

# MPA NEWS



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## Following the Brexit vote, what is the future for the UK's MPAs?

The decision by UK voters in July to withdraw from the European Union is likely to have significant impacts on the UK economy and policy in general. The Brexit vote — for British exit — could impact the nation's MPA policy as well.

Under the EU's Habitats and Birds Directives, the UK has been obligated to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for flora and fauna, and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds. As a result, the UK has designated over 200 SACs and SPAs combined, with more still in the planning stage. But due to Brexit, the future of all of these sites — protected in UK waters under EU law — is now in limbo.

The UK's departure from the EU will involve several months of negotiations, and there is even some chance Brexit could be reversed by UK officials. But assuming Brexit continues forward, can we anticipate what it will entail for the UK's European MPAs — or, for that matter, the UK's national MPAs? MPA News asked two experts:

**Samantha King** of Natural England, the statutory body that advises the British Government on marine conservation and seascape issues in England's territorial waters; and

**Jean-Luc Solandt**, Principal Scientist, MPAs, for Marine Conservation Society UK, an independent NGO.

### Samantha King

"At the moment it is very much 'business as usual' for MPA designations and management:

- We are still a member of the EU, and we will continue to engage with EU business as normal and be engaged in EU decision-making in the usual way.
- Once Article 50 is invoked [the provision of the EU Treaty that triggers a country to leave the union], we will remain bound by EU law until the withdrawal agreement comes into force. The period between invocation of Article 50 and our eventual exit from the EU is two years unless the other Member States agree to extend it."

### Jean-Luc Solandt

"The current message from the UK's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) is that the program of work in introducing new sites — including extensive new SACs for harbour porpoise and SPAs for birds — will go on, as will managing damaging activities in current sites. This is somewhat encouraging. Even if the UK were to invoke Article 50 of the EU Treaty, nothing would happen for two years.

"A huge number of issues have to be resolved as to how we leave, including negotiating a new trade agreement with the EU. So I don't foresee our country signing Article 50 anytime soon.

"We do unfortunately have the situation in the medium term of telling all our fishermen that EU law, quota on stocks, and EU MPA management measures still remain. We understand that some individuals are believing the referendum result to be an immediate license to fish where and how they like. This is not so, and some regulators are having a difficult time of it.

"In terms of UK law, the major marine policy driver in recent years has been to complete a network of MPAs — a so-called 'blue belt' — by 2020. That includes both designation of new marine conservation zones under UK law and management of all existing sites. In so doing, governments of our four devolved countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) and their statutory nature conservation advisors have all included the habitats and species within SACs and SPAs as major contributors to the entire UK MPA network. Indeed, most of the significant estuaries and reefs of inshore English and Welsh waters are included in these European marine sites. So should SACs and SPAs be de-designated as part of Brexit, we'd have to replace them with relevant sites, thus wasting time and effort."

#### For more information:

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