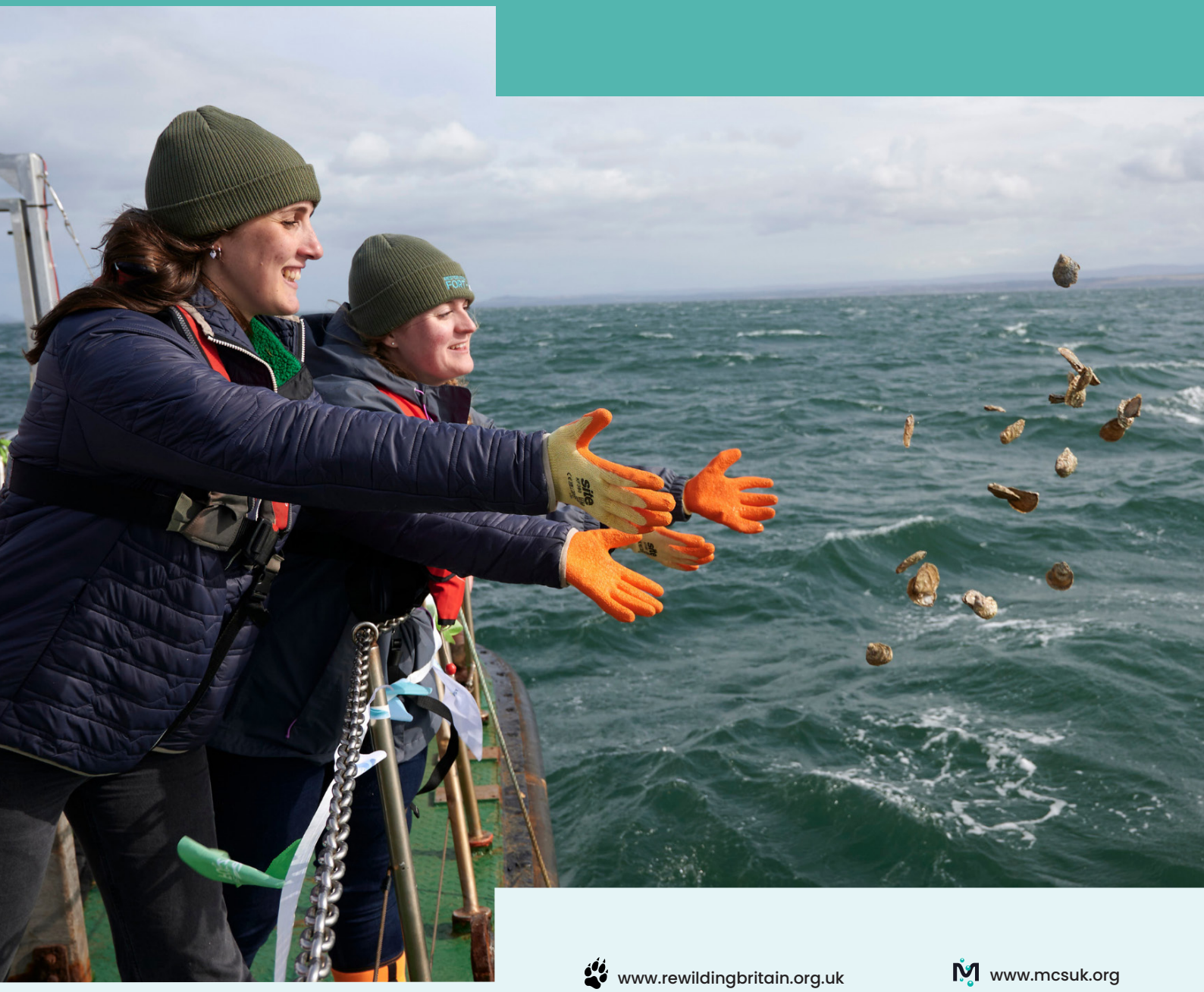
WILDER SEAS

A blueprint for restoring our marine environment and empowering our coastal communities

A report by the Marine Conservation Society and Rewilding Britain

MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

REWILDING BRITAIN



www.rewildingbritain.org.uk

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ABOUT US

Rewilding Britain
We are Rewilding Britain. We're helping to create a wilder Britain for nature, climate and people. We're inspiring a movement of rewilders across Britain's land and seas – a groundswell of hope, so that together we can ensure we have a wilder, nature-rich future that benefits us all.

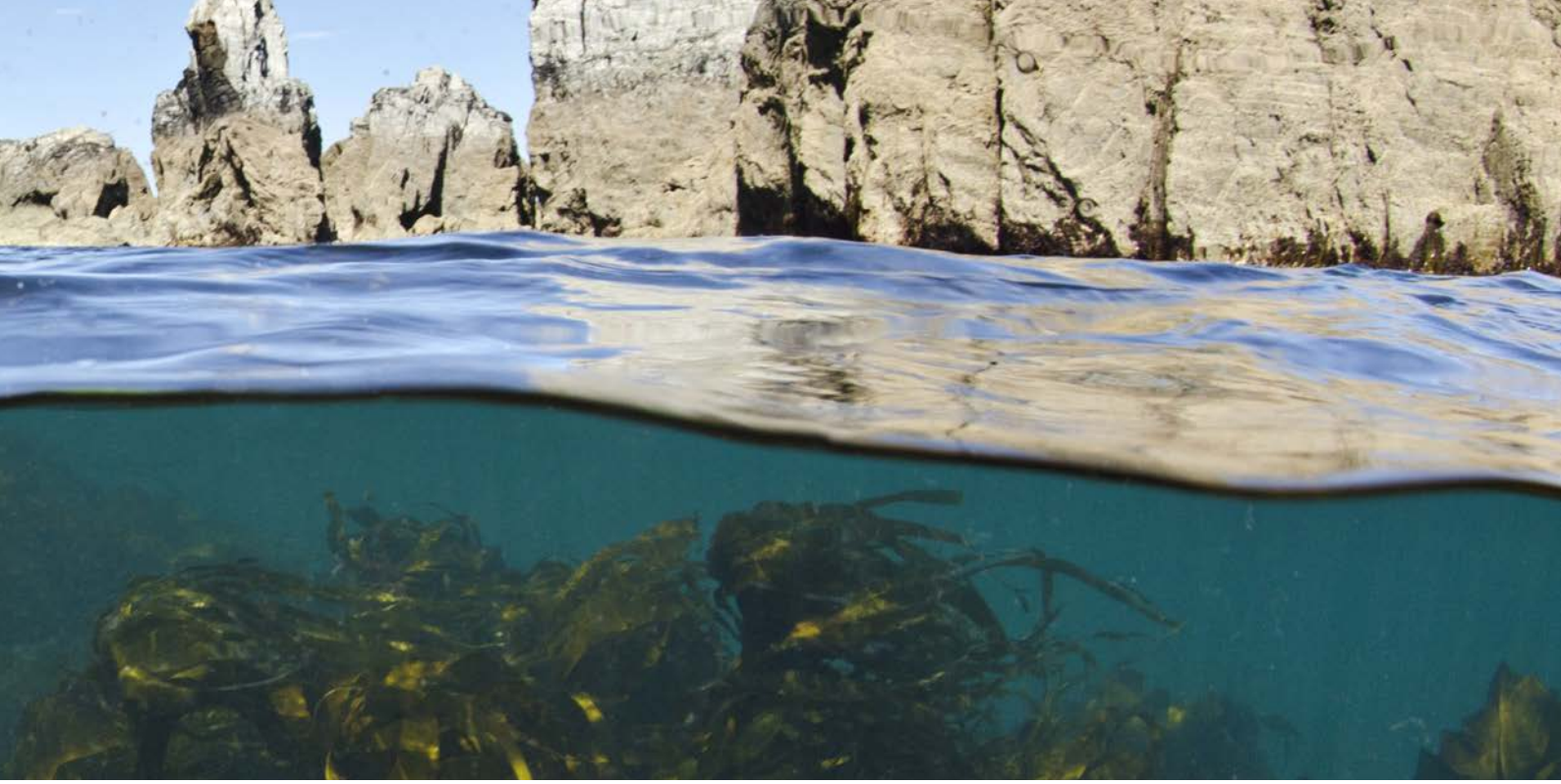
Marine Conservation Society
We're the marine conservation charity run by ocean lovers for ocean lovers. We work towards our vision of a sea full of life, where nature flourishes and people thrive. We combine scientific research, advocacy, education and community engagement to promote sustainable management of marine resources.

CONTACT

For more information on the content of this report or to arrange a meeting, please contact:

Jacques Villemot - Rewilding Britain
jacques.villemot@rewildingbritain.org.uk

Aleksandra Chernysheva - Marine Conservation Society
Aleksandra.chernysheva@mcsuk.org



FOREWORD

From Rebecca Wrigley, Rewilding Britain and Sandy Luk, Marine Conservation Society

As an island nation the United Kingdom is fundamentally shaped by our relationship with our seas.

Our seas are not just a backdrop to our national identity, they are our biggest natural ally against the climate crisis, a source of health and wellbeing for millions, and a cornerstone of our economy. From carbon capture and coastal protection to recreation, food and tourism, the UK's coastal and marine environments deliver essential services whose true value far exceeds the £211 billion estimate provided by the Office for National Statistics.

Yet our seas are under mounting pressure. Marine ecosystems, once rich and abundant, are collapsing. This is threatening the resilience of coastal communities, the sustainability of important industries, and our ability to tackle the nature and climate emergencies. As the ocean's capacity to provide these services diminishes, so too does our collective resilience.

The case for action could not be clearer. The UK seabed has the potential to sequester nearly three times more carbon annually than all the UK's forests combined, yet it remains vulnerable to damaging exploitation. Meanwhile, the profound mental and physical health benefits offered by our seas highlight the need to reconnect our communities with them, above all because the loss of marine life is widening the gap between people and the environment on which we all depend.

The UK Government must urgently act to protect this most extraordinary national asset, to rewild our seas and to ensure that we have a thriving, resilient ocean for generations to come.

This report sets out clear solutions to reverse the decline of our sea life. It is a blueprint that outlines eight vital and practical recommendations across three crucial areas.

Rebecca Wrigley
Rewilding Britain

Sandy Luk
Marine Conservation Society

INTRODUCTION

THE DE-WILDING OF OUR SEAS

Increased human disturbance, exacerbated by the climate crisis, has caused a dramatic decline in marine life across the globe. Only 13% of oceanic waters are now considered to be truly wild. A WWF report has shown that over the past 50 years (1970–2020) the average size of marine wild vertebrate species (fish, marine mammals, reptiles and seabirds) has fallen by 56%.[1]

In the last century, the UK has lost up to 92% of its seagrass and 95% of its native oyster reefs. Many of our marine animals feature on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list. This includes shark and ray species, which are in rapid decline. According to the 2023 State of Nature report, 13 out of our 25 species of breeding seabirds have plunged by almost a quarter in just 40 years.[2]

Successive UK governments have systematically failed to meet their environmental targets. This includes achieving the Good Environmental Status of our seas by 2020. Internationally, the UK has also committed to the UN's '30x30' target – protecting 30% of land and sea by 2030. Currently 38% of UK waters are Marine Protected Areas, but many of these are not safeguarded from the most damaging types of activity, such as bottom trawling, dredging and marine development.

MARINE REWILDING: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Marine rewilding is the large-scale restoration of marine ecosystems to the point where nature can take care of itself and accelerate the recovery of nearby marine areas.

Rewilding seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species – allowing them to shape the seascape and the habitats within. Rewilding encourages a balance between people and the rest of nature, so that we can thrive together. It can support and create new opportunities in coastal economies, allow living systems to provide the ecological functions on which we all depend, and help people reconnect with the marine environment.

Yet in the UK, marine recovery projects are far less common than terrestrial rewilding projects. With over 80% of the British public supporting rewilding, removing barriers to community action is crucial to support the achievement of the Government's nature targets.[3]

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS IN SUMMARY

WORK AT OCEAN SCALE

Large-scale marine recovery, working at nature's scale and hand-in-hand with coastal communities, has the potential to create skilled jobs and boost local economic growth.

1. Scale up community-led marine recovery by streamlining licensing.
2. Unlock marine community projects through new funding opportunities.

LET OUR OCEAN LEAD

Removing pressures on the marine environment is crucial to giving nature a chance to lead its own recovery, and will enable marine ecosystems to provide a range of services, including mitigation for the changing climate and its associated impacts on communities.

3. Deliver genuine, whole-site protection of Marine Protected Areas across 30% of UK seas.
4. Recognise the role of seas in addressing the climate crisis by protecting blue carbon ecosystems.
5. Introduce a Marine Spatial Prioritisation Plan that prioritises nature recovery, supported by a Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund.
6. Tackle the scourge of chemical pollution in our ocean by banning the use of 'forever chemicals'.

SUPPORT OUR OCEAN AND COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Marine rewilding is as much about people as it is about nature. Through the creation of blue jobs and the growth of ocean literacy, we can create a better, wilder and wealthier future for the UK's coastal communities.

7. Build workforce capacity as part of a sustainable blue economy.
8. Improve ocean literacy by delivering the Ocean Literacy Action Plan for England.

WORK AT OCEAN SCALE

The benefits of streamlining licensing and unlocking investment in community-led marine recovery will go beyond ecological gain. Large-scale marine recovery, working at nature's scale, has the potential to create skilled jobs and boost economic growth in coastal communities.

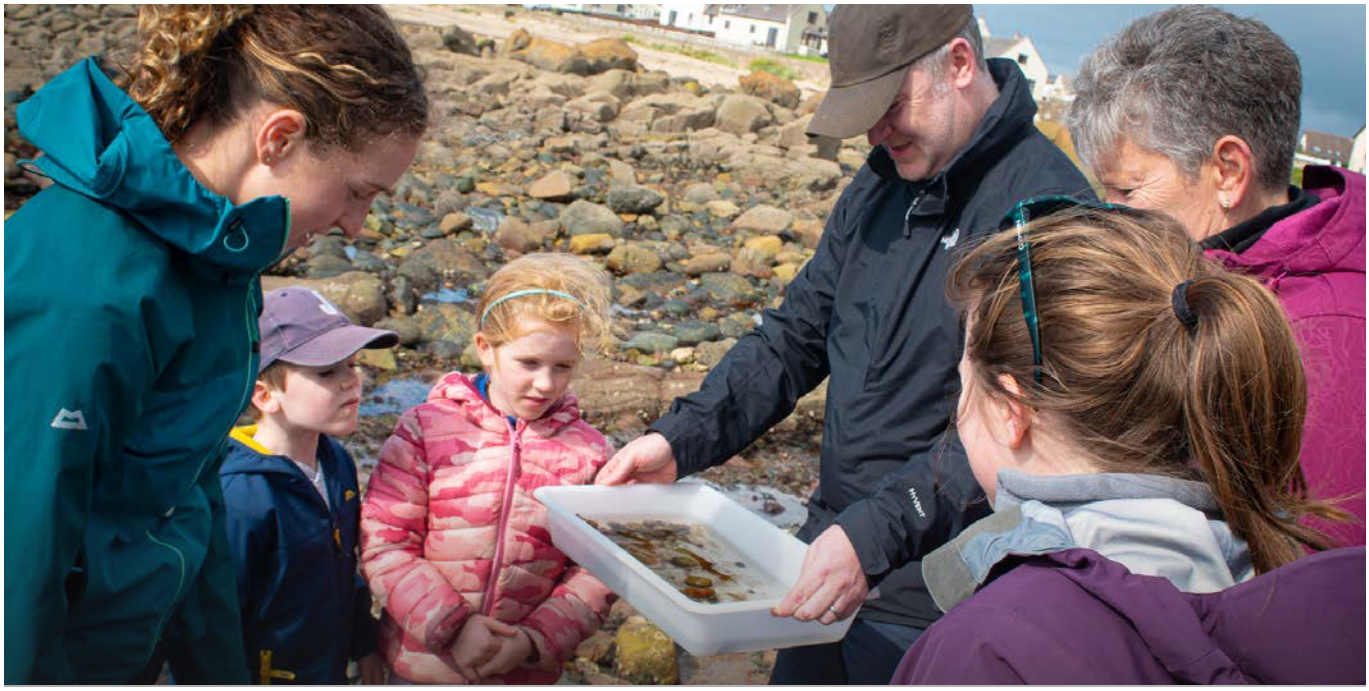
1 SCALE UP COMMUNITY-LED MARINE RECOVERY BY STREAMLINING LICENSING

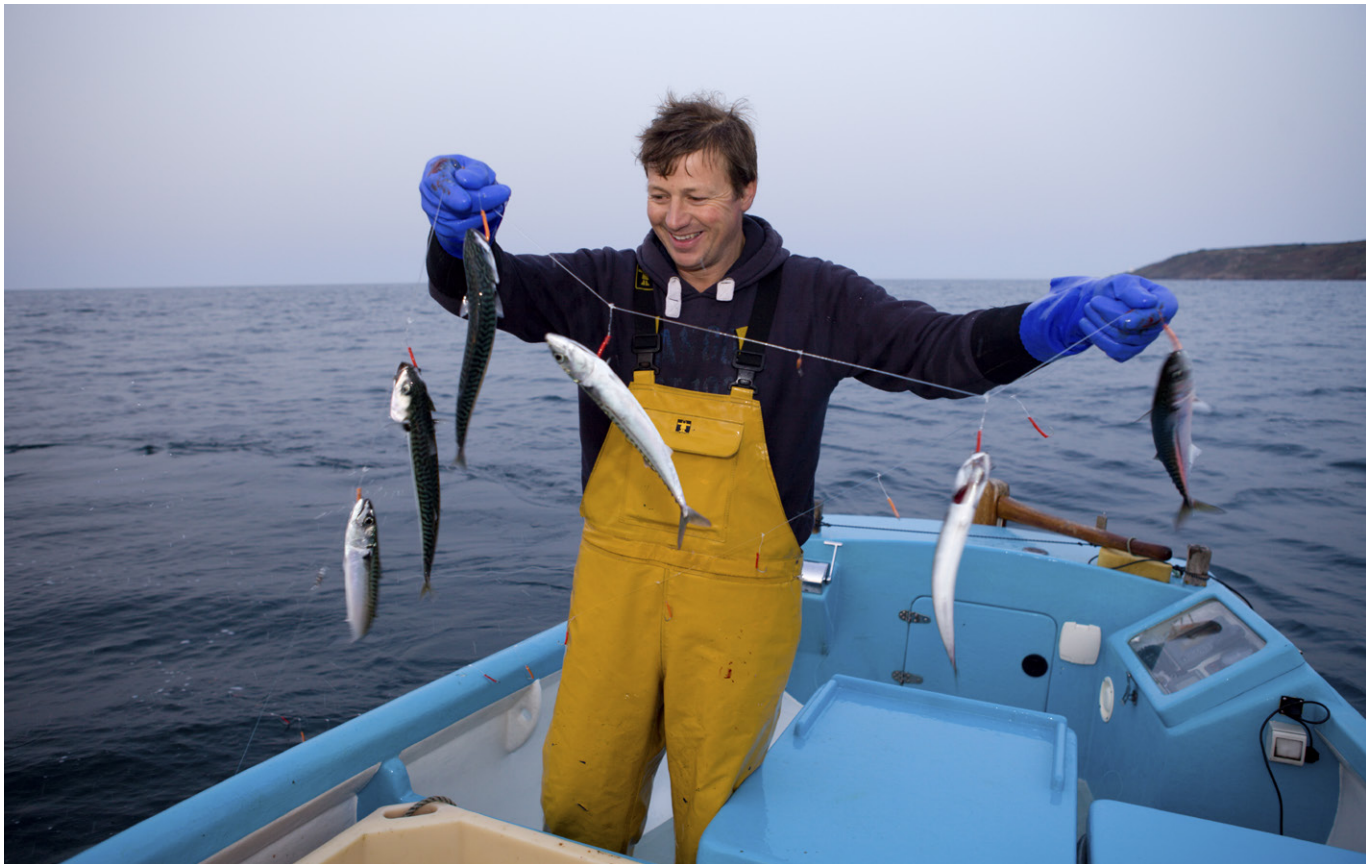
THE CHALLENGE

The current marine licensing system is too complex and burdensome for communities to navigate. Active marine restoration projects – seagrass or oyster restoration, for example – are subjected to the same regulatory framework as developers of new oil rigs and wind farms. This long, complex process is ill-adapted to such initiatives, because it considers only potential damage to the marine environment and has no scoring system to recognise the positive impacts of these rewilding projects. This is pushing away the very communities ready to lead the charge – a point frequently raised by members of Rewilding Britain's Rewilding Network.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

The UK Government must urgently reform its marine licensing system for non-commercial marine restoration to support the growth of community-led projects along the UK coastline. **It is time for a seascape licence** covering several habitats, which can maximise the recovery of natural processes connecting our marine habitats and species. This is a crucial step in facilitating the rewilding of our seas and supporting healthier and wealthier coastal communities.





2 UNLOCK MARINE COMMUNITY PROJECTS THROUGH NEW FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

THE CHALLENGE

Coastline restoration is an extremely costly process for local communities – and the short-term, government-supported trusts and grants on offer don't provide the long-term security needed to scale up restoration efforts. Community organisations are having to rely on a mixture of philanthropic grant funding, individual giving, membership revenue or micro-donations to deliver vital restoration programmes.

While there is increasing interest from financiers and investors in the sustainable blue economy, the Marine Conservation Society has found that barriers still hold investors back. These range from high level of risk to lack of data about the marine environment, to a limited pipeline of investible projects.

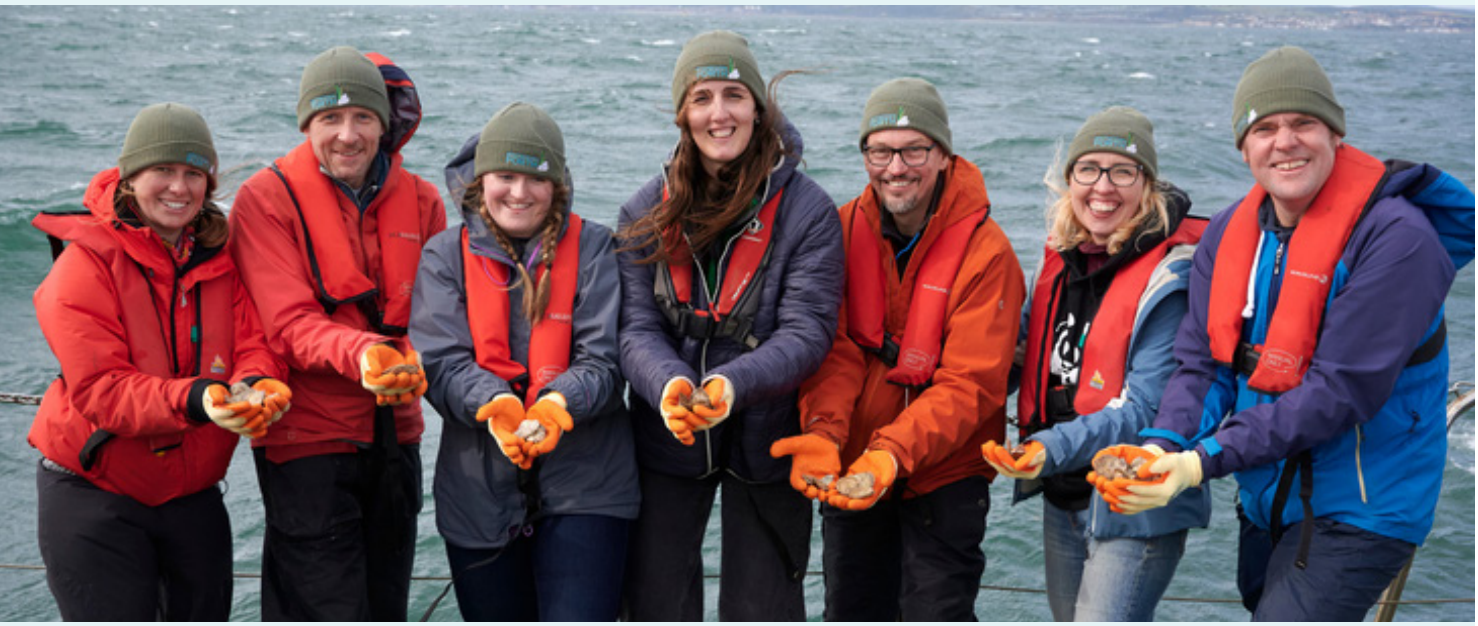
OUR RECOMMENDATION

The growth of sustainable private investment in marine restoration can only be catalysed by secure government funding streams for marine recovery projects. We need to move towards a future in which blended finance models such as blue bonds – a financial debt instrument that can raise funds for the Government to spend on marine recovery – can be used to scale up and de-risk initiatives, creating a pipeline of investible projects to attract further private finance.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Restoration Forth is a major community-inspired project to reintroduce European flat oysters and seagrass to the Firth of Forth, Scotland. These animals have long supported local communities. They provide a wealth of ecosystem services, enhance biodiversity, create nursery habitats and improve water quality by filtering up to 200 litres of water a day. Additionally, they contribute to the stabilisation of carbon in the marine environment. Overexploitation and industrial pollution, however, led to the complete collapse of what once was one of the largest native oyster reefs in the North Atlantic.

A fantastic team effort enabled the Marine Conservation Society, Heriot-Watt University, WWF and other project partners to return the first native oysters to the Firth of Forth in September 2023. By the end of 2024, the project had reintroduced 30,638 European flat oysters to the area. Restoration Forth is a clear example of how community-focused efforts can completely transform a marine environment for the benefit of people and nature.



LET OUR OCEAN LEAD

Removing pressures on the marine environment through effective protection, holistic marine spatial planning and a ban on the use of harmful 'forever chemicals' is crucial to giving nature a chance to lead its own recovery. Doing so will also benefit communities, by allowing our marine ecosystems to deliver a range of services, including mitigation for the changing climate and associated impacts.

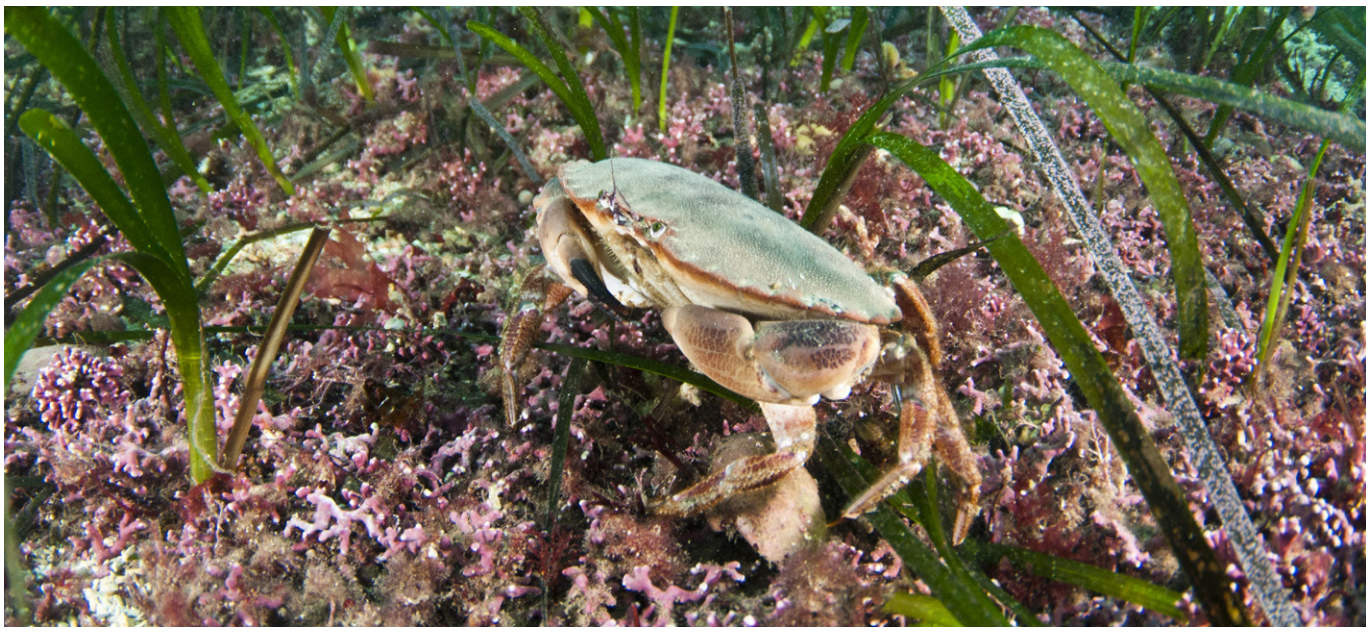
3 DELIVER GENUINE, WHOLE-SITE PROTECTION OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS ACROSS 30% OF UK SEAS

THE CHALLENGE

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) play a crucial role in the large-scale recovery of our seas – yet most of them are not given a chance to recover. Despite the UK having officially designated 38% of its waters, the degree of genuine protection varies greatly site by site. This is evidenced by the fact that only 7% of MPAs are protected from the most damaging fishing methods, such as bottom trawling and dredging. Many of our MPAs are also under increasing pressure from new developments, including offshore wind, creating additional burdens on already degraded habitats. This overlooks the interconnected nature of the marine environment and how significant natural processes are to the effective functioning of marine ecosystems.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

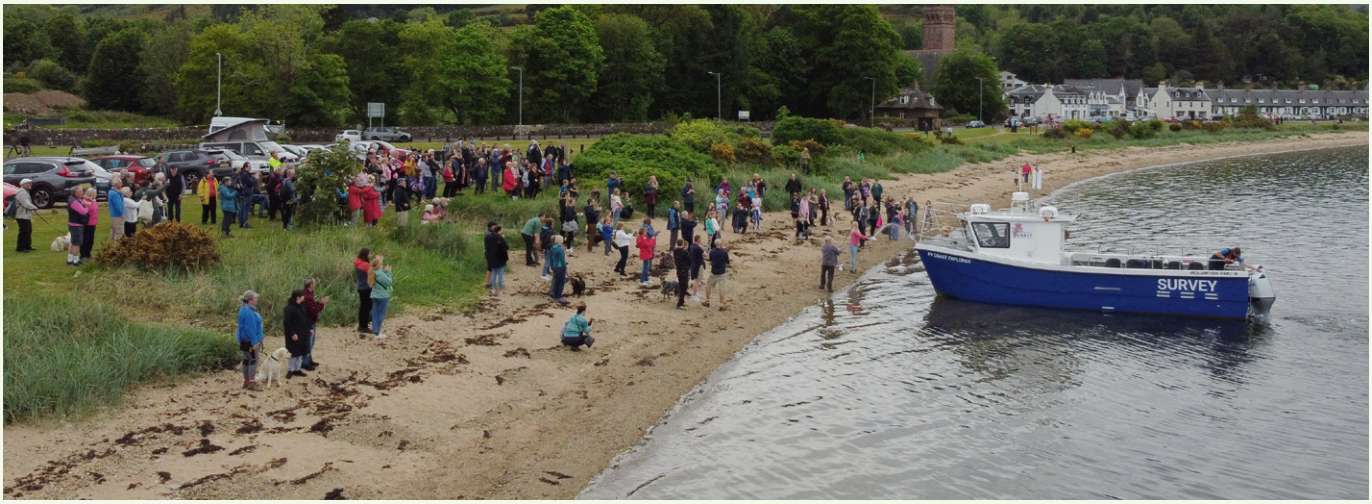
Only a whole-site approach to managing MPAs can maximise benefits for marine life and those depending on it. Management must consider damaging practices across the whole site, and aim to protect not just a single habitat or species, but the entire network. This doesn't have to preclude extractive activities entirely – selective, low-impact fishing could be permitted as long as it didn't hinder an area's recovery.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The success of the **Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST)** is a world-renowned example of how a local community can recover its marine environment and in the process support jobs and businesses. In 1995 COAST was set up by locals to reverse the decline of fish stocks and the destruction of marine habitats in the seas around the Isle of Arran, which is off the west coast of Scotland. The dramatic decline was largely a result of inshore bottom trawling and scallop dredging, which had depleted fish stocks, ravaged the sea floor and damaged vital nursery grounds for fish and shellfish.

The community succeeded in designating Scotland's first No Take Zone, which was subsequently embedded within the wider South Arran MPA. The return of marine life has been dramatic, with some species increasing by nearly 400% since 2008. This includes commercially important species such as lobster and scallop, therefore supporting the local traditional creel fishery. It has also contributed to the creation of a variety of local employment opportunities in marine restoration, community engagement, project management and research.



4 RECOGNISE THE ROLE OF SEAS IN ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS BY PROTECTING BLUE CARBON ECOSYSTEMS

THE CHALLENGE

Marine ecosystems that store blue carbon remain largely unprotected in the UK, despite their vital role in buffering the effects of climate change. No MPAs have been designated for the protection they offer against climate change impacts, leaving some blue carbon hotspots vulnerable to damage and to the re-release into the atmosphere of stored carbon. The UK legislation that underpins MPA designation does not directly protect areas, such as blue carbon habitats, that provide resilience against the physical impacts of climate change.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

Protecting blue carbon hotspots is critical to ensuring that our seas continue to play their part in tackling the greatest challenge of our time. These habitats often perform other important ecosystem functions too, such as improving water quality, and provide important nursing and feeding grounds for many types of marine life, meaning that their loss could have knock-on effects throughout the entire marine environment.

MPAs are not the only tool at our disposal. There is increasing global recognition of the role of Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMs) – sites outside of protected areas that are managed to achieve positive long-term outcomes for biodiversity and the vital ecosystem services it provides. Unlike MPAs, they do not need to be designated to protect specific habitats or species. Instead, their purpose is to protect areas providing high-value ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and storage, or those that serve as larval dispersal sites for species of commercial or ecological importance.

Enhancing our MPA network with OECMs that cover areas of high-value ecosystem services, such as blue carbon habitats, would both enrich the whole MPA network and support the conservation and recovery of blue carbon habitats.

5 INTRODUCE A MARINE SPATIAL PRIORITISATION PLAN THAT PRIORITISES NATURE RECOVERY, SUPPORTED BY A MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENT FUND

THE CHALLENGE

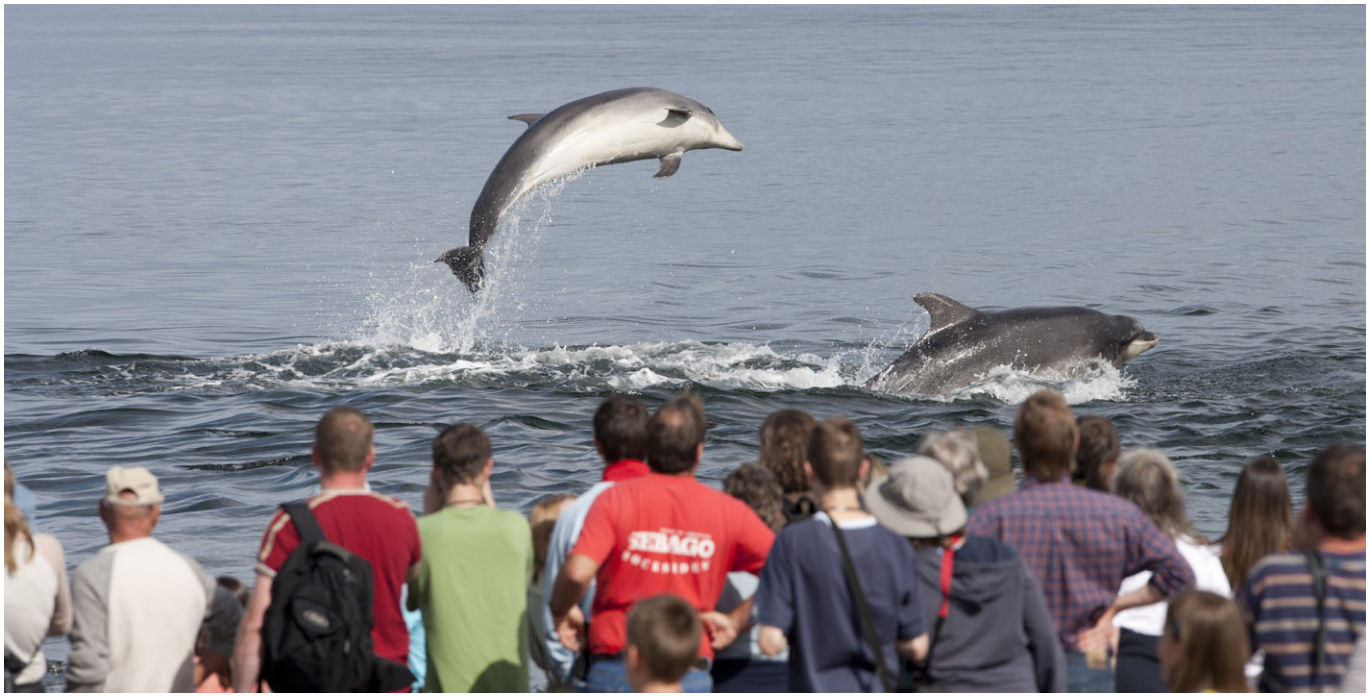
While offshore energy is crucial to helping us transition to Net Zero, the deployment of offshore infrastructure is placing additional pressure on already degraded marine ecosystems. While significant resource has resulted in the UK Government almost meeting its offshore wind targets, important nature targets, such as Good Environmental Status, as set out in the Marine Strategy Regulations (2010), continue to be missed.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

To enable large-scale marine recovery we cannot overburden marine ecosystems. **We are calling for the development of a holistic Marine Spatial Prioritisation Plan that assesses the amount of activity healthy ecosystems can sustain and looks to balance the range of demands placed on the sea.**

This should link existing initiatives, such as the Crown Estate's Whole of the Seabed Programme, the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan and Defra's Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme. It is crucial that it also includes sites which deliver important ecosystem services and don't qualify as MPAs, by incorporating OECMs.

The UK Government must also go beyond compensatory measures and prioritise enhancement through the introduction of a Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund. This would be separate from the Marine Recovery Fund, which is being set up to deliver compensatory measures only. A Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund already exists in Scotland (SMEEF), and an equivalent is being developed in Wales (MARINE Fund Cymru). An equivalent fund for English waters is crucial to enabling not only the maintenance of the status quo for marine ecosystems but improvement as well.



6 TACKLE THE SCOURGE OF CHEMICAL POLLUTION IN OUR OCEAN BY BANNING THE USE OF 'FOREVER CHEMICALS'

THE CHALLENGE

'Forever chemicals', which can remain in our seas for thousands of years, have contaminated the entire marine ecosystem and are now found in everything from plankton to porpoises. Perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) comprise over 10,000 man-made chemicals widely used in everyday consumer goods such as waterproof clothing, takeaway food containers, paints and non-stick pans. They are effective in repelling grease and water and are highly resistant to heat, but their 'useful' properties also mean that they barely degrade in the marine environment and that they are impossible to remove.

Studies show that they have negative impacts on the function of the blood, liver, kidney and immune systems in bottlenose dolphins, neurological impacts on polar bears and immune impacts in sea otters.[4] The full impacts on marine wildlife are yet to be discovered, however. Researchers at the Marine Conservation Society and the University of Portsmouth found that one type of PFAS (perfluorobutanoic acid) was present in seaweed at concentrations over 6,000 times higher than the surrounding water.[5] This raises huge concerns about PFAS spreading through the food chain.

Alternatives to PFAS are available, but only three PFAS out of several thousand are banned in the UK. Moreover, the levels of PFAS in the marine environment are not being routinely monitored.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

To effectively address the threat from 'forever chemicals' the UK Government must commit to a ban on the use of PFAS in consumer products, phase out all other uses and introduce mandatory and routine monitoring for all PFAS in the marine environment.

SUPPORT OUR OCEAN AND COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Marine rewilding is just as much about people as it is about nature. Through the creation of blue jobs and the growth of ocean literacy, we can create a better, wilder and wealthier future for the UK's coastal communities.

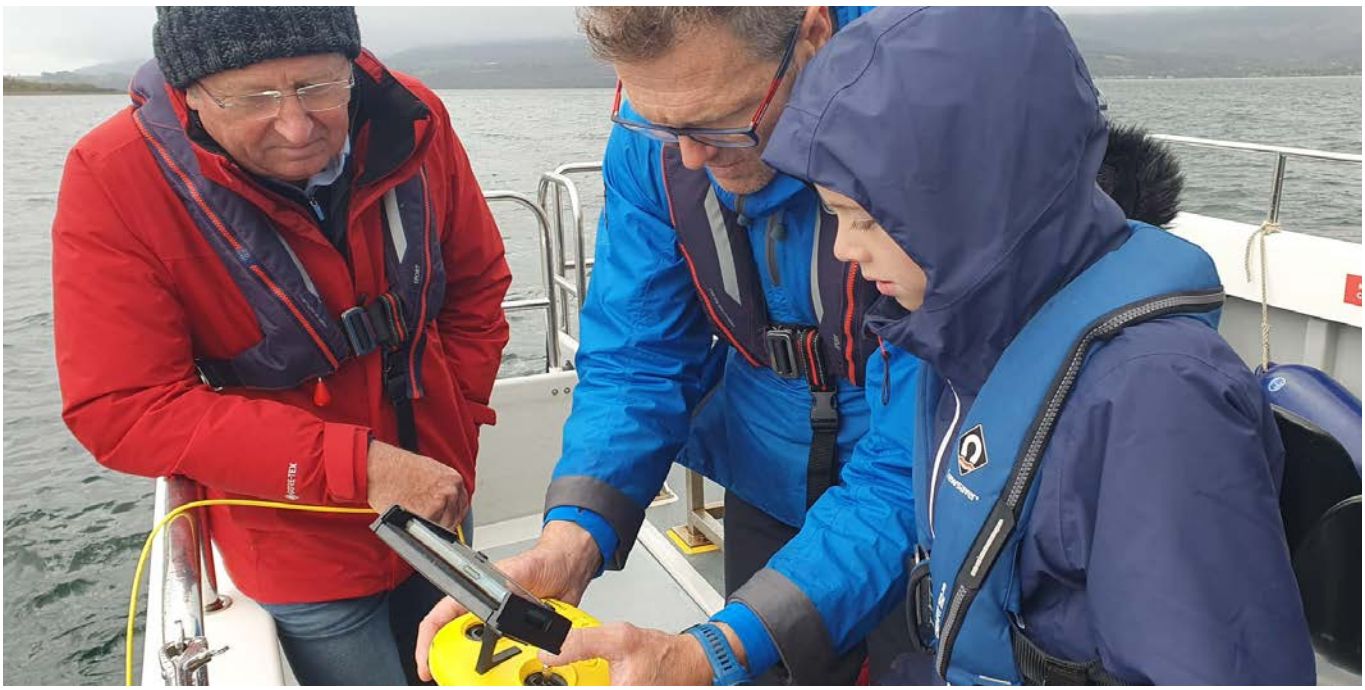
7 BUILD WORKFORCE CAPACITY AS PART OF A SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY

THE CHALLENGE

Nature-based solutions, such as protecting and restoring seagrass meadows and kelp forests, are essential to the creation of wilder seas. Yet they depend on a workforce for installation and maintenance, which currently is insufficient in number and skill to ensure large-scale restoration. Our marine natural capital is an untapped area of economic growth, centred in coastal communities. The right investment in marine conservation can unlock new opportunities in marine planning, biology, oceanography, aquaculture, GIS, environmental engineering and more. Figures from the US highlight its true potential: between 15 and 30 jobs were generated for every USD$1 million spent on coastal restoration projects.[6] That's six times more than the equivalent investment in oil and gas. Despite this evidence, spending on marine health is minimal compared to spending on terrestrial habitats; Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, Life Below Water, is the most underfunded of SDGs globally.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

We need investment and targeted support to build blue knowledge and skills in the UK. We believe that, beyond investment, targeted support is required to identify skills shortages and understand demand, and to engage and empower young people to access employment in nature-based sectors.



8 IMPROVE OCEAN LITERACY BY DELIVERING THE OCEAN LITERACY ACTION PLAN FOR ENGLAND

THE CHALLENGE

For too many people in the UK our ocean seems geographically distant and irrelevant to daily life – meaning individuals and communities are much less likely to care for their coastal environments. An analysis of UK press coverage found that our ocean is often portrayed in utilitarian terms, emphasising its economic value and environmental threats, rather than fostering a sense of personal connection or belonging amongst the public.[7] Six in ten teachers agree that key concerns such as ocean sustainability don't get enough attention in the curriculum.[8]

Conversely, research shows that being 'ocean literate' – having "an understanding of your influence on the ocean, and its influence on you" – can promote positive changes in the way we manage our ocean and resources.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

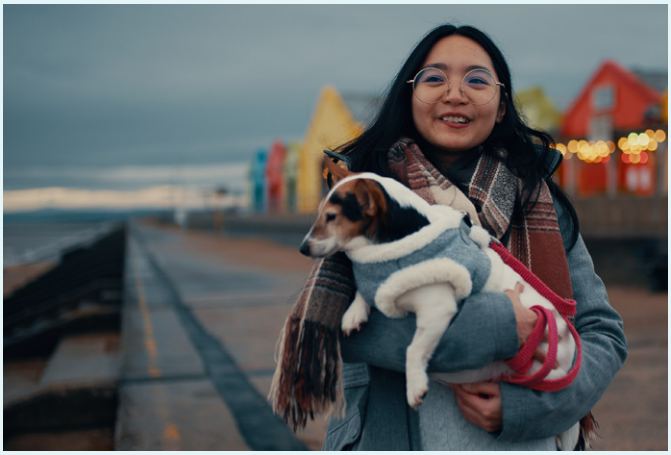
Our ocean could benefit significantly from enhanced ocean literacy, and we are calling on the UK Government to deliver its Ocean Literacy Strategy for England at pace. Wales is currently leading the way with its Y Môr a Ni, the UK's first national Ocean Literacy Strategy. It was co-designed by the Welsh Ocean Literacy Coalition, supported by 20 organisations and launched in 2025. It sets out a series of objectives to increase ocean literacy in Wales, with the aim of building a more sustainable relationship between people and the sea.

Defra, Diverse Marine Values Project and the Ocean Conservation Trust are co-developing an Ocean Literacy Strategy for England, which we welcome – and in the name of future generations we encourage them to deliver it soon.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Hiraeth Yn Y Môr is a Marine Conservation Society-led project designed to increase ocean literacy locally and support sustainable management of the Liverpool Bay Special Protection Area. Through a community steering group – the One Ocean Forum – the Marine Conservation Society facilitated the co-design of a programme of ocean literacy activities, staging several events during the project's two-year lifetime. Participation in the project increased knowledge of the sea amongst participants, with the resulting evaluation showing that 100% of respondents intended to carry out some form of pro-ocean activity in the following year. Participants also reported a positive impact on overall community wellbeing.

At the national level, the project worked closely with the Welsh Ocean Literacy Coalition on the production of the Wales Ocean Literacy Strategy – the first of its kind in Europe.



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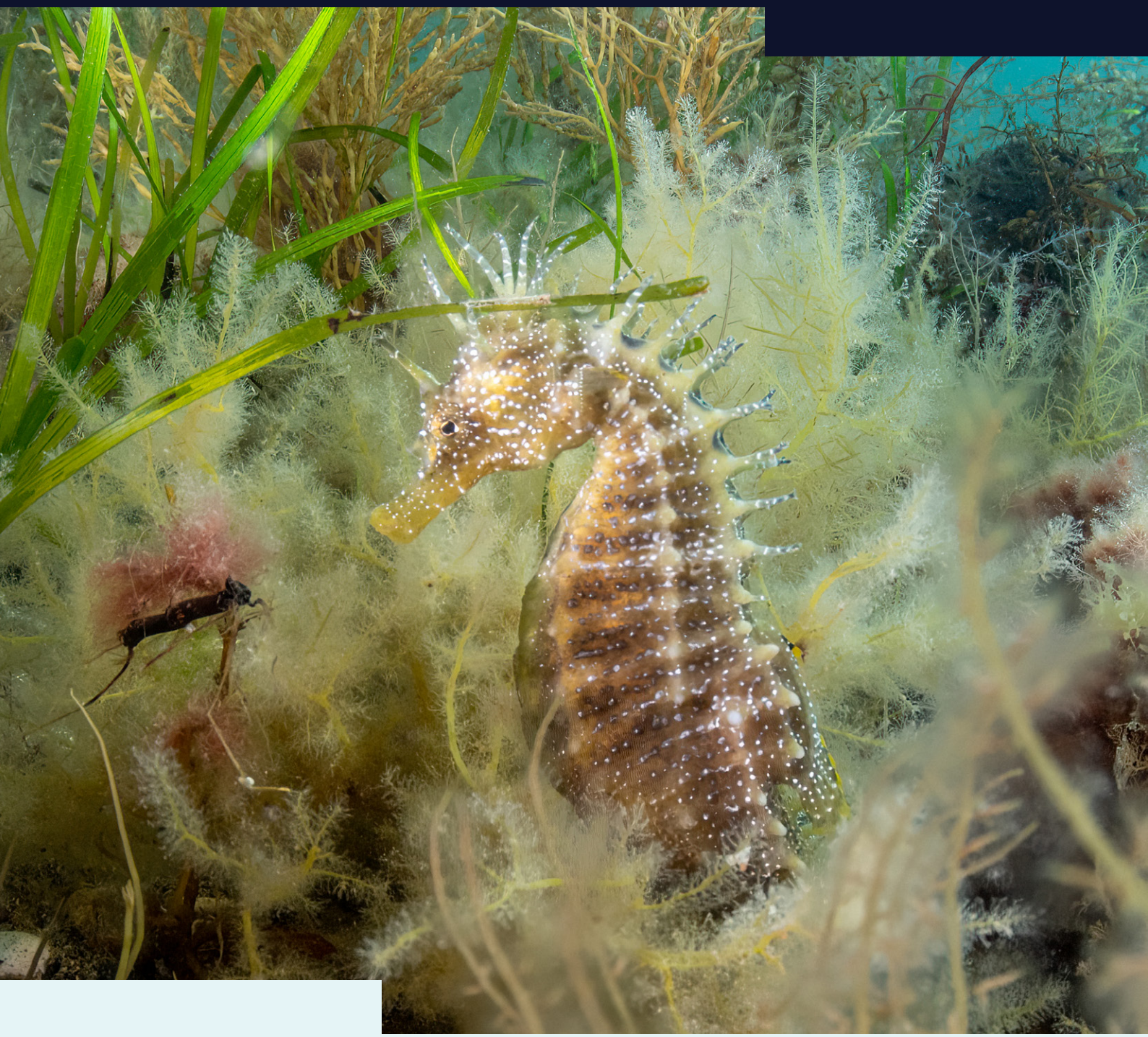

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