations, in relation to marine biodiversity targets, is the implementation of a 'Blue Belt' of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) around the UK coast. This network, which comprises both European sites (designated under Natura 2000) and also nationally designated MPAs, is intended to contribute to an Ecologically Coherent Network (ECN) of MPAs in the North East Atlantic, agreed under the Oslo Paris (OSPAR) Convention and other international and domestic commitments. Following the designation of this network, Defra has tasked Cefas, JNCC, Natural England, the Environment Agency, and Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), in collaboration with other statutory nature conservation bodies and academic partners, with delivery of a programme of MPA monitoring in Secretary of State (SoS) waters. The remit of this programme is to provide evidence against which the condition of designated habitat and species features within MPAs may be assessed, relationships between pressures and feature condition can be investigated, and the efficacy of adaptive management measures may be evaluated.

At the time of submission, the SoS programme has conducted dedicated monitoring surveys or highly detailed verification surveys at 40 inshore and offshore MPAs since 2013, ten of which are located in the North Sea. Further research and development surveys and international collaborative activities have also been conducted to improve our understanding of the MPAs and their designated features in the context of the wider North Sea ecosystem, and explore applications for the MPA monitoring programme. This presentation gives an overview of the achievements of the programme to date, using R&D case studies from the North Sea and wider SoS waters; including innovation in monitoring approaches and sampling designs, testing and development of indicators, technical and operational advances, achievements in inter-agency collaboration, and progress towards ecosystem-based MPA monitoring.

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