

A vision for UK seas

Thank you for inviting me back to speak at this year's Ocean Recovery event, and to celebrate the work that has been going on across our marine space. I join you today at the beginning of an exciting new era for the UK, and at a time where the ocean is central to supporting a healthy marine environment alongside a successful fishing industry.

2020 was a challenging year for all of us, but our marine ambition has remained strong. The UK is a global leader in protecting our ocean and marine life, and has demonstrated this leadership over the last year through a number of commitments.

Alongside WWF, the European Commission and Costa Rica, the UK led the development of the [Leader's Pledge for Nature](#), which was launched in September at the UN General Assembly and is now supported by 82 signatories and the EU.

The Pledge aims to reset humanity's relationship with nature, and sets the tone for a step-change in global ambition for climate and biodiversity both on land and at sea, to put biodiversity on a path to recovery.

Thirty-eight countries have also now joined the Global Ocean Alliance, which supports the target to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030, and this number continues to grow.

Alongside this, the UK is now the Ocean Co-Chair of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People. At the One Planet Summit on 11 January, we were proud to announce that between the two alliances, 66 countries now support the 30by30 ocean protection target.

The UK has a rich wealth of marine life, and now that the Transition Period has ended and we have secured a settlement with the EU, we are recognised as an independent coastal state with sovereign control of our waters.

No longer bound by the Common Fisheries Policy, the UK has a real opportunity to enhance the protection of our marine environment, and place sustainability at the heart of our fisheries policies. This includes working closely with my colleague Minister Prentis to join up our work across marine and fisheries, and we have already hit the ground running.

[The Fisheries Act 2020](#), the first primary legislation on fisheries in the UK to be passed in nearly 40 years, has eight objectives of which six focus on sustainable fishing and environmental protection. The objectives of the Act, alongside our Marine Policy Statement and UK Marine Strategy, act as the major pillars to the protection of our marine environment.

2021 is an exciting year, marking an unprecedented alignment of international and domestic marine agendas, which is why we are calling it our 'Super Year'. There is much to look forward to.

The UK is committed to playing a leading role in developing an ambitious post-2020 framework for biodiversity, to be adopted at COP15 of the upcoming Convention on Biological Diversity. Through the UK's COP26 Presidency this November in partnership with Italy, we will place Nature at the core of our approach to the Conference, recognising the crucial role of Nature-based Solutions for climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience, and working closely with governments, businesses and civic organisations. You'll hear more about the role of nature-based solutions in Session 6.

But, the UK's global leadership really starts with our ambition and delivery at home.

Marine Protected Areas

The UK continues to take marine protection seriously, and remains committed to delivering a well-managed network of Marine Protected Areas. Since I spoke last year, the total number of UK Marine Protected Areas has risen to 371, covering 38% of UK waters.

This includes extending the existing Marine Protected Area in the Isle of Scilly by approximately 13,000 hectares to protect internationally important populations of storm petrel and lesser black-backed gulls. And, working with the Scottish Government, we have also extended the Solway Firth SPA by 92,000 hectares to offer further protections to red-throated diver and ringed plover.

We have now shifted our focus to site management. In October, the Marine Management Organisation launched a [Call for Evidence](#) to seek views on draft assessments of the impacts of fishing within four offshore MPAs, including the Dogger Bank site. The Call for Evidence closed in December, and the information received is now being reviewed and used to update and finalise the draft assessments. The MMO will be consulting on these byelaws from February.

Our commitment to marine protection also extends to our Overseas Territories, where the UK has now exceeded its target of protecting 4 million square kilometres of ocean. The announcement in November by Tristan da Cunha of a new Marine Protection Zone has safeguarded the future of sevengill sharks, yellow-nosed albatrosses and rockhopper penguins in the remote archipelago.

HPMA review

Yet, there is still more we can do, and are doing. On World Ocean Day 2020, we announced the publication of the report of the independent review into whether and how Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) should be introduced in Secretary of State waters. This includes how HPMAs can enhance the protection of blue carbon habitats, which have a role to play in climate mitigation and adaptation.

The Review, led by former Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon, recommended that HPMAs are an essential part of the UK MPA network for protection and recovery of the marine environment and the government should introduce HPMAs within

existing Marine Protected Areas. On 20 July 2020 the Secretary of State announced that he intends to pilot HPMA's.

The government welcomes the report, and recognises the potential role of HPMA's in securing our vision to leave the environment in a better state than which we found it.

We are looking closely at the recommendations, and working with key stakeholder groups, to inform a cross-government response. Jen Ashworth is going to talk more about this in Session 15.

Marine Planning

Going further still, we recognise that committing to a clean, healthy, safe and productive marine environment requires effective and sustainable management, in order to benefit both our coastal communities and the wider UK economy.

The Government is committed to ensuring that there is a full set of marine plans in place this year, meeting the commitment made in the 25 Year Environment Plan. These marine plans will be a significant milestone for the Government in supporting sustainable development for our marine area, whilst ensuring the on-going protection of the marine environment.

We have already published the East and South Marine Plans, and the remaining marine plans for England are being brought forward in parallel and are well progressed.

The UK Marine Strategy

Of course, being able to implement all of this effectively requires a clear UK vision for clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas. The UK Marine Strategy give us this. The Strategy provides a robust framework for assessing and taking measures to achieve and maintain Good Environmental Status in our seas. It covers a comprehensive range of biodiversity and marine environment indicators from marine species and habitats to contaminants, marine litter and underwater noise.

While the Strategy update report published in October 2019 showed we have made good progress towards achieving Good Environmental Status in some areas, it also highlighted that further action is necessary to achieve that ambition. This is where we are focusing our efforts.

In Spring this year, we aim to publish Part Two of the Strategy. This will set out the monitoring programmes to track our progress towards updated [Good Environmental Status targets set out in Part One in 2019](#). This will be followed by the update to Part Three, which sets out the programme of measures we will implement in order to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status for UK seas.

Green Recovery Challenge Funding

Meanwhile, we all know the challenges the pandemic has posed this year, and

the future will be very different as a result of COVID-19. Respecting, valuing and restoring nature will deliver a more resilient, sustainable green and blue recovery helping to deliver the UK's net zero ambitions.

Recognising this, the Government announced a [Green Recovery Challenge Fund](#) in September which is now worth £80m, to kick-start a pipeline of nature-based projects to restore nature, tackle climate change and connect people with the natural environment. Protection of our coastal species and ecosystems are amongst successful projects to-date, including Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, Ocean Conservation Trust's seagrass project, and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's projects on seagrass and oysters.

Following the success of the first round of £40m, the Government has confirmed that it will double the size of the fund by making an additional £40 million investment. Round 2 will be launched in early 2021.

Seabird Conservation Strategy

When I spoke to you this time last year, I announced the development of a comprehensive Seabird Conservation Strategy for England.

It is critical that our strategy is based on the best possible evidence and that we work with our stakeholders to make sure it is implemented effectively. Following the advice of our Steering group, I have commissioned a comprehensive review of the different pressures our seabirds are facing, in order to develop a holistic strategy with action targeted where it is needed most. We will be collaborating closely with stakeholders – including conservation organisations, scientists and industry as these plans develop.

But we have not stopped there. In the past year we have already taken a series of actions that will help support our iconic seabird populations.

By expanding our protected areas in the [Isle of Scilly](#) and the [Solway Firth](#), we have protected an additional total of 140,000 seabirds.

We have also decided to remove lesser black-backed and herring gulls from general licences, following extensive scientific and stakeholder consultation.

We are working with stakeholders to tackle bycatch through developing our UK Plan of Action on Seabird Bycatch, including a recent workshop whose report will be published this Thursday. Lessons learned from the workshop are guiding the development of the Plan of Action and associated toolkit. Together these will set out the objectives and means by which we can reduce seabird bycatch based on the experiences of those who understand it best.

I am pleased that we will be supporting the RSPB's vital work improving island biosecurity measures that will help safeguard the UK's internationally-important seabird islands.

Offshore Wind Enabling Actions Programme

Our work on the Seabird Conservation Strategy is not our only exciting

development. As I'm sure many of you will have seen, in November, the Prime Minister set out the plans for a Green Industrial Revolution through the government's ambitious Ten-Point Plan. The Plan has paved the way for the environment to play a vital role in our approach to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss and ensure a green economic recovery from COVID-19. In December, building on the Ten Point Plan announcement, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy published its Energy White Paper, putting net zero and our efforts to fight climate change at its core.

And this is why I am so pleased that in the autumn budget, the Chancellor announced a £4.3m funding for an Offshore Wind Enabling Actions Programme. This is a cross-Government programme, being delivered in partnership with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It is focused on work to improve the understanding of adverse environmental impacts from offshore wind construction, and develop a cross-Government approach to compensating for them, as well as reducing the impacts of underwater noise, introducing net gain in a marine context and using big data to improve consenting and monitoring. These projects will help reduce consenting delays, support economic recovery and help meet the Government's net zero commitments.

Super Year 2021 is clearly critical for renewed action on the ocean, both internationally and at home too. The message remains clear: we must protect and improve ocean health and resilience to address the twin challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. By doing so, this will in turn help us to enhance our competitive marine industries, including sustainable fishing, and contribute to thriving coastal communities. With that in mind, I am looking forward to hearing about the excellent work going on across the piece, as we join together for ocean recovery in our collective mission to build back better.