

Nature Targets for NI seas

Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF)

16th June 2021

The Northern Ireland marine area spans over 6,000 km², and includes a coastline of over 650 km. More than half of Northern Ireland's biodiversity is in our seas, including whales, dolphins and porpoises, grey seals, puffins and gannets, horse mussels and cold-water corals. Strangford Lough alone is home to over 2,000 marine species and attracts up to 80% of the world's population of light-bellied Brent geese throughout October and November, which come to feed on the eelgrass on the mudflats.

However, the impact of human activity on fragile marine habitats is widely evident, including the increasing amount of marine litter, the decline in marine biodiversity and the repercussions of climate change including sea temperature and, sea level rise, changing species distributions and ocean acidification.

The Northern Ireland marine area currently has 48 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), occupying 38% of NI's inshore region. However, only 4.48% of these MPAs are considered to be 'under favourable management', a reflection of the general poor health of our seas.

What's more, the UK was committed to achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) of its waters by 2020, however, according to the 2019 UK Marine Strategy assessment of progress towards achieving GES, only 4 out of 15 indicators for healthy seas are currently being met. We are at a critical juncture for our oceans and so a future strategy for our environment must act to halt and reverse the decline in the health of our seas.

It is essential that there is coordinated, robust action to ensure the health, diversity and productivity of NI seas is preserved and where necessary recovered as soon as possible. Key to this ambition are:

Target 1

Completion of an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in Northern Ireland which is well-managed, monitored and enforced.

Indicators:

New MPA designations fill all identified gaps in the network

Includes a subset of sites which are highly protected, offering the strictest form of environmental protections to no less than 30% of the overall network by 2030.

The condition of all sites and features in the network are favourable or improving.

All sites are well-managed, monitored and enforced. Associated reporting, including on effectiveness of management measures every 6 years, helps guide adaptive management of sites and overall network.

Climate smart MPA management measures allow the MPA network to fulfil its full carbon sequestration potential through effective management and restoration of blue carbon habitats.

Target 2

All NI waters are in 'Good Environmental Status'

Indicators:

Fifteen of 15 MSUK indicators show GES has been fully achieved in every region of the UK including NI waters

An ambitious and effective programme of SMART, dynamic and reactive measures are implemented to ensure GES is achieved as soon as possible

All aspects of the Marine Strategy UK, including monitoring and implementing programme of measures, are fully resourced on a long-term basis.

The NI marine spatial plan is adequately integrated with the Marine Strategy UK to deliver an ecosystem-based approach to managing activities in our seas and achieving GES.

Target 3

Fisheries management in Northern Ireland takes an ecosystem-based approach and prioritises sustainability.

Indicators:

NI Joint Fisheries Statement delivers on the sustainable and climate objectives of the Fisheries Act (2020)

All fishing activity in NI is also in line with scientific advice at or below Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY).

Fishing activity is fully documented. Remote Electronic Monitoring occurs on all vessels fishing in NI waters.

Fisheries are effectively monitored and managed as part of wider marine planning and conservation measures.

Target 4

The environment is at the core of policy creation and decision making, aided by an effective Marine Spatial Plan for Northern Ireland.

Indicators:

A fit for purpose NI marine spatial plan aids Government, industry and other sea users to shape environmentally minded development decisions and projects at sea.

All aspects of sea use are included and accounted for in the plan, including fishing, the MPA network and the potential role of marine habitats and species to tackle the climate crises (Nature based Solutions)

The NI marine spatial plan is adequately integrated with the Marine Strategy UK to deliver an ecosystem-based approach to managing activities in our seas and achieving GES.