Perspective: Amid uncertainty over UK MPAs’ future, reasons for optimism emerge

By Chris Williams, Sue Wells, and Matt Doggett

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The inter-relationships among science, policy, and management were the focus of a UK conference on MPAs organized by the Poole Harbour Study Group and the Estuarine and Coastal Science Association in May. This brought together a wide range of academics, practitioners, and regulators to discuss key issues and challenges facing MPAs both globally and nationally (full details available here: http://www.pooleharbourstudygroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Programme.pdf).

Despite the timing of the conference (occurring just weeks before the start of Brexit negotiations on the UK leaving the European Union), it was remarkable for its optimism and for the positive case studies that were presented. Brexit is leading to considerable anxiety about the fate of the UK’s European Marine Sites, as was eloquently laid out by Jean-Luc Solandt, Bryce Stewart and Alice Puritz in MPA News in April 2017. And at the time of the conference, the UK national election had not taken place and government commitments were unclear. For decades, MPA establishment and management in the UK have lagged behind other countries, and there are genuine concerns about the future. So it was very good to see some celebration of the positive steps that are being taken, reflecting the theme of this year’s April Earth Day when conservationists promoted “optimism”, and which was carried through to Oceans Day in June.

In England, progress is now being made to develop a framework for effective MPA management in inshore waters, where the ten regional Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) are the main regulators. IFCAs are unique management bodies, comprising both paid staff and voluntary members from local councils, other regulators and civil society. Management is undertaken through bylaws and also voluntary agreements, all of which go out to public consultation before being adopted.

Beachy Head West MCZ, at the foot of the iconic Seven Sisters cliffs in Sussex, is an example where such combined forms of management are now underway. This MCZ also has two intertidal zones designated as Educational Conservation Areas, where the focus will be on interpretation and awareness raising. The Medway Estuary in Kent, a designated MCZ and Special Protection Area, is unusual in that the fishing rights were granted in 1729 to the Rochester Oyster and Floating Fishery (ROFF), a local guild that has had responsibility for managing the fishery to this day. In partnership with the Kent and Essex IFCA, ROFF has established an intertidal no-take zone (NTZ) to protect the salt marsh and mud flats that form a nursery area for a range of commercial fish species. At 12 km², this is now the largest NTZ in the UK.

Building community support for MPAs

The conference venue was the Poole Harbour Authority, and the nearby Poole Rocks MCZ provided a good example of what is happening on the ground. The bylaw for the site is being finalized and the Southern IFCA will then consult on management measures.

A major problem in the UK has been communicating the value of MPAs. Much as we love the coast, the memories of our childhood seaside holidays, and our rich maritime heritage, the British have been slow to appreciate its underwater marine life. So a highlight of the conference was the presentation of the interactive website http://poolerocksmcz.uk/ and supporting 3-minute YouTube video that have been produced for Poole Rocks MCZ. These provide models of the kinds of communication tools needed for all MPAs, and were created through a partnership project involving the Southern IFCA, two NGOs (Dorset Wildlife Trust and the Marine Conservation Society), and the think tank the New Economics Foundation, or NEF. (NEF’s ‘Blue New Deal’ action plan was also showcased at the conference: this presents a road map for coastal communities, demonstrating how they can thrive by making sustainable use of their natural assets, including MPAs.)

This is the start of a wider engagement plan by those involved to get coastal communities to support their local MPAs, just as they would support terrestrial sites. The video and website make the underwater realm more accessible to those who do not dive or fish, but who are nevertheless still stakeholders and need to be involved in stewardship of the sites.

For more information:

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