

Dealing with the impasse in UK MPAs (*Fishing News*, 25 May 2012, page 24)

A recently published review of MPAs around the UK highlights the progress that has been made and some key issues that have arisen through initiatives to designate marine special areas of conservation (SACs) and marine conservation zones (MCZs). It draws particularly on case studies in south-west England, including Lyme Bay and the Finding Sanctuary MCZ project, writes **Peter Jones**

SACs presently cover around 5.6% of the total UK marine area, but this figure rises to 12.8% of England's marine area. Alongside these, 127 MCZs have been recommended, potentially covering 15.3% of England's marine area. Given that there are overlaps between some SACs and proposed MCZs, the total coverage of MPAs (SACs and MCZs) could rise to 27% of England's marine area. MPAs tend to be more concentrated in inshore waters, and the coverage of MPAs in the seas within 12 nautical miles could be 34% if all the proposals go through.

'Reference areas' within MCZs, where all fishing operation will be completely banned, will represent just 0.3% of England's total marine area, but these are particularly contentious.

MCZ recommendations have been made on the basis of the best available evidence, but this has not proved to be sufficient to constitute the firm evidence base required by the government.

Whilst further surveys are underway, it is unclear how many MCZs will eventually be approved by the government for designation. SACs are subject to strong legal obligations to the European Commission, but there is more legal flexibility where MCZs are concerned, so the UK government has more say over MCZs.

None-the-less, the potentially high coverage of MPAs, coupled with uncertainty as to which fishing operations will and will not be allowed within different MPAs, have obviously led to some major concerns amongst the various fisheries sectors.

The fishing industry fears that both marine SACs and MCZs will lead to many further restrictions on trawling, but potentially also static fishing, adding to the many major pressures on the industry.

Marine conservation NGOs, on the other hand, fear that the proposals already fall far short of previous recommendations for 30% of our seas to be designated as no-take MPAs. Furthermore, NGOs fear that many MCZ recommendations will be delayed, perhaps indefinitely, by the quest for a firmer evidence base.

Both argue that the burden of proof should be placed on the other, the fishing industry on the basis of the need for a firm evidence base to justify use restrictions, the conservationists on the basis of the precautionary principle.

The only concern that they probably share is that the reformed CFP will not provide for the protection of MPAs beyond 6 nautical miles, where stocks are shared with fishermen from other European countries under the relative stability principle and directly regulated by the European Commission.

The motives for these concerns are, however, very different. UK fishermen fear that MPA restrictions beyond 6 nautical miles will be unilaterally imposed on them, as happened with the seasonal pair-trawl ban in the South-West Approaches.

Conservationists, on the other hand, fear that restrictions on fishing for MPAs will not be put in place, and that conservation objectives will therefore be undermined, reinforcing their concerns about the potential for 'paper MPAs'.

The paper by Dr Peter Jones (Dept of Geography, University College London) discusses the many issues related to this impasse between marine conservationists and the fishing industry.

The government is arguably 'stuck in the middle' and the decisions it takes in the next few years will be critical in deciding the future course for MPAs and the fishing industry. The paper is published in the journal *Environmental Conservation* but is an 'Open Access' publication which is freely available for all to download at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0376892912000136>