

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Governing the marine environment, HC 551

Wednesday 5 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Toby Perkins (Chair); Julia Buckley; Anna Gelderd; Martin Rhodes; Blake Stephenson; Alison Taylor; Cameron Thomas; John Whitby; Sammy Wilson.

Questions 122 - 162

Witnesses

[I](#): Mike Cohen, CEO, National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations (NFFO); Jacques Villemot, Marine Rewilding Lead, Rewilding Britain; and Benj Sykes, Vice President and UK Country Manager, Ørsted.

[II](#): Andrew Bell, Director, UNESCO Biosphere, North Devon; Mark Russell, Executive Director, British Marine Aggregate Producers Association; and Mark Simmonds, Director of Policy, British Ports Association.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Ørsted](#)

[British Marine Aggregate Producers Association](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mike Cohen, Jacques Villemot and Benj Sykes.

Chair: Welcome, everyone, to the meeting of the Environmental Audit Committee. This is the latest evidence session in our review into governing the marine environment. The first panel is concerned with fishing, energy and nature. We are joined today by Mr Mike Cohen, Mr Jacques Villemot and Mr Benj Sykes. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for joining us. Starting with you, Mr Cohen, can you introduce yourself, your role and your organisation, please?

Mike Cohen: I am Mike Cohen. I am the Chief Executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations. We are an umbrella body, a membership organisation made up of regional fishermen's associations and fish producer organisations, mostly in England and Wales. We have a few members in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Like the national fleet, most of our members are smaller, inshore vessels, but we also have offshore and distant waters boats too—the whole gamut.

Jacques Villemot: My name is Jacques Villemot and I am the Marine Rewilding Lead for Rewilding Britain.

Benj Sykes: Good afternoon. I am Benj Sykes from Ørsted. We are a global renewable energy developer. I head up Ørsted's business in the UK. We are quite big. We have invested, I think, £16 billion in the UK with another £16 billion to £18 billion coming up in clean infrastructure. I have a particular focus on environmental matters in the UK, across Europe and globally within the company.

Q122 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Starting with you, Mr Cohen, and asking all the panel, how effectively do you believe that current approaches to marine planning strike the right balance between nature restoration and preservation and the economic needs of the economy?

Mike Cohen: I think the situation has been improving over the last two or three years, certainly with more integrated decision making, by which I mean more of the people who are able to control what happens in the sea are starting to talk to one another: DEFRA, the Marine Management Organisation, the Crown Estate. There is increasing co-ordination but I still think we can go further. I would like to see a more strategic approach to what we do with our seas. We produce food; the nation produces food. We produce energy. We use it for recreation and get building materials out of it. We bury nuclear. We do all sorts of things and we do them all separately. I think it is time to have a more integrated conversation about what the nation needs and how it will get it from the sea. That is starting but I do not think it is quite happening yet.

Chair: Thank you very much. Mr Villemot, from your perspective, to what extent is the right balance being struck at the moment? Is it improving?



Jacques Villemot: I think it is fair to say that it is improving. However, we are not there yet. The UK is not currently on track to meet its net zero target. It is not on track to meet its nature target either. Eleven out of 15 of the good environmental status indicators were meant to be met in 2020. We are not there yet. I completely agree that we need a more integrated approach. There is a need to better take into consideration the various uses of our seas, but also to frontload the marine environment as part of that to make sure that we take an ecosystem-based approach throughout every planning decision.

There is also a need for more prioritisation at the minute. We know that we have those big targets to meet. We are in urgency to meet them and something will have to give at some point. There needs to be a more integrated approach but also one that prioritises better for us to be able to meet those targets.

Benj Sykes: I echo what my two colleagues here have said. I think we have made great progress, with more to do. Offshore wind, as I am sure the Committee will know, is being taken forward as the backbone of our clean electricity system. That means a rapidly accelerating buildout of energy infrastructure offshore, but there are many other activities that are also important to Britain's economic and social wellbeing, as Mike mentioned earlier.

I think we are seeing progress. For example, the Crown Estate is now developing a whole of seabed plan. That is taking into account multiple stakeholders and multiple sea users. We also have the National Energy System Operator, NESO, developing a strategic spatial energy plan, and I am pleased to say that it is listening to the need to integrate environmental as well as human user aspects into that plan.

We are definitely pointing in the right direction. The pace at which we are making these changes is a challenge, but I think that pace is needed for the climate crisis and the nature crisis that we face.

Q123 **Chair:** What practices would you like to see adopted to better achieve that balance and integration?

Benj Sykes: It is a very good question. A lot of where we need to go now is more integration, not just co-ordination but integration, across Government Departments. I work closely with DEFRA, DESNZ, the Ministry of Defence and others about co-existence in the sea. As a business, we also work very closely with many of Mike's members around fishing. We know that the Government Departments are working on this but as someone once said, there is no such thing as Government, just Government Departments. We need to see that integration, which we have seen strengthen over the last 12 months. I think that can go a lot further so that we approach these as a single set of challenges rather than departmental ones. There is also a lot of work to do with their arm's length bodies.



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Chair: Mr Cohen, from your perspective, what practices would you like to see adopted to better achieve that balance?

Mike Cohen: I agree with a lot of what Benj has just said; I think that is well put. Greater co-ordination between Departments is necessary. We have had announcements. Let's take offshore energy. The Crown Estate has announced that it wants, I think, 125 GW of offshore wind in English waters. Crown Estate Scotland wants 42 GW in its waters. We have 30 GW of nuclear, I think, proposed on land and more solar on land. All together, so many different organisations and bodies have their own plans for something that will affect the sea to a greater or lesser extent, but all those plans added up together are far more energy than the UK uses and far more than any projection. We need to get beyond the stage of aspirations and proposals and have some more integrated strategic thinking.

NESO is starting to have an impact. I do not yet have a sense of how it will work, but I think it has the potential to be very useful in that space, giving some certainty or clarity to the discussion around the mix of energy uses. That then needs to feed into how we are using the sea. We need consultation at all levels, with communities and businesses, but it needs to feed into a strategic process.

Ultimately, decisions will have to be taken about how the sea is used. My job is to advocate for the food production sector at sea. I know there are other uses to which the sea can be put that the nation may need. Somebody will have to take a decision about which one will win. Everybody cannot have everything. Those hard decisions will have to be taken probably in this building. I would like you to have the fullest possible information about all the different uses we can put to it and then for you to prioritise and take a level-headed and cold decision about it.

Q124 **Chair:** On that planning and strategic approach, the marine plan came out of legislation in 2009, with the regional marine plans being discussed in 2011. Thirteen years on from that we are saying all we need is an integrated plan. What is your sense as to why we are still having basically the same conversations that we were having 13 years ago?

Mike Cohen: I totally agree with that. We are renewing one of the marine plans now and there will be more because we are still doing this siloed—the point that Benj made about different Departments doing their own things. We are treating these as separate issues and they are not. They are about the use of the marine space. It is not an energy issue or a food production issue or a conservation issue because they all lay claim to the same area, and so does transport, defence and leisure. They are all legitimate uses of the sea but we need that whole of government approach. Never mind whole of seabed, it is a whole of government approach to deciding what we do with it all. Have that as a very open and public conversation with us and take the hard choices.



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Maybe we still get this because the choices that will be made are quite difficult. You are going to tell somebody they cannot have what they want or perhaps that the thing they have done for a long time they cannot do any more. You will have to own those decisions and that is a hard thing to do. I think that maybe we have just pushed that along for the next guy to deal with.

Q125 Chair: Mr Villemot, we have heard in previous evidence sessions that the UK Government have designated large numbers of marine protected areas but have been less effective at ensuring that these areas are genuinely protected after they have been designated. What do you see as the main reasons why we have met the "30 by 30" in the number of designated areas, but we are failing in the number of those areas that are genuinely protected?

Jacques Villemot: There is an element that will come down to what the people around me have been saying already today. We need to be making those decisions and to prioritise what areas are being used for what purposes. That includes nature conservation as well as part of that. A marine protected area properly protected will have some restriction on activities that need to take place within parts of it, and potentially as well to developments that take place within the boundaries. That needs to be better integrated as part of the marine spatial planning system, that is for sure.

There needs to be as well a marine spatial planning system that is strong and has the prioritisation level integrated as part of it to be able to organise a little bit the development of activities at sea and ensure that the marine protected areas are truly protected. There will be a need to better restrict activities that take place within them. We also know that there are processes in place to better restrict activities, such as bottom trawling. That has been going on for a long time but it has been consistently delayed and it needs to be accelerated. The reasons why is hard for me to decipher because these are often conversations that have been behind closed doors, but it seems a bit of a no-brainer from our point of view that there are some particularly destructive activities that need to be restricted in those protected sites.

Q126 Chair: Mr Cohen, to what extent does a designation of a marine protected area influence the way that a local fishing fleet would operate?

Mike Cohen: It is not so much the designation as the management. Marine protected areas are designated for a wide variety of reasons, many of which really do not intersect with fishing at all. Our largest MPAs off the east coast of the UK are to do with harbour porpoises and seabirds and they do not really have a great deal of interaction with what we are doing in those areas because we are concerned with the seabed. In other areas, there may be more.

We are keen to see some certainty about the management in MPAs. We would like to know what the rules will be. That matters, and it matters to



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us that they are based on evidence of benefit. If we just ban things in areas on maps, we will not achieve conservation. I have a huge vested interest in conservation working because if we do not have healthy seas I cannot pay the mortgage, because we catch fish and we need healthy seas.

We would like to see the management measures that are brought about tallying up with the evidence for what measures will actually help to protect the environment in a given place. If that means that that has an impact on fishing, that is something that we deal with at the time. However, in most cases it doesn't. Most of our activities do not have any negative conservation impacts and can co-exist quite happily. Fishing has gone on for a very long time. Commercial fishing is well over 1,000 years old as an industry. We are still doing it in places we have been doing it in for generations.

Q127 Chair: We have had a lot of talk in this place about bottom trawling. Are there particular aspects of your membership that are more difficult to defend in environmental terms? Does that pose you problems in trying to hold the whole thing together?

Mike Cohen: It is difficult to defend only in that it is quite nuanced and it is quite rare that you get the opportunity to tell the whole story. Most bottom trawling activity does not do to the seabed what most people think. Trawlers are designed to skim over the seabed. We are not trying to catch sand; we are trying to catch fish. If you dig into the seabed, you slow down, you use fuel and it costs money. Trawl gear is designed to skim the seabed as lightly as possible, not dig into it.

Some dredgers do dig into the seabed as much as 3 cm or 4 cm, but this is usually used over sandy ground because they are fishing for scallops and they get those from sandy grounds that regenerate their scallop crop every year. That is the way a scallop fishery works. It is like ploughing a field and then coming back next year. Those trawlers absolutely change the seabed they pass over, and so does the weather and so do the tides. A single winter storm will do more than every single trawler in the country could do to the seabed.

The fact that bottom trawling in those places has been happening is not random. Farmers plough fields and change the environment far more than we do when we fish, but they do not plough at random. They do not just set off in a tractor and hope that somewhere they will come across some wheat. They go where they know the crop is and they harvest it and so trawlers go to where they know year after year—in some cases decade after decade—they will catch something and make a living.

The argument that they are in some way changing and devastating the environment does not fully hold water to me. They are not roving wildly across the seabed. They are going to places where consistently there is a healthy crop of scallops or flat fish and they are still there after generations in the same place.



Q128 **Chair:** Mr Villemot, would you have as benign a view about bottom trawling?

Jacques Villemot: To come back on the multi-use things, I do not disagree with Mike about the fact that we can envisage having fisheries taking place within marine protected areas. I am not talking about banning all sorts of fisheries from all protections. There are some sites that will need some specific protections and some others where multi-use will be critical. That needs to be considered as part of the planning system.

On bottom trawling, it depends on the area. There are some areas that are designated for protection of the benthic environment—the benthic environment being the seabed—and these areas, of course, will protect some more fragile ecosystems case by case. Bottom trawling and destructive fishing will not be compatible for marine protection, but I completely agree with taking the decision on science-based methods. I think that always needs to come down to evidence.

Q129 **Cameron Thomas:** You touched earlier on the need for joined-up strategic thinking. Shipwrecks make for some of the world's most impressive dive sites, particularly because in the years following the sinking marine life moves in, using it as an artificial reef. To what extent can we join up marine renewables with marine restoration initiatives with the technology?

Benj Sykes: It is a big question—how the offshore wind buildout can also play its role in the recovery of nature. I will just touch very briefly on the technical element. Around the base of turbines we will often put down scour protection to stop the base of the turbine getting eroded by sea currents. Those become reefs. We have lots of evidence of that from around all our European and Asian wind farms. That is one example where we see artificial reefs building up. In some sections of the export cables where the power is brought to shore, where we have installed protection for those cables we also see those reefs develop.

At Ørsted we are going a little bit further—well, quite a lot further, actually. We have set an ambition that all the projects we commission from 2030 will have a net positive biodiversity impact. We are now designing into our wind farms positive biodiversity outcomes above the top of a mitigation hierarchy and we are running pilot programmes around the world on the tools that we are going to use to deploy that into our projects. It is not a requirement anywhere, although marine net gain will potentially look a lot like it, but we can see how offshore wind in particular can be contributing to the solution of loss of environmental health in the oceans rather than adding to the problem. We very much hope other developers will follow along behind us. We are also developing a way of measuring marine biodiversity so that we can demonstrate to everyone that we have achieved our ambition.

Cameron Thomas: Thank you. Jacques, I saw you nodding along a little



bit. What are your thoughts on that? What would you like to see?

Jacques Villemot: Absolutely, the reef effect is a real potential benefit that can come from putting some fixed structures within the marine environment. That needs to be considered. There is also a potential risk around ecosystem shift, so that is one of the things that needs to be taken into consideration. That means that again it will be case by case because there is potential risk associated with putting a reef in an area where you would usually have sandbanks. That needs to be considered. I completely agree with the fact that we need to monitor those benefits and take that into consideration. That can potentially increase the biodiversity and the biomass. The risk is to not do it at the expense of the natural processes that are meant to happen within this area.

Cameron Thomas: Mike, did you want to follow up with anything?

Mike Cohen: I think that highlights what a complicated issue it is. If you put a reef in an area where there wasn't a reef, you have definitely changed that environment and you may have changed the biological assemblage in there. You are not restoring something; you are putting in something new. If what you are putting in is healthy and contributes to a thriving ecosystem, maybe we just have to accept the fact that in the sea, as on the land, we are a thing that lives in its environment and changes it as it goes, as every living thing does. Overall, environmental health is what matters rather than being too fixed on what is happening in that particular place. A thriving and healthy reef where there did not used to be one is still a thriving and healthy reef.

Q130 **Cameron Thomas:** In January, the Government announced strategic compensation measures for offshore wind activities. What impact do you foresee the marine recovery fund having on marine conservation efforts?

Benj Sykes: The marine recovery fund is an important tool in the toolkit for offshore wind developers and for Government. It was conceived within Ørsted and then we handed it over to DEFRA and DESNZ to take forward into legislation, which finally is getting there. It has been a slow process.

As Mike and Jacques have said, we need to take a whole ecosystem approach. The marine recovery fund enables us to take action at a strategic level. Rather than delivering compensation wind farm by wind farm as is done at the moment, we can deliver a much more impactful solution by doing that strategically. I suppose some of the challenges that that still has include that strategic should really be as much of the marine environment as we can possibly bring in. It would be great to see even stronger joining up between England and Scotland on this. At the moment, it has only one measure, which is for benthic protection, benthic recovery and compensation. There are many other measures that are mature enough to go into that marine recovery fund.

It will have a huge, positive impact on the environment. It will also enable the acceleration of the move to the Government's Clean Power 2030 target.



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Mike Cohen: The marine recovery fund is an excellent idea. It is something we have talked about for a long time because the site by site environmental or benthic compensation added hugely to the delay in construction and delay does not do my industry any good at all. Certainty is useful, and it is quite onerous to still be involved in a delayed process. The strategic approach that that makes possible is very sensible.

The announcement that Minister Hardy made recently around strategic compensation, focusing on the creation of new MPAs alongside offshore wind, is very challenging for my industry. It is hard enough to lose ground for the construction of offshore power, but then to be told that to compensate for the environmental damage done by that power we risk losing more fishing ground is pretty hard. That is pretty difficult. That is like being told, "We are taking your farm to build a power station on and because that will damage the environment when we build it, we are going to take your garden as well". That is pretty harsh. It is getting evicted and then being asked to pay for the bailiffs. That is a difficult one for us to get to grips with.

The offshore wind and fishing industries have done an awful lot over the years to work out how to get along quite pragmatically business to business. This will not help relations. Effectively, making the fishing industry pay for potential damage done by offshore wind seems quite unjust. That is little local businesses paying for damage that may be caused by large, foreign-owned multinationals, and that is not a great look.

That said, I am yet to see convincing evidence that offshore wind does that much damage to the benthos. All the published papers that I have read suggest that the benthic damage—the seabed damage—such that there is, from offshore wind construction is minimal, so I am not convinced that there is an evidence-based need to protect more of the seabed because you are building wind farms. I do not think that is where the problem is, if there is a problem at all.

Jacques Villemot: On the marine recovery fund and then on the measures proposed, first of all, the marine recovery fund is needed. We need the compensation to be taken at the more strategic level. We do not have enough like-for-like measures at the minute to make up for the impacts that are potentially being caused by developments at sea. We really need to take a strategic approach, and that is a framework that will enable us to do so.

On how much it will enhance the marine environment, we have some scepticism here because that is not the role of compensation. The role of compensation is not to go beyond recovery; it is to get back to no net loss. There is a need to develop a framework within that to encourage that enhancement beyond that. That can be developing a marine net gain framework, as Benj mentioned before, and that would be fantastic.



Having the marine recovery fund already set up might enable us to accelerate that process, which would be very welcome.

Having a framework in place to welcome a voluntary contribution in the meantime, like there is in Scotland with the Scottish marine environment enhancement fund, can capture voluntary contributions to enhance the marine environment and redistribute them towards projects. Ørsted has done some great work through the Wilder Humber. Having a framework in place that enables these projects to take place alongside the British coastline would be fantastic. In its current form, it is not the role of the marine recovery fund, in our view, to get to no net loss, so there is a need to develop those frameworks beyond.

On the benthic MPA and the measure being proposed, from our point of view it is potentially a good measure. There need to be ways to compensate and I appreciate that active restoration of the marine environment is something that is extremely limited, particularly offshore. The way to restore the marine environment most often is to remove pressure and allow nature to take care of itself. On how much we see it impacting other sectors, it is important again to come back to that prioritisation of sectors and to the multi-use elements and only focusing on the practices that are the most damaging for those targeted features.

Q131 Cameron Thomas: Benj, what barriers does Ørsted face within the consenting process for offshore wind farms and have changes to consenting processes led to any change in Ørsted's investment plans to 2030?

Benj Sykes: To answer your last question first, no. We are doggedly pressing ahead. We are currently building the world's biggest offshore wind farm for the, I think, seventh time, and that will be completed in a small number of years. Then we are moving on to another one of broadly similar scale. No, we are pressing ahead.

There is a number of areas where we see the planning process can be improved, and this is not something that Ørsted alone is looking at. As I mentioned before, I am working closely with DEFRA and MHCLG and DESNZ, trying to pull all the different parts of the infrastructure together to move on the planning process. Part of it is around the habitats regulations, which we can work with. We think that there are ways to bring in better guidance, particularly around things like de minimis, where very small impacts that are in any scientific sense de minimis still have to be properly dealt with and compensated. That can create a lot of delay. We see other jurisdictions where de minimis is allowed to step in and say, "Your impact is so small, move on. That is not a place to invest time and effort in improving the environment."

The other thing is that the Government's arm's length bodies, Natural England, the MMO and others, are under an immense amount of pressure. Offshore wind has grown at a pace that no one anticipated. Those agencies have not, and I think that is putting them under



tremendous pressure. That slows the whole process down, of course, because they have to do their job and we have to let them do their job. We think that with the right guidance and the right resourcing and the right approach—it was, by the way, very welcome to hear the DEFRA Secretary of State a few weeks ago saying how the Government's priority around growth would be signalled strongly into all those agencies. All that coming together will make the planning process run more smoothly and efficiently without having any detrimental impact on the environment. In fact, it should have a better impact on the environment.

The last thing I want to say is that there is a lot of focus at the moment on how we get more wind farms through the consenting process and into the sea. We should not lose sight of the challenges of building wind farms that have now achieved those consents because once you have your consent—in England it is the development consent order—there is still a lot of work to do to get marine licences and other aspects of the consent discharged by those agencies. There is an intent to deliver those licences in 13 weeks; it can take nine or 12 months. That can get very expensive for a project. If I look at our current project, when we have all the vessels out there, that is over £1 million a day. We really need to make that part of the process very efficient as well, and I believe that is entirely doable.

Q132 Alison Taylor: Mr Cohen, could I go back to one of your earlier answers? You mentioned that some difficult decisions would have to be made by Government in sector allocations and uses and that there would be winners and losers. Are you willing to give a view on who you think the winners and losers should be in your opinion?

Mike Cohen: Obviously, it is literally my job to say that we should win. It is actually why people belong to my organisation. I am in the fortunate position that my job is to advocate for the people who want me to do that for our industry, but I am not naive and I am a realist. I will always be advocating for food production and coastal communities that depend on those areas of the sea being allowed to continue doing what they have done for a long time. I recognise that the national interest may have other priorities. All I can realistically and reasonably ask for is the opportunity to have those priorities heard and acknowledged and for decision makers to be honest about the outcomes.

If you close an area to fishing, you are probably costing somebody their livelihood. You are telling some people, "You can't work any more" and they probably do not have something else they can do instead. You may be telling a community that the main source of employment there has gone now because we need that for someone else or for some other value or for some other industry. I would like decision makers to be honest about that and to tell those people, "I am doing this to you, I know I am doing it, and this is what I will do to try to help". As it is, we end up just trying to pretend that everybody can have everything and therefore we do not need to help anybody because everyone is fine, and



that simply is not true. We have been doing that for 15 years now and it is a little bit morally dishonest to keep on doing it.

Never mind the outcome I want, it is obviously what I am going to say. I want the opportunity to have my say and I want an honest answer from the decision makers, or an honest admission from the decision makers that they will own the decision they have made.

Q133 Alison Taylor: Thank you for that. I was going to ask about what role innovation will have in the future in managing fisheries sustainably. Are there any new technologies that you think might help contribute to the future sustainability of fisheries?

Mike Cohen: Technology is a tricky one in some ways. We have had a number of projects looking at new gear technologies and new vessel technologies. The difficulty is always in prototyping and testing those and then getting them to the stage where they are licensed. Fundamentally, we fish with the gear that we are licensed to use. Your fishing licence tells you what you are going to use, and you cannot use something else until it is approved. What projects have tended to do is to get through a first year of prototyping; the funding dries up; regulators do not approve it or just lose interest in the project and then it dies.

There is some good work being done by a group called Fisheries Innovation and Sustainability looking to fund stuff to completion. There are some good things. There is a device called the Sumwing, which is basically a beam trawl that uses hydrodynamics to float across the top of the seabed. Float is the wrong word—skim across the seabed rather than digging in. There are some good things.

Innovation has been helpful in regulatory innovation. Under the last Government and continued under this Government, we have the fisheries management plan agenda. We are looking to manage fisheries differently from how they were managed before under the European CFP—fishery by fishery, area by area, bringing together industry and scientists and managers, looking to manage level-headedly and scientifically stock by stock, and engaging everybody in taking them forward and letting experts use their expertise. I think that is very valuable.

It is slightly crazy that that is an innovation, but it is very different to how things were managed before. We are keen that Government protect that when we come to revisit the trade and cooperation agreement, that it keeps the regulatory autonomy that we have had that has let us innovate and change things, because that has genuinely been useful. If any one thing improves fisheries management, it will be the flexibility that we have.

Alison Taylor: Thank you very much for that answer.

Q134 Julia Buckley: We were briefed about some of those—the remote electronic monitoring, the on-vessel monitoring systems. They sound



quite a modern way forward using the apps and trying to tap into GPS. Perhaps some of those are more affordable than the previous alternatives. It sounds like quite a positive way forward. How easy is it for fishers to access information about the new approaches or technologies that might help them?

Mike Cohen: The new tracking devices or VMS systems are now mandatory across the whole fleet. It is a very useful tool in understanding how fisheries work. They are good for us. They are not just an enforcement tool. They are not really an enforcement tool; they are a data collection tool and they are very useful. Remote electronic monitoring, done properly, can be exactly the same—a good tool for fisheries management. It is not there to catch people out. It is there to manage fisheries better. They are a useful tool.

Getting information needs to come from lots and lots of different sources. I have a role in that. My organisation has to do its part in making sure members are well informed. We have to take some responsibility. The Marine Management Organisation is in contact with everybody with a fishing licence, same as the local IFCA's. Getting that information out through all those methods is important and giving people the chance to join in. That is how it works.

Q135 **Julia Buckley:** You are saying those intermediary organisations have taken on that role. I am just wondering about your demographic. In other areas where we are moving to a digital age, there are some older, more traditional workers who may not find it so easy to access. Have you noticed any issues there?

Mike Cohen: Yes, we have. Some people have struggled, particularly with the electronic catch app—the electronic logbook. It is an app that you record what you have caught and estimate weights. It has been very problematic for some people. I think the MMO was quite responsive and tried to work with us to iron out the initial problems. It was not dogmatic. It did not leap straight to an enforcement approach. It worked with people, which is really positive. We want the results, not to catch somebody out for not doing it right.

It has been challenging and we have tried to help people where we can in our membership. It is difficult. We have a lot of older people in the fishing industry. At the same time, the catch app was an attempt to use the technology that everyone has. Pretty much everyone uses their phone all the time. There will be teething problems and transitional problems, but so long as Government agencies take a sensible approach to encouragement and support rather than immediate enforcement, they are problems that can be solved.

Q136 **Julia Buckley:** If you have any specific recommendations in that area, now would be a good time to mention them.

Mike Cohen: Yes—just that, what I have just said. Don't leap to enforcement. Don't put hard deadlines in for things coming into play and



assume that people not complying are doing it for bad reasons and not just because it is difficult to do. By and large, that is the approach that has been taken and I would like that to be endorsed and carried on.

Q137 John Whitby: My question is for Mr Villemot and it is about engaging local communities in marine governance. First of all, what would be the benefits of that engagement, and how effectively are local communities engaged currently?

Jacques Villemot: On your first point around benefits—more than a benefit, it is a requirement. It is critical to have those channels to enable the community to have a voice within the decision-making process that will affect them locally. To use an example that is part of our rewilding network, a network of projects delivering rewilding on the ground, we have a wonderful project on the Isle of Arran in Scotland. It was a community-led project. A group of locals decided that the marine environment was decimated locally for a number of reasons, and they decided to create a no-take zone for the local fishing fleets to benefit from it. The damage that was done to the local environment was such that the local fishing industry, which was mostly potting, was not catching anything any more. They have created a no-take zone. It was a community-led initiative and was accepted by everyone locally, including the fishing industry. That has led to the first and only to this day Scottish no-take zone in the country.

The Scottish Government then followed suit and gave a legislative power. They have embedded it within a much wider marine protected area now, which allows it to be the core engine behind a wider marine restoration strategy alongside it. It is delivering a huge number of benefits for the local population, including in tourism and fishing.

When you compare that to the highly protected marine area process that took place in Scotland alongside it, which was very top down and very much felt like the local population was being imposed on, that has led to complete rejection of the whole programme, even though that is something that could have had benefits—in fact, would have had—for the local population. The fact that it was done in such a way meant that it led to complete rejection. The first point is that it is an absolute requirement rather than a benefit.

On the benefits as well, beyond protection you also have active restoration. Enabling local communities to take part in those restoration projects is critical in labour and having hands on the ground, being able to do it. We see it time and time again. If you give people a chance to get involved, they are so keen to go out there and get their hands dirty, go and scrub oysters, plant seagrass, collect the seeds—all these things. You get that labour; you get that volunteering force behind you to strengthen your project.

Beyond that, it gives them a massive sense of ownership of their projects. You have a duty of care. You have more interest and



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understanding of the challenges that your local marine environment is facing. It provides invaluable support to Government as well because it will help Government to achieve their targets towards GES—good environmental status. It will help Government achieve their targets towards net zero. It will help Government to face the impacts of climate change by providing barriers to its impacts, such as flood erosion and these sorts of things.

When we have projects in the network—seawilding, for example, in Scotland, which was a community-driven project; they managed to get so many people behind them to help them with the seagrass planting and with the oyster project and have released 350,000 oysters now that are self-reproducing—you maximise those benefits. They have created that guide of best practice that shows that it is possible. Communities all around the country are wanting to follow suit and they are leading a network of community-led projects. By giving them a chance to do it, it creates a ripple effect.

I will keep it short on the second part: how effectively we are currently doing. It is not great, to tell you the truth. In many ways there is definitely some limitation in how it is currently done. Some communities, as I mentioned, cover seawilding. In England, the Sussex Kelp Recovery Project has managed to force themselves into there. When that happens, it is wonderful because it creates a great example of how it is possible, but they are having to face so many legislative barriers, and so many barriers in general, like funding barriers and others, that it unfortunately remains an exception more often than the rule.

Q138 John Whitby: Going on to those barriers, what is preventing coastal communities from actively participating?

Jacques Villemot: I mentioned the legislative barriers. One of the key ones is the licensing. Benj has mentioned that for offshore wind projects, but imagine if a player like Ørsted is struggling to obtain these licences, how can you expect community groups to get those licences as well to kick-start restoration projects? It is key to have a streamlined process.

The licensing system is there for a reason. It is important to regulate what activity is taking place in the marine environment, crucial even, but for marine restoration projects, particularly for non-commercial marine restoration projects, there needs to be a streamlined approach that is taken that is easier to navigate for community groups and that does not cost as well. At the minute—I wrote it down somewhere—every advice you ask of the Marine Management Organisation, for example, to navigate this process will be billed to you for £120 an hour. When you have issues with funding the restoration itself in your community group, those costs can rack up so much. You also need to take into consideration the amount of benefit that those communities will get from the projects.

It is also trying to find ways to enable large-scale restoration projects to take place, not just on small patches for one habitat, but to try to support



ecosystem-wide restoration projects. We talk about seascape scale. I mentioned the Wilder Humber project that Ørsted has led earlier, but there is also the Solent Seascape Project. These projects are spearheaded by huge organisations that have a lot of expertise in navigating the complex bureaucracy behind it. For every habitat that you are looking to restore, you need different licences, different timeframes and different costs. There needs to be a way to streamline that to be able to have seascape-scale restoration projects that will deliver massive benefits for coastal communities and make them want to get more involved—something that can be done at council level and more to support great initiatives like coastal networks and coastal partnerships. I will leave it at that.

Q139 John Whitby: I was going to ask what more could be done to facilitate community-led marine restoration, but I think you have just answered that pretty much, haven't you? Is that fair to say?

Jacques Villemot: Yes, I think that is right. Give a chance for people to do it—people will want to do it. Remove the barriers and you will have an army of volunteers willing to get their hands dirty and to go out and do marine restoration.

John Whitby: Wonderful, thank you.

Q140 Blake Stephenson: My first question is also to you, Mr Villemot. Legislation across UK jurisdictions currently provides protections for individual species and habitats rather than entire ecosystems. I know you touched on this in your opening remarks. Does this approach necessarily provide the best protection for marine habitats?

Jacques Villemot: It is a great question. I have talked about marine restoration here and how at the minute we can only focus on one habitat at a time. It is the same around marine protection. I think there is a need to move away from that feature-based approach that is not delivering for marine recovery. Again, every target that we are seeing for marine recovery or for marine restoration is not being met. The fact that we are currently failing to meet 11 out of 15 of the indicators measuring the good health of our seas shows that there is something going wrong with the current approach.

For us, the crux of it is the fact that we are focusing too much on specific individual species, individual habitats, instead of looking ecosystem wide. The marine environment is so deeply interconnected; every habitat and species is connected by the big blue soup that is the water column. If you focus on one habitat or one species, you are never going to be able to address and to drive the recovery because you are not looking at natural processes, which are at the heart of nature recovery and at the heart of how our ecosystem functions.

I think there is a need to look at protection from a whole-site approach. To come back to bottom trawling very briefly, we know that even when



there has been measures in place in protected areas currently to address some of the most impactful practices, in some of those 13 sites that were part of the stage 2, like South of Celtic Deep, for example, the measures only cover a tiny area of that. That leads you to wonder what protection there is for the remaining protected area. Can you really drive the recovery of the ecosystem if you do not take into consideration the interactions that take place in the marine environment?

Q141 Blake Stephenson: Thank you. Mr Sykes and Mr Cohen, I am interested to know if we were to move to a whole-site approach, what impact you think that would have on your respective industries.

Mike Cohen: We would like to see a scientific approach to whatever you do. I do not think it does us any favours to look at whole sites on the grounds that, "This is just too complicated so let's ban lots of stuff and it will probably work out." It is not an appropriate way to manage things, in my view. I am a lapsed scientist, so I am obviously going to want the evidence rather than the gut feelings, but it is how I work and I think it is the right way to do it. Study a site, understand what you are trying to protect and why, what has happened to it, and then what actions will improve it—if it needs improving.

There is no value in putting in place management measures for a site if you have no idea what they are going to do. If we talk about restoring things to how they were before—to what prior state? Restoring implies we are going back to something that used to be. Well, when? Before humans used the sea, 6,000 or 7,000 years ago? Before climate change really started to affect things? How far do we take it? Do you want to restore the southern North sea? You will need to remove all the pollock that have moved in there in the last 20 years, and we will have to get rid of all the tuna that have come to Cornwall in the last few years, too.

We do not really want to restore. We want healthy seas and that requires an empirical look at the current state of actual health. One of the most depressing meetings I was ever in was with some officials about the first three highly protected marine areas, in which there was a discussion about whether there was enough money to do a baseline study to find out what actually lived in the sites after they had been designated, "We have designated them; we have banned everything; now we will see what is there". That is utterly illogical to me.

As somebody who used to do marine surveys for a living, I would say survey a site first. Do a baseline. Understand what is there, then design some measures that will address the problem you have found. Enact the measures and monitor it to see if they are working and, if they are not working, do something else. If we want it to get better, we ought to want to know if what we have done is not working.

Blake Stephenson: Thank you. That is very helpful. The same question to you, Mr Sykes, about your industry.



Benj Sykes: Ørsted and the industry more widely would be strongly supportive of moving, as Jacques has said, from individual species and individual habitats to a more ecosystem-level approach. Whether that is the same as a whole-system approach is in the language a little bit, I think. To Mike's point, we need to be data led with this.

Jacques has mentioned our Wilder Humber project. There we are doing seagrass and oysters. In the marine environment we are doing dune restoration. We are doing the whole dune and intertidal zone, because that is the way in which you can get the most impact from an environmental perspective, not just narrowly looking at one thing. What it also raises is the question of where you do this.

Both my colleagues have mentioned highly protected marine areas. We think as an industry that we should be more enlightened in how we approach restoring the health, particularly of the North sea. The Irish sea is not in a great state, but the North sea is in a worse state environmentally. We think it is taking a whole biogeographical approach and then looking at where we can deliver the most environmental improvement at the lowest cost to consumers, because all this cost from our sector will ultimately end up on people's electricity bills and we want to keep that to a minimum without undermining the restoration of nature.

Q142 **Blake Stephenson:** Thank you. To each of you, starting with Mr Villemot, how can marine protections be expanded without damaging coastal communities and livelihoods? It is a big question, I am afraid.

Jacques Villemot: No, it is a very good one. I do not think it is fair to say that marine protection damages coastal communities and livelihood to begin with. I think they are there to do the opposite, in fact. I think they are there to drive the recovery of our seas and to deliver multiple benefits to the coastal communities. They depend on the marine environment. We all depend on healthy nature and healthy seas.

When we are talking about a whole-site approach, we are not talking about full protection systematically. We are calling for full protection for only 10% of our seas. For the remaining areas there is consideration for multi-uses. We can envisage a marine protected area that has a level of fisheries enabled—small-scale local fisheries that take place. That is something that we are willing to see in the future. No, I do not think that in general it will impact coastal communities negatively.

There needs to be a case-by-case consideration here. I always come back to bottom trawling, because at the minute it is such a big topic and it is a crucial one. We are talking about 33,000 hours of bottom trawling taking place in 2023 within marine protected areas; 6% of these only were from UK fishers. These are things that will not negatively impact our coastal communities. It will deliver a huge range of benefits, including for the fishing industry and for our net zero targets, by creating healthy environments that capture carbon and help to safeguard against the impacts of climate change.



We are not necessarily asking for expanding the marine protection either. We are talking about the networks that we have work. Sure, identify if there are still some gaps there. There may be some species—having conducted a sufficiency review for seabird protection, for example—where there some tweaks are needed in the network. We know that with the compensation there will be some tweaks. We are talking about replacing sites here, not creating new areas. It is replacing the ones that will be damaged because of the impacts of development. We are not asking for expanding. We are asking for better management, which will deliver benefits.

Blake Stephenson: I will come to Mr Cohen last so he can have the final word on the impact on fishing communities. The same question to you, Mr Sykes.

Benj Sykes: I somewhat echo what Jacques said. I think the opportunity is there for coastal communities to engage meaningfully and at an early stage in environmental improvement programmes so that they can properly embrace the benefits and be part of that solution. I am sure Mike will talk about the potential negative consequences if that is not done right.

What we have seen in the Humber and in other areas where we are active is that by bringing communities into the room and bringing them along on the journey with us, the work that we are doing has been well received. I do not see that necessarily as being a conflict. Clearly, we need to find ways to work together, particularly with inshore fishing. In fact, funnily enough, Mike and I worked together on a project, Westernmost Rough Wind Farm off the Holderness coast, where I was representing the wind farm and Mike was representing the fishing community through the Holderness Fishing Industry Group. It wasn't easy, but we found ways to work together, to collaborate and to deliver a way of co-existing, which meant that everything was able to carry on.

One thing we have not touched on but which is important is this point around co-existence. There are smart ways to work together to use the sea space to its maximum potential while restoring the environment. I know others have said we are never going to be able to meet everyone's needs to the full extent, but I think that is the path to find the best solution, not by zoning but by working together to find the right ways of co-use for the right types of MPA.

Q143 **Blake Stephenson:** Mr Cohen, how can marine protections be expanded without damaging your communities?

Mike Cohen: By following the evidence again, I suppose. I have to push back a little bit on that 33,000 hours of trawlers in the North sea, with only 6% of them UK boats. I know where the figure comes from, and it recorded every single hour at which a fishing boat was at sea as if it were fishing. Given that those MPAs that they are talking about cover almost all the southern North sea, that counts every Dutch, German, French and



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Spanish boat going home as though it were fishing in British waters. I will be the first person to grumble about how much time European boats spend fishing in British waters, but they certainly do not do 94% of the fishing and a moment's thought should tell us that that is wrong.

That figure is not correct and does not reflect what is actually being done in those areas. Those boats pass through. The areas in question as well are protected for seabirds and porpoises. Even if they were trawling, a porpoise or a seabird that is anywhere near a bottom trawler is in a lot of trouble already before the boat gets near it.

That is the difficulty. We have lots of assumptions and lots of things thrown out quite quickly that create a picture of what is happening in MPAs that is not quite right. There is a big difference between the sea and the seaside. People are used to going to the beach and looking at what they can see. At sea level, the horizon is two and a half miles away. Our EEZ goes 200 miles or until it meets another country. A lot of stuff happens that people are not very well aware of, and it is easy to throw ideas about that people have no way of ground-truthing and thinking about. If we follow the evidence about what will actually have a positive impact on the nation, not just on a particular patch of seabed or a particular area, we can make sure that whatever management measure we take, whether it is for particular conservation values or for energy production or gravel extraction or whatever it may be, it will not impact communities.

I emphasise that we talk a lot about stakeholders in consultations. If you place a bet, the stake is the thing you lose if you get the bet wrong. Fishing communities have a stake in this like no one else, because if the decision does not go their way, they lose everything. They lose their jobs and their ability to support themselves. Local towns lose people paying their council tax and shopping in local shops. If I like the sea, as I do—I love it and I am deeply engaged in it—and a decision does not go my way but I do not make my living from it, I may be disappointed in that outcome but I will not lose my house.

If we are going to make decisions about anything like conservation or placing wind farms or anything else, and it is not going to hurt communities that depend on fishing—traditional coastal communities—we have to weigh up the evidence and take decisions in the broader national interest. The Fisheries Act says decisions about the sea should be made taking account of the needs of the environment, the economy, society and food production, and it does not pick a favourite. All four of those need to form part of the decision.

Going back to my theme before, make them consciously part of your decisions—your decisions, MPs. Make them honestly. Put your hands up to what you are doing and then work out what you are going to do about it. It will not harm communities, even if it stops them doing what they do, if you put something in place that stops that harm—that mitigates.



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Q144 Chair: Thank you very much. Finally, I want to touch now upon diversity. Mr Sykes, starting with you, both as a company and as a representative of the industry, what steps do you see your sector taking to increase the diversity of people working in your sectors at all levels?

Benj Sykes: I know we are about to come to International Women's Day on 8 March, so maybe I will start with gender diversity. We are, I would say, a work in progress. The energy sector as a whole has not been very good, particularly in the field roles, in bringing gender diversity or, indeed, any diversity. We are working hard. We work as an industry with programmes like POWERful Women, which brings energy players together to promote and support women in engineering and STEM subjects to come into our sector. That is bearing some fruit. My own direct experience is that 68% of my department are women. Perhaps that is because most of them work on environmental matters. However, as a company it is hard going but we are making progress. As a sector, there is still much more we need to do, particularly in the field workforce. It is still heavily male dominated.

We are working, as I say, across industry. We are looking at all the different ways we can progress that. We are working more and more now into key stage 2 as well. I am working with the EngineeringUK organisation, which is particularly focused on encouraging diversity into the STEM curriculum, particularly at key stage 2 because that is when decisions are made. That is not going to deliver results into our business for 10 to 15 years, but it is the right place to start to bring them in. Yes, there is more to do on that front.

We are making conscious efforts on wider diversity in disability and ethnicity. The way we recruit, for example, and the way we develop people is very open and sighted on the need to bring that diversity into our workforce—not only bring it in but hold it in and develop it and bring it up through the ranks of the organisation.

Q145 Chair: Would you say that you are more diverse than you were five years ago and there is clear progress?

Benj Sykes: Yes, there is, but we still have an awful long way to go.

Q146 Chair: The same question to you, Mr Cohen. To what extent do you think your sector is successful in increasing diversity, working across all levels?

Mike Cohen: We have far more women in the fishing industry than we used to have, for a start. Fishing is a little bit complex because fishermen are all self-employed. At the smaller level they tend to be owner-operator businesses. Larger boats have a number of crew. Women in the industry tend to be in management roles in larger companies or running fish producers' associations. I think about—I may get this wrong, so apologies—40% of my board of directors are women now. That would not have been the case even five years ago, certainly not 10 years ago. There is an improvement in that sense. There are not many women fishing on the decks of boats, though there are some and they are very



successful. It is a little bit difficult for us to directly impact diversity of the catching sector because it is a self-employed sector.

Training in the fishing industry is something that we need to look at for recruitment and retention into the industry because of the way the training is done. You cannot do an apprenticeship in fishing, apart from at one place. We would love to work more around education and that is when we can start to look at recruitment a little bit more broadly, I think. The improvements are being made, but we are very much an ageing workforce and quite traditionally structured.

Q147 Chair: Mr Villemot, how do you ensure that under-represented voices are included in the design of marine conservation and restoration initiatives?

Jacques Villemot: It is a very good question and unfortunately, I think, one where the environment sector as a whole has a lot more work to do. The environment sector as a whole is predominantly a white, middle-class sector, and we are trying to change that. Organisationally, we are trying to do a lot of work to bring more voices to nature, bring a diverse range of people to nature, and to try to create vocations, but it is definitely an area in its inception, unfortunately. There is a lot more work to do. There are some changes to be done at a systemic level. The marine biology degree is the least diverse one currently in the UK, so there is a lot of work to be done at that level and at the social level.

What we are trying to do ourselves is, as I have mentioned, bring more diverse people to nature. We are supporting some initiatives that are trying to do that. It comes back to giving voices to coastal communities and to the communities that are affected by those challenges. It is about trying to develop the network of projects alongside the UK coastline to make sure that we give them a voice, but it is very early. We have a lot of work to do; that is the truth of it. We are on a journey and we are trying to improve it, but we are unfortunately quite early on in it.

Chair: Thank you, all three of you, for the evidence you have provided. It has been tremendously helpful and we are very grateful for your attendance here today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Bell, Mark Russell and Mark Simmonds.

Chair: Welcome back to the second panel today in the governing the marine environment inquiry. I am delighted to be joined by Mark Russell, Andrew Bell and Mark Simmonds. I will start by asking you to introduce yourselves, starting with you, Mr Russell.

Mark Russell: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Mark Russell. I am executive director of the Mineral Products Association, which is the representative body of the aggregates, cement and concrete sector. I am particularly responsible for planning and mineral resources and part of my portfolio is responsibility for the British Marine Aggregate Producers



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Association, which is the representative trade body for the marine aggregate sector. I have fulfilled that role for the last 23 years or so.

Andrew Bell: I am Andrew Bell, or Andy Bell. I am the chief executive of the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere reserve, which covers all the land that drains to the north Devon coast and then goes 12 miles beyond Lundy. It is roughly 50:50 marine and terrestrial. I am also on the national committee for the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, and through that position I advise and work internationally with other UNESCO sites around the world.

Mark Simmonds: Good afternoon and thanks for the invitation to be here. My name is Mark Simmonds. I am the director of policy and external affairs for the British Ports Association. We are the trade association representing ports all across the UK. I am also the chair of the Maritime UK policy group.

Q148 **Chair:** Starting with you, Mr Simmonds, how does the port industry contribute to the UK's economic growth?

Mark Simmonds: The ports industry is the foundation of the entire marine economy, we like to say regularly. Directly, the industry employs 125,000 people across the UK, and we are spread out, of course, often in areas of high deprivation. We pay above the national average. We have good skilled jobs spread right around the UK. We also handle all the shipping that comes into the UK; 95% of all the UK trade in goods arrives and leaves by sea. That is around 450 million tonnes a year at the moment, including more than half our food and a good chunk of our energy as well. We are the enabling sector for everything from energy to fishing to logistics.

Q149 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Russell, how do the marine aggregate industries contribute to the UK's economic growth?

Mark Russell: The marine aggregate sector is part of the wider mineral products sector, and that sector represents the largest material flow in the national economy, over a million tonnes of raw materials and products flowing through the economy every single day. Our largest customer is the construction sector, which is responsible for around £180 billion of spend per annum. In that respect, the whole of the mineral product sector, including marine aggregates, provides the foundation for growth, whether that is delivering housing, schools, hospitals or essential transport and energy infrastructure.

As far as the marine sector specifically is concerned, 25% of all the sand and gravel that is used in England and Wales comes from marine sources. Trying to break it down a little bit more regionally, London and the south-east is responsible for around a third of all the construction activity that takes place in the UK—something in excess of £60 billion per annum. Of that, one third of all the construction aggregates that are provided in the London and south-east region come from marine sources, and within the



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M25, more than 50% of construction aggregates come from marine sources. Regionally and nationally, it makes a significant contribution to the economy. It is an enabling sector, similar to what Mark was describing for ports.

Q150 Chair: Thank you. Mr Bell, we have heard in the previous panel about the trade-offs between marine protection and economic growth. Give us your sense of the environmental contribution that ports and aggregates play and the dangers if it is not managed properly.

Andrew Bell: Certainly. North Devon is not blessed with massive ports. We have a couple of small ports that we work with quite carefully in their operations, and we try to extend their reach in the capacity that they can take through. Getting lorries off the road, for example, is one of the key things about it. It can certainly have a very good environmental benefit as well with that transport coming through. We work with them in their environmental management, trying to minimise any harm where possible. For example, with the port of Bristol, offering habitat compensation measures and that sort of thing—working with them to reduce their net impact on the environment—has been something we have been exploring as well. The port of Bristol did the Stert Island managed realignment as part of its offsetting side.

Q151 Chair: Mr Russell, how do your industries engage with communities and contribute to local economies?

Mark Russell: It is a good question. As a sector, we deliver raw materials to over 50 wharfs around the country in 32 port areas, from the north-east, down the east coast, London south coast, the Bristol channel and the north-west. Each of those wharfs will employ staff directly, but the wharfs themselves will also support a wider supply chain of drivers of lorries and the wider construction supply chain, ready-mixed concrete plants, precast concrete plants, and so on.

Picking up one of the points that Andy just made, one of the big advantages of the sector is the ability to deliver large volumes of bulk material close to where it is needed, effectively reducing road miles. A 5,000 tonne-capacity ship will deliver the equivalent of 250 lorries-worth of raw material close to where it is required. If you consider the Thames river, for example, as a sector we are delivering the equivalent of 1,000 lorry loads of construction aggregates into that market every single day of the year.

Q152 Chair: Mr Simmonds, how do the port industries engage with communities and contribute to their local economies?

Mark Simmonds: Ports are rather unusual and probably a bit different from a lot of the other businesses and industries that have given evidence so far in that we are fixed—we are not mobile. We are very much rooted in the communities where the ports are and have often been there for many generations. In fact, one of the oldest businesses in the UK is the port of Aberdeen. It has been there for over 1,000 years.



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Much of the employment in ports tends to be very local. I was talking to Portsmouth international port this week, and 95% of its workforce lives within 5 miles of the port. While not everyone will be that extreme, it is common that most people working in the ports industry will be very local to the port. I mentioned the indirect economic impact through the other industries that we support, whether it is fishing or cruise tourism, or logistics and warehousing and those sorts of things.

In how they engage, our membership is hugely diverse. I have to give a bit of a caveat in that a lot of my answers will be “most ports do this” or “some ports do that”— it is very common for ports. We have a programme, which we can share in writing with the Committee, where we have highlighted a lot of the programmes and initiatives that ports do in their communities, whether it is boosting skills or investing in local charities and things like that. We have a good bank of evidence of some of the good things that ports do but, of course, it varies from place to place.

Q153 Sammy Wilson: In your written evidence, you indicated the various regulatory hoops you have to go through when obtaining planning permissions, marine licences and so on. What impact does all the environmental and marine protection requirements have on your industries?

Mark Russell: A fundamental constraint, similar to what Mark was saying previously, for our sector is that it is only able to operate where commercially viable geological resources are present. It means that the area in which we are able to undertake our activity is geographically constrained. As a sector, we have been going for well over 50 years, so we are well accustomed to managing the requirements of marine protected areas. It certainly does come with some challenges.

I think the biggest challenge at the moment, which was picked up on in the previous evidence session, is the changing pressures as a consequence of other activities that are emerging, particularly renewable energy, because that is changing the landscape that the whole of the marine development sector is operating across. It is effectively reducing the environmental headroom that is available for all the other activities that are taking place, which produces significant challenges for those activities to adapt, because they will need to adapt going forward. Being able to adapt within the current framework of environmental protection is potentially going to be quite challenging.

Similar to what Mike Cohen said in the previous session, and Benj Sykes to a degree, we need more flexibility, recognising that the evidence and the data gaps may not necessarily give us all the answers to make the informed decisions. Being able to make some decisions as opposed to just defaulting to a precautionary approach where the position is effectively that you can't do what you were doing previously clearly has to be a better outcome than just saying “stop”, particularly given the various unintended and consequential impacts that that would have for



employment and jobs, but also for the wider economic needs of the country.

Mark Simmonds: It is not necessarily about the regulation itself but the way it is implemented and delivered. One of the questions in the previous session was about the balance and I think a lot of our members would feel that the current system is not quite working for nature and it is not working for industry either. In a way, there is a balance but not the one you want.

We find that consenting processes obviously add cost. Nobody thinks you should not have those sorts of processes or that the system needs to be thrown out or anything, but our members tell us that consenting bodies and their advisers are often extremely risk averse. I have some sympathy with that because they are under a lot of scrutiny and will be challenged for the decisions they make, but they are also under-resourced. That tends to increase the level of risk aversion because if you are up against a tight timeline it is much easier to ask for more and more data and put in an objection rather than agree to something. Our members raise that with us very regularly. We support, broadly, the idea of the precautionary principle but we find that the way it is implemented is not as a way of managing risk. It is used as a way to justify having no risk at all, which does not work for many of our developments.

We also find the overall processes are extremely prescriptive and very process-driven. I agree, as I almost always do, with what Mark said previously about the need for more flexibility and a more dynamic approach. We are talking about marine ecosystems that are very dynamic and we think the way they are managed, protected and enhanced, increasingly, also needs a dynamic approach. We don't have that at the moment. It adds cost and a lot of time.

Q154 **Sammy Wilson:** In the information supplied to us, I did not see any comments made about there being too much regulation. I think the quote was the slow speed of the process was causing a huge constraint on economic growth. How do you see the process being speeded up to deal with the kind of issues that were raised in the comments that you made in your brief to us?

Mark Simmonds: There are two ways. You can throw out what we have at the moment and start again or you can make tweaks and reforms to what we have and try to speed it up. I think that most marine developers lean towards the latter, and keeping a lot of the knowledge and experience that has accumulated with the current system but improving certain pinch points. Our members quite often tell us that screening and scoping phases can be extremely difficult and there could be more common sense applied by regulators in those stages. One of our other criticisms or something that is often raised with us is the amount of data that is regularly asked for in the process of securing a marine licence.



We think those could be better challenged, but that goes back to the earlier point. There are twin problems: one is the resources of the regulators and the advice bodies—they need more resource but that is not the answer on its own. There need to be some changes to the process as well and we have some specific ideas about how that can happen.

Sammy Wilson: Mr Russell, do you want to come back on that question?

Mark Russell: Yes, I will add to what Mark said. He is absolutely right that the regulatory regime often becomes the focus of why the system is not working. The problem is not so much about the regime; it is about how the regime is being applied in practice. A major issue, which has been an issue for a while but I think is accelerating, is the capacity and the competence within regulators and advisers. That moves the test of acceptability around risk and precaution. If you are in your first job, the last thing you want to do is drop the ball on behalf of the organisation that you represent.

The Chancellor had a roundtable meeting in January, I think, with various Government regulators, talking about trying to improve the way that they support economic growth. That is an important step to take because although we have the growth duty in place, which is supposed to require regulators to enable outcomes, I think in practice it has not necessarily delivered what was anticipated or expected. The Chancellor challenged the chief executives of the major regulators to change the culture within organisations, and I think that is quite an important step to try to take.

Currently if you asked most of my members their views on the advice they receive from advisers, it tends to be, "No, because". We need to try to turn it around to, "Yes, if"—have a system that enables sustainable outcomes as opposed to just continually puts barriers in place and find a way to work more collaboratively to navigate a way through the rather congested and tricky regulatory waters that all marine developers have to try to navigate through.

Q155 **Sammy Wilson:** Both of you have mentioned risk and the risks involved in working in the marine environment, but what risks do you see arising when marine planning is developed without meaningful stakeholder engagement? That includes you but also the communities that are affected by it and the environmental perspective. Mr Bell, maybe you want to start that one.

Andrew Bell: Thank you. It is an opportunity to say something because we have helped with the regional marine plan for the south-west. We work very closely with the MMO and participating in the consultation. One thing that the regional plan does not do is it not very good at putting lines on the map and getting to the fine granularity. In north Devon we have tried to get into that deeper phase to look at where we would put aquaculture, where the wind industry comes in within port corridors and



where it can do X, Y, Z. The idea is to de-risk investment for those particular industries and how they work in the area.

We can then get the social licensing sorted out—in other words, the acceptability of those kind of developments in an area. It eases the path through so that developers do not come in and do abortive consultations or investigations. We can try to steer them into the right places where it will work and be the most acceptable. That is very much the way that we are trying to work within the planning system to help that through.

Mark Simmonds: The risk is that you don't have community engagement or that you have ambivalence from developers. That is sometimes what we find when trying to engage our members on marine plans. I recognise that we are still relatively early in putting a marine planning system in place. It has been 13 years or whatever, but going from nothing to something takes a long time. It is tricky. It is also tricky for us because ports already are lines on a map. We already have a spatial element as far as we are concerned. We are there and we have also been doing marine spatial prioritisation within harbour areas forever. If you look out the window you can see marine aggregates going up and down the Thames—pleasure boats, taxis and all sorts of things. It is something we have been doing for a very long time, so it can be a bit frustrating for our members watching the pace of development of marine plans.

We are also finding it difficult to engage the Government at the beginning of the process of updating marine plans, starting with the east plan right now. We have not yet seen the Government's hand and what they want for spatial prioritisation. We found in some of the previous rounds we were trying to guess what Government policy was going to be on things like net gain. We have got that and now they are trying to update it and guess what Government policy will be on marine spatial prioritisation, which seems odd when they are both parts of the same Government. I understand that they need to update these things but we would like to see more from Government gauging on the spatial element of what these plans will include.

Mark Russell: I think it is important to remember that the development of planning systems takes time. With my other hat on, I am also responsible for dealing with terrestrial planning as it applies to land-based minerals. We need to remember that the land-based planning system evolved from the end of the second world war, so it has been evolving for the thick end of 80 years and we are currently going through a process of fundamental planning reform, as you will all know. It does take time to establish planning in a meaningful way.

The other important point around that is that planning means different things to different people. In that respect, there needs to perhaps be a little more clarity on what marine plans do versus what they are not able to do at the moment. I think that is recognised by the MMO.



Fundamentally, for planning to work effectively it needs to work holistically and that was certainly the intention of the Marine and Coastal Access Act that was introduced in 2009. It was supposed to move us away from the sectoral approach towards planning for activities and regulating activities and to bring them all together. I am not sure whether it has done that, necessarily, because we have a two-tier development system where there are the activities that are covered by marine licensing, where decisions have to be made in accordance with the plan. The plan effectively guides decision making.

Then you have NSIP¹ projects, which covers renewables and a range of other big infrastructure activities where decisions have to be made with regard to, which means that they are not driven by the policies and structures that are in place within the marine plans. That makes it quite difficult for the activities that are governed by the marine plans to plan and manage themselves. That holistic place is important because it means the planning system can try to reflect on the intended and unintended consequences of decisions, which I think a number of the discussions in the previous session were picking up on. At the minute, there seems to be a focus on the policy prize, which in this case is renewable energy, without necessarily thinking through what the knock-on implications could be to all the activities that are taking place, whether intended or unintended. That is a real gap and weakness of the way the system works at the moment.

One of the ways that that could be clarified is by revisiting the UK marine policy statement. That was introduced in 2011 as a consequence of the Marine and Coastal Access Act. I would argue that some of the prioritisation within that has changed. It never really set out differing weights behind the activities that were there. It was more saying, "This is important for this reason; this activity is important for this reason." We are reaching a point now where there needs to be more clarity around prioritisation. As part of that, there is also more transparency of the knock-on implications and consequences that may arise from that and how those will be managed. At the minute, that feels like quite a big gap, to be honest.

Q156 Sammy Wilson: Moving on, both of your industries are regarded as having a big environmental impact and very often they are interpreted as having a detrimental environmental impact. What measures do you take to try to reduce that, and incorporate within your activities measures to be sure that your environmental impact is minimised?

Mark Simmonds: I challenge that we have a big environmental impact in ports. A number of activities have some sort of impact on the environment. Probably the biggest and most obvious is maintenance dredging. Most ports will have a statutory duty under legislation to

¹ Mark Russell has clarified to the Committee after the evidence session that this stands for 'nationally significant infrastructure projects'.



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maintain the depth of channels and berths so that ships can continue to safely navigate into them. That is usually done by dredging, so most ports have powers to dredge and will need a marine licence to dispose of the dredged material. The other set of activities might be capital dredging, expansion or deepening of harbours, which is more of a traditional development activity. Both types of dredging are very tightly regulated and managed.

Maintenance dredging can have a positive impact on the environment. Ports are very often in estuaries or sensitive environmental areas just because of the history of where they have developed. In estuaries, you get sediments and water coming down from the river and being washed in from the sea. Quite often you have contaminants from other industries—farming or whatever. In some cases, we have contamination from Roman mines still being washed down some rivers in the UK and being deposited in the mouths of estuaries and then dredged by ports. In some cases, ports are removing contamination from a river or seabed. A lot of monitoring and sampling is required in most dredge campaigns and in the disposal of those things, but quite often if you have contaminated material that can only be dredged up to a certain level of contamination, you are then concentrating that in the disposal areas and removing it from estuaries that are more sensitive environments. That activity is very heavily regulated and where you don't have contaminated sediments, the impact is relatively low.

The amount of dredging varies massively. Some ports might do two or three campaigns a year. Others, like Dover or Teesport, will be dredging almost every day of the week, depending on how regularly they silt up. In those cases, the more often you are dredging, the less likely you are to have any detrimental impact because the material is moving in so quickly there is not likely to be anything living in there, and it has been done for decades in many cases. The impact is fairly low.

The impact on the environment is extremely site specific. It varies from place to place. Disposal at sea, which is by far the most common method of removing dredging, is relatively low impact and contained in a small number of regulated disposal sites around the UK. Wider marine development, capital dredging or building of new quays and things like that, is regulated in the usual way. When ports obtain a marine licence, they will very often have conditions placed on them.

For both maintenance and capital dredging a common condition is that you can only dredge at certain times of the year to avoid impacting migrating birds or fish or whatever it might be. Sometimes that can go a little too far. One port I know ended up with a three-week window a year when they were allowed to dredge because there were so many different conditions placed on them, until they objected and that was loosened a little bit. That is probably another good example of where the regulators keep piling on conditions without really looking at the impact that has on



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the port's ability to operate. Conditions are commonly placed on the day-to-day operations and often on the licences for capital projects as well.

Mark Russell: Similarly to what Mark said, there are perceptions around impact that perhaps don't necessarily reflect reality. The total UK continental shelf area is about 867,000 sq km. The total area of seabed that is licensed for marine aggregate extraction is 1,000 km and the area of seabed that is dredged is around 100 km. You are looking at a very small footprint of impact potentially—significantly less than 1% of the total area. Fundamentally, the marine licensing regime that exists is predicated on environmental protection, so any activity that is licensed has to be environmentally acceptable in the eyes and the view of the regulator and the statutory advisers that advise them. I think that is an important point to note.

The EIA process that underpins the licensing regime looks to identify the potential impacts, consider their significance and then look at ways to manage, mitigate and monitor them. It is the management, mitigation and monitoring where the significant developments have taken place in my sector. We have adopted a regional approach towards the environmental impact assessment and regional monitoring, which means rather than every single developer doing individual studies, we do collective studies. It also means that this has allowed us to adopt a more consistent approach towards management and monitoring, with regional monitoring taking place.

That is rare and I think as a sector we broke the norm in adopting that approach because we felt it was a much better way of delivering sustainable outcomes, and it was a much more effective way of delivering more consistent assessments in conjunction with the regulators and their advisers because they could have just one conversation instead of potentially having nine or 10 different parallel conversations.

The other important point on the management side of things is guidance. The previous Government very much stepped back from guidance and I think that has been to the detriment of the way that the marine environment is managed. Guidance is as much about defining guard rails and boundaries for regulators and advisers as it is for developers, and that has been forgotten in a sense. It is compounded by the fact that the regulators and advisers are under so much pressure at the moment. Guidance would really help.

From a marine aggregate point of view, when our guidance was withdrawn we produced our own guidance—industry best practice or good practice guidance—which we developed in partnership and consultation with our regulators and advisers. The gov.uk website signposts towards that guidance now, which I guess reflects the fact that it is recognised, but in my view it represents a poor substitute for having definite guidance that is produced by the Government, which defines boundaries and guard rails for how things work.



Q157 Sammy Wilson: Mr Bell, from your side of the whole issue, do you believe that the regulations are sufficient? As far as the practices that your organisation observes, do you believe that the regulations are sufficiently implemented by the likes of ports or the aggregates industry to deal with any environmental harm that may occur?

Andrew Bell: As a rule, yes, they are. It is critical to the marine environment and how it behaves—or if it will be toxic or whatever—so it is important that they are regulated properly. I do not see any issues arising from the ports and their current operations with the regulations as they are. I can understand how they sometimes feel about how those regulations are applied and the process being too long or too restrictive in some ways. There is room for wriggle. There are also things like the beneficial use of sediments to realign and recreate saltmarshes and the like. You can take some of the sediments that are being dredged, provided that they are clean, to help restore saltmarshes and keep them healthy, because they have to keep pace with sea level rises as well. The additional use of those sediments would be quite handy for that.

The other thing is the monitoring data that the industries are doing. There is a dearth of data in the marine environment and the more that is shared and open the more people can use and benefit from it. We have various things that we are trying to deploy in the Bristol channel area, like sound sensors so that we can detect marine mammals, but some of the sensors that are being deployed can listen to sediment movement as well. There are a lot of good signs out there and if it is augmented by what the industries are doing particularly regionally, as Mark Russell said. It would be good to have that compounded with other data sources to get a much better picture of how the marine environment really works. That means we can start addressing some of the questions about the dynamism within the marine environment and how that behaves. We can then start looking at flexible approaches that are more suited to the particular sites.

Q158 Sammy Wilson: We asked the other panel this question. Do you see how new technology can help to improve the outcomes from the activities of your industries?

Mark Simmonds: Yes, absolutely. I think sometimes people look at our industry as a mature industry that is not particularly innovative, but we have seen quite a few things coming in and starting to be used in the way we operate and undertake development. Some examples are new ways of doing hydrography—anything from having autonomous vessels surveying harbour areas to observation satellites doing it almost in real time and being able to give you detailed symmetry of certain places. That is quite impressive and it is not far away in being able to be deployed fairly consistently.

There are new dredging techniques. I was talking to Harwich Haven, which is the harbour authority for Felixstowe and does a lot of dredging, about new ways of dredging there, which is essentially—they will



probably tell me I have explained this wrong—agitating the seabed and allowing the tide to move some of the sediment out naturally as a way of maintaining depth and a new way of doing things there. There are lots of innovative ways of doing things.

On the capital side, we are seeing more use of things like bubble curtains to reduce noise from piling and other impacts underneath the sea. We are starting to see things on the operational side and in capital development as well.

To touch on the beneficial reuse, which is taking some of the dredged material and using it for beach replenishment or flood defence or other good things, we are working closely with Government on trying to remove some of the barriers to that. Dredging is expensive and we usually have a lot of material to get rid of very quickly in a specific area, so it can be difficult to match up dredging with the need for those sorts of things. There are licensing and legislative barriers as well, which we are working on with the Government, but it is hard.

There are changes and innovation going on in the practice and the legislative side too. I have probably had a go at the MMO a bit already today and probably will again if I get the chance, but I should say that it has shown repeatedly that it can be innovative in licensing processes. It is undertaking some transformation at the moment. It has introduced self-service licensing for low-risk activities. It has innovated by having longer-term licences for various activities and exempting low-risk things. It has shown that at that level it can take steps in innovating and doing things better.

Chair: I think we need to move on, thank you.

Q159 **Cameron Thomas:** Gentlemen, how are nature recovery timelines factored into planning for port operations or marine aggregate activities?

Mark Simmonds: One of the things I wanted to say earlier in general comments is that there is a bit of a disconnect between the protection of nature and the restoration and enhancement of nature. One of our criticisms of the current system and the way net gain and other things are being approached is that they are being approached completely differently. You protect and then you do your gain separately, whereas there should be one integrated system.

We are still talking to Government about marine net gain and how it will work in the marine environment. We have it in the terrestrial side and that goes down. That covers the intertidal area as well, which as far as we are concerned is essentially more like a marine environment anyway. In a way, we have mandatory net gain conditions there and that will be factored into any new development from last year, which is not going particularly well, unfortunately.



More broadly than that, these sorts of considerations are taken into account through the licensing process or the marine planning process. Harbour authorities are required to have regard to marine plans in the decisions and actions that they take.

Mark Russell: It is an interesting question. The issue of nature recovery at its heart, from my sector's perspective, is grounded in an understanding of impacts and recovery. Marine aggregate extraction, unlike many other forms of development, is a temporary use. We are not resulting in permanent, long-term change necessarily by putting something in place or removing something. The impacts associated with marine aggregate extraction are more akin to temporary disturbance. The evidence that we have gathered and other regulators and advisers have gathered over the last 30 years has shown that as long as the seabed sediments remain the same or similar at the end of extraction—so if you start with sand and gravel and you finish with sand and gravel on the seabed—recovery happens naturally.

The timeframes change. It can range from six months for full recovery to potentially 10 years in some cases for stable environments but the recovery does happen. The licensing regime effectively ensures that happens by having requirements to leave capping layers and ensure that the seabed sediments remain the same. That is enforced through licence conditions and monitoring of licence conditions.

The evidence point is really important and we are talking about biodiversity net gain at the moment and the potential, and also the marine recovery fund where significant sums of money are invested to try to deliver better outcomes. This is not new. The aggregates sector as a whole has had something called the aggregates levy applied to it since 2009. The current rate per tonne is over £2. I think it is £2.07² off the top of my head, but it is of that order. That generates about £400 million worth of income to the Treasury annually, of which marine contributes probably £20 million.

The reason I raise it is that the levy, which I think is unique in the taxation world, was introduced with the objective to better reflect the environmental consequences of winning primary minerals, whether on land or offshore. For a time, a portion of that income was used to help inform applied research projects to fill data gaps and enable better outcomes, but that stopped in 2013 and effectively all the aggregates levy is now is a revenue-raising mechanism. It does not differentiate between good practice and bad practice and it does not do anything to directly contribute to better environmental outcomes. There are perhaps

² Mark Russell provided the following note to the Committee on 13 March 2025: The current rate is 2.03 pounds/tonne, which will increase to 2.08 pounds/tonne from 1st April 2025

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rates-and-allowances-aggregates-levy/rates-and-allowances-aggregates-levy>



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some lessons there that need to be reflected on for the marine recovery fund and also the BNG process that is looking forward at the moment, given some of the practical challenges that Mark referred to that are emerging from its early application.

Cameron Thomas: Do you have any points on that, Andrew?

Andrew Bell: Yes. The marine part of the UNESCO Biosphere reserve produced a marine capital plan, which looked at the habitats and benefits that come from that and flaws that can be improved. There was a response to that saying, "What about the individual species?", so we had to produce a marine nature recovery plan. We have those two documents sitting in place with wide consultation with the fishing sector and other users in the area.

It is being used with Bideford and Appledore ports, for example, and Ilfracombe. They are not major ports, I must admit, but they are in north Devon. We work with those in trying to get the marine nature recovery plan in place. It is there as an open invitation now, to work with developers, as an opportunity for marine net gain for things that are happening in the Bristol channel/Celtic sea. We hope to move that forward.

In addition, I sympathise with Mark and Mark about BNG and particularly how that applies in intertidal areas. We have a lot of expertise with managed realignment and recreating saltmarshes and the like. The way the metric works at the moment is that it is only positive if you are recreating saltmarsh on areas that are degraded arable land or developed land. Most estuaries are flanked by coastal grazing marsh sitting behind flood defences. If you want to do what the estuary needs to do in maintaining the right kind of shape and morphology, you need to do the managed realignment on to those freshwater grazing marshes, which is another priority habitat. You do the BNG calculation for that and it comes out negative, so you will have to give three times as much area in recreating new freshwater grazing marsh to compensate for 1 hectare of the saltmarsh that you need to create. It is really perverse, just because of that priority habitat bit.

We would advocate that around the coastal systems, we need a fresh look at the system-based approach as to how the estuary will respond to sea level rise over the next 100 years, how the ports are also adapting to that and then how we can maintain the best morphodynamic shape of the estuary without being penalised because somebody says, "That is another priority habitat there". We need to recreate the freshwater grazing marshes—there is no doubt about that, because that is the roosting sites for the overwintering birds and the like—but we need a simpler system where we can finance those things working with the developers to make it much easier in that context.

In the terrestrial ecosystems the BNG works fine as a calculator. It is a little bit complex now with the legal agreements that are needed, which



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makes it cost prohibitive and that is why we are not seeing many offsite compensations at the moment because the developers just buy a bit more land and do all their BNG onsite. That mitigation is being applied, which is good but it means that the hope that we had of delivering some broader and strategic ecosystem-based improvements is being lost because of that complexity. We need to make it much easier to apply—particularly, as I said, estuaries need a fresh look.

Q160 Anna Gelderd: Mr Bell, what unique cultural and heritage benefits do marine biospheres represent with particular reference, of course, to the north Devon biosphere?

Andrew Bell: When we were setting up the biosphere in north Devon, we were doing consultations on where and what to include. Originally, because we were looking at the ecosystems as being the basis of defining it, we came up with big symmetry that went out into the Bristol channel and came round back and joined the coast at the Cornwall-Devon border. It was the fishermen who said, "Why are you doing that? Why don't you just go to the 12 nautical miles because that is where we fish as our ecosystem? What we want to do is say that our fish are sustainably caught inside a biosphere reserve." There was that instant working with the fishery sector and the partnership we had. Included within that 12 nautical miles—in fact, the one that we extended further—is Lundy, which was the UK's first marine conservation site and the first no-take zone.

Of course we have got all the rest of the coast around north Devon that has all those reefs as well as the broken beaches, for example. Those beaches themselves have now been declared a world surfing reserve—the first in the UK. That is from the Save The Waves federation, a California-based institution. There are 13 such reserves around the world, so we work hand in glove with the World Surfing Reserves on the management of that surfing industry or management of the beaches for the benefit of that surfing industry. The surfing income is worth £52 million to the local economy every year. A lot hangs on the living culture as well as the shipwrecks—people mentioned some of the wrecks around the coast. I think you mentioned diving on those wrecks, which brings a lot of good things with tourism but also the wildlife benefits as well.

I could wax lyrical for a long time. There are other UNESCO sites within the UK. We have Brighton and Hove and the Isle of Wight, but also the Isle of Man is a biosphere reserve, and then we have Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, Dyfi Valley and Wester Ross.

Q161 Anna Gelderd: What measures are necessary to ensure the protection of these marine biospheres?

Andrew Bell: At the moment, biosphere reserves are a non-statutory designation. They are designated by UNESCO at the request of member states. The process is that normally local communities get together and say, "We think this would be a great idea for a biosphere reserve"—having the functions of conservation, sustainable development and



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knowledge generation and how that all fits together. That is approved by Government and then submitted to UNESCO and UNESCO approves it. There is nothing in the UK policy at the moment that says anything about biosphere reserves at all.

There are things about world heritage sites, which is one of the other UNESCO designations, but there is nothing about geoparks or biosphere reserves. There used to be but there was institutional memory loss when the UK left UNESCO. As the seven sites in the UK are delivering and testing policy for Government—local government as well as national Government—I think it is worthwhile to say that they should at least be reflected in some policy somewhere.

There is a belief at the UK level that if you tried to make a statutory designation, like a national landscape or a national park, you would pickle it in aspic. I think one of the strengths of biosphere reserves is that they are an open and dynamic tool and they can try to address the problems of the day, so you use those lessons and apply them to other parts of the country. That is why we are quite keen and happy to work with the ports, the energy industry, the aggregates industry and the fishing industry to say, "There are better ways of doing this and how can we manage MCZs in a better and easier way?" Rather than sticking rigidly to the rules, how do we make the flex and improve on that to get win-wins?

Q162 Anna Gelderd: That is very interesting to hear. Finally, I have a question for everyone but I will come to Mr Simmonds first: what benefits does a sustainable marine environment bring to local coastal communities such as those in my area in south-east Cornwall?

Mark Simmonds: In areas like south-east Cornwall, it brings tourism, which is an obvious one. There are numerous health benefits and other social benefits to healthy environments, and living in those areas and visiting them. We represent most major ports in the country. We have 115 port members and they own and operate 400 ports around the country. That includes a lot of very small harbours, so we have an interest in that. Having healthy seascapes and marine ecosystems brings people to those areas. It is good for ports and for local communities too.

Anna Gelderd: Mr Russell, do you have anything to add to that question?

Mark Russell: Yes. We are slightly different because our activity generally takes place a considerable distance offshore. Nevertheless, I think we can and we do make a contribution towards the wider marine stewardship piece, largely as a consequence of the data and the evidence that we are able to collect. Whether that relates to the physical processes or the geological origins of the deposits that we are dredging, or archaeological or historic environment artefacts that we recover, all of them help build a better understanding of the environment in which we operate. Certainly the historic environment piece is an area that we have contributed an awful lot to in understanding the prehistoric landscape



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that used to exist across our continental shelf during the ice ages, when it was dry land.

Anna Gelderd: Finally, Mr Bell, do you have anything to add on the question about the benefits to local and coastal communities?

Andrew Bell: Yes. As you know coming from south-east Cornwall, the sea is the big driver for tourism, as was mentioned earlier. In north Devon the tourism economy is worth about £0.56 billion per annum. We know consistently from all the surveys we have done with tourists that 80% of them—it is 78% to 82%, depending on which year you do it—are driven by the environmental factors that brings them there. It is the coast and marine in particular that bring people down. If you said 80% of £0.56 billion is what the environmental value is worth in those coastal ecosystem services, just purely on tourism alone, it is worth giving that thought, isn't it?

Anna Gelderd: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

Chair: Mr Russell, Mr Bell and Mr Simmonds, thank you very much for your evidence today. We very much appreciate your attendance.