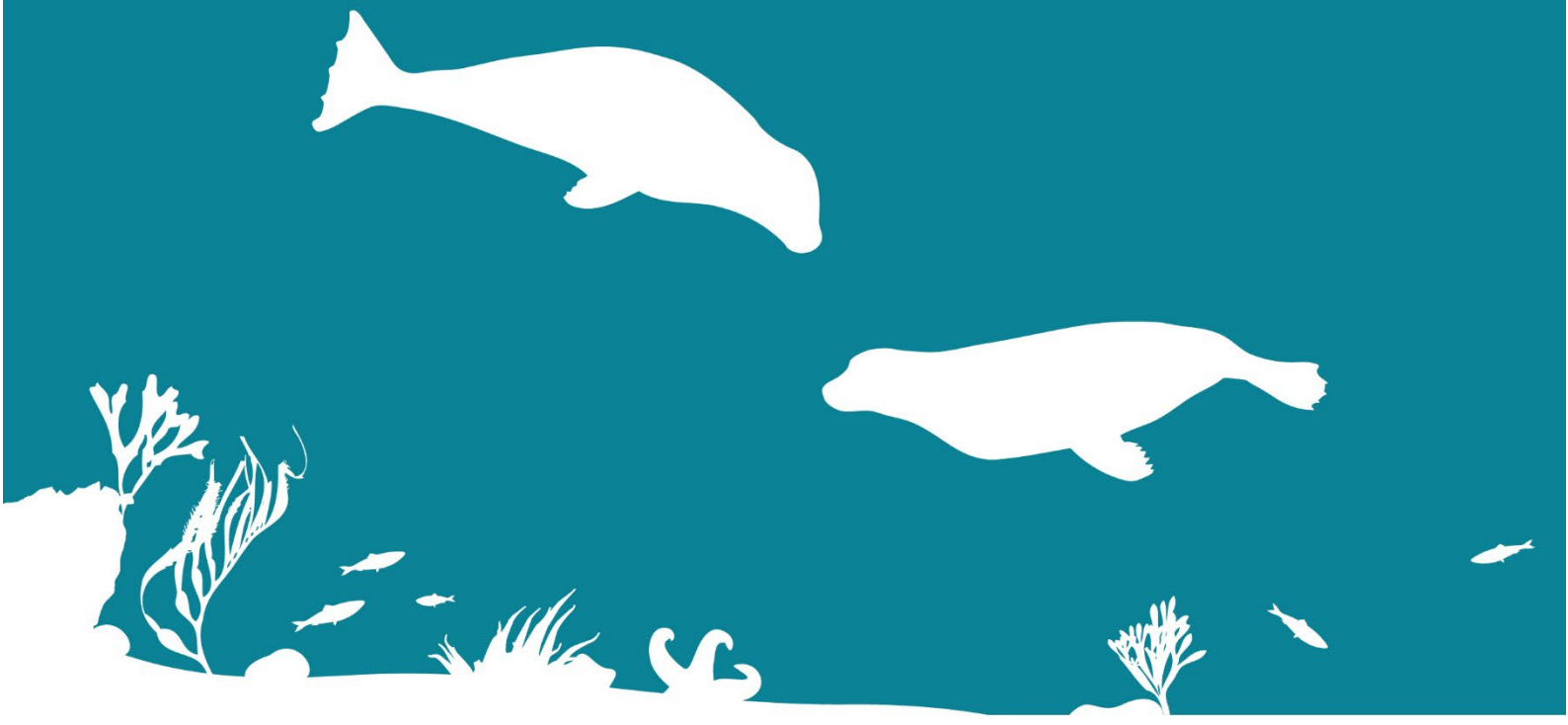
The Wildlife Trusts

Our Ocean, Our Future, Our Responsibility.

Global to Local - The UN Oceans Conference declaration and what the UK needs to do to implement it



"The ocean is fundamental to life on our planet and to our future. The ocean is an important source of the planet's biodiversity and plays a vital role in the climate system and water cycle. The ocean provides a range of ecosystem services, supplies us with oxygen to breathe, contributes to food security, nutrition and decent jobs and livelihoods, acts as a sink and reservoir of greenhouse gases and protects biodiversity, provides a means for maritime transportation, including global trade, forms an important part of our natural and cultural heritage, and plays as essential role in sustainable development, a sustainable ocean-based economy and poverty eradication."

- Political declaration of the 2022 United Nations Ocean Conference

What do The Wildlife Trusts want from the 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference?

We know how important and valuable our ocean is, and yet it is still under incredible pressure from many sources. Our Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are being degraded, unsustainable fishing, exploitation and development continue to impinge on our ability to reach Good Environmental Status (GES)[1], and pollution from land run-off, plastic and noise is still a major problem, to name just a few. These pressures are altering the ecological balance, depleting resources beyond safe biological limits and jeopardizing the health of the sea, the same sea on which we all depend. **There is no time to lose, we must take responsibility, our future depends on it.**

We must ensure that competing interests do not cause further loss of habitats and wildlife. The recovery and restoration of our marine environments are within our grasp, if effective action is implemented now. With the right guidance and ambition, we can achieve a gold standard of marine management, with thriving seas and a world-leading blue economy. A healthy marine environment would help to provide economic security and benefits for all citizens and help inspire a new generation to act as responsible stewards of our seas in decades to come.

We are halfway through the UN Ocean Decade but at the global as well as local level, action is not advancing at the speed or scale required to meet the targets and ambition within Sustainable Development Goal 14 – Life Below Water[2]. Despite great ambition, many of the commitments signed up to at the 2022 United Nations Ocean Conference have yet to be implemented here in the UK. The 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference is a pivotal moment **for the UK Government to fulfil its responsibilities**, to express how it intends to progress to

[1] Good Environmental Status (GES) is defined as the environmental status of marine waters where these provide ecologically diverse and dynamic ocean and seas which are clean, healthy and productive within their intrinsic conditions, and the use of the marine environment is at a level that is sustainable, thus safeguarding the potential for uses and activities by current and future generations.
[2] Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Goal 14 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

meet its global commitments to reverse marine biodiversity loss and accelerate action to protect and sustainably use our seas back home.

The Wildlife Trusts suggests the UK Government needs to take the following actions to ensure international commitments are met at home. These are arranged under each of the 10 Ocean Action Panels which will take place at the United Nations Ocean Conference[3].

What actions need to be taken at home once world leaders agree on their goals at the 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference?

1. Conserving, sustainably managing and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems including deep-sea ecosystems.

Despite often being a key player on the international stage for both climate action and the conservation of biodiversity, the UK has not backed this up with implementation at home. Our international environmental leadership threatens to be undermined by the fact that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on the planet.

The UK Government was instrumental in securing the 30x30 target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and has committed to meeting it in our waters, but despite the deadline being less than 5 years away, effective management in all Marine Protected Areas has yet to be implemented, with many sites continuing to be degraded by offshore development and destructive fishing[4].

In our wider seas, the UK Marine Strategy should provide the framework to take action and monitor progress towards achieving Good Environmental Status, but this is currently completely inadequate, with failures against the majority of indicators.

Our seas are very busy and they are getting busier every year. A strategic, spatial approach to planning all activities at sea is needed to reduce and avoid conflicts and make the best use of the finite space available. This approach needs to be fully cross-departmental to ensure policies for planning, transport, energy, food and nature are all aligned. It should address management at the sea/land interface and collaborate with our neighbouring states on planning across political boundaries. It should cover all activities to avoid unintentional harm and maximise the benefits of healthy seas. In particular, the UK Government's mission to deliver clean power by 2030 must be achieved in a nature-positive way, avoiding harm to marine biodiversity; we cannot solve one global crisis by making another worse.

Urgent global action is also needed to protect marine habitats that store carbon to address the accelerating climate and nature emergencies.

The UK Government needs to:

- End damaging activities including bottom-trawling in our Marine Protected Areas and manage all sites as whole ecosystems rather than on a feature-based approach.
- Avoid damaging developments, including offshore wind, in all seabed Marine Protected Areas.
- Use Marine Protected Areas to protect blue carbon as well as biodiversity, making these sites a win-win for the nature and climate crises.

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[3] UNOC3 Ocean Action Panels links.pdf
[4] UK and Global Biodiversity Framework - The Wildlife Trusts 2024.pdf

- Review the UK Marine Strategy and implement effective measures to achieve Good Environmental Status for our seas.
- Develop a comprehensive, cross-departmental, national marine spatial plan to support the recovery of our seas.

2. Increasing ocean-related scientific cooperation, knowledge, capacity building, marine technology, and education to strengthen the science-policy interface for ocean health.

Issues such as dolphin strandings and plastic and sewage pollution put the media spotlight on our seas, but public understanding of marine ecosystems remains low. This is largely because the ocean's incredible diversity of habitats and wildlife is hidden beneath the waves, making the effects of everyday human activities on marine life less visible. There is a growing number of people using and valuing our seas, becoming ocean advocates, but further investment and commitment to improving ocean literacy in all sectors is still required.

Policy decisions must be based on evidence, but marine research and data collection can be incredibly costly. Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies must have the adequate funds to provide advice and monitor the effectiveness of management measures. Evidence generation can take many forms, but citizen science must be valued as a cost effective, robust source of data.

The UK Government must:

- Integrate baseline monitoring, new research, and our understanding of the marine environment into marine spatial planning, to make improvements in the planning and use of our seas.
- Ensure the management of our seas is adaptable and responsive to advances in our knowledge and technological developments.
- Support cost-effective citizen science projects such as Seasearch and Shoresearch, that monitor the state of our coasts.

3. Mobilizing finance for ocean actions in the support of SDG14.

To halt the decline of nature and put our seas into recovery, we must ensure that every marine development results in a lasting improvement to marine biodiversity. This will create resilient habitats and species that can adapt to both climate change and development pressures.

Similar to Biodiversity Net Gain on land, the concept of Marine Net Gain aims to ensure developments and damaging activities at sea actively contribute to the recovery of the marine environment. Given the scale and pace of offshore wind farm development and its associated infrastructure, Marine Net Gain must urgently become a mandatory requirement for marine activities and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. It would support the UK government's commitment to leaving the environment in a better state for future generations. To achieve true environmental gain, any measure must be additional to existing activities, based on ecologically sound principles, and strategically co-ordinated.

Actively restoring offshore marine habitats remains highly experimental and expensive. The most effective strategy for recovery offshore is to remove existing pressures, thereby creating the environmental headroom ecosystems need to regenerate. While developers may prefer active restoration methods, it is crucial to recognise that inappropriate interventions — such as replacing sediment with hard structures — can cause long-term habitat degradation. A successful Marine Net Gain framework must prioritise ecological integrity over short-term fixes.

The UK Government must:

- Make Marine Net Gain mandatory in the marine environment for developments of any size, including linear developments such as cables.
- Ensure the development of Marine Net Gain takes an ecological needs approach.
- Develop Marine Net Gain strategically to ensure quick progress towards recovery and resilience of the marine environment.

4. Preventing and significantly reducing marine pollution of all kinds, particularly from land-based activities.

The Water Framework Directive aims to achieve Good Ecological Status (GES) in all estuarine, transitional, and coastal water bodies by 2040. This also includes provisions to reduce nutrient pollution entering estuaries and harbours. However, as it stands, we are currently well off track in the UK, with a mere 29% of estuaries and coastal bodies in Good Ecological Status.

Agricultural run-off is a serious issue contributing significantly to nutrient pollution in our rivers and coastal waters. By taking a catchment scale approach and building strong relationships with farmers we can find solutions that benefit farm businesses as well as wildlife and the wider environment, both on land and downstream at sea.

The UK Government needs to:

- Strengthen River Basin Management Plans to ensure water bodies meet Good Ecological Status.
- Designate more areas under the Urban Wastewater Treatment (UWWT) Directive to reduce sewage discharges and implement stricter nitrate and phosphate limits to protect not just our rivers, but also our seas.
- Protect the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) budget to support farmers in tackling farm pollution.
- Develop and implement strategies to address the ongoing problems associated with marine litter, such as improving the understanding of marine litter pathways and trends and introducing sector by sector litter minimisation and management practices.

5. Fostering sustainable fisheries management including supporting small scale fishers

To secure the long-term viability of the fishing industry and the ocean, we must rethink how we manage fish stocks and fisheries. This includes building resilience to external factors, such as climate change. Many stocks are still fished at levels above scientific advice and use unselective gears leading to the bycatch of unwanted fish and other animals, including protected species such as dolphins, sharks and seabirds.

Despite major technological advancements, much of the industry continues to rely on archaic and destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling. If we are to reach net zero and allow our seas to recover, we need to develop less impactful ways of fishing that protect wildlife and the carbon stored in the seabed, and support fishers deploying new technologies.

All fishing activities must be sustainable, not only to conserve the fish stocks they rely upon but to protect the wider ecosystem, and the futures of coastal communities that depend on it for

their livelihoods. For instance, we should avoid capturing forage fish, as they are vital food sources for many bird and cetacean species and benefit the climate if left in the ocean.

The UK Government needs to:

- Ensure catch limits align with scientific evidence – all commercially exploited fish and shellfish stocks should be maintained above the maximum sustainable yield (MSY).
- Minimise bycatch through the adoption of technical measures.
- Support a just transition for the fishing sector that fosters an ecological approach to fishing, supports small scale fishers and ensures the sector's long-term viability.

6. Advancing sustainable ocean-based economies, sustainable maritime transport, and coastal community resilience, leaving no one behind.

Not only do our seas help produce the oxygen we breathe and store carbon, but they also provide extensive economic benefits, such as through food provision, tourism, transport and energy. As an island nation, no-one lives more than 80 miles from the coast and the sea remains a key part of our life here in the UK, supporting livelihoods and trade. A healthy ocean offers extensive health and well-being benefits with the recreational and restorative opportunities it provides.

The UK Government has an opportunity to develop a strong 'Blue Growth' strategy. Sectors such as coastal tourism, aquaculture, marine biotechnology and ocean energy have high potential for employment and growth, working within safe environmental limits, but this should not be at the expense of our marine wildlife.

We must ensure a sustainable blue economy is achieved. Productive, diverse, healthy, and resilient marine ecosystems are the bedrock of a sustainable blue economy. With the UK Government's agenda focused on jobs and growth, it will be essential to ensure that environmental protection and sustainability of maritime activities remain central to marine planning and management.

The intent of the Government's projections for offshore wind must be planned in a way that conserves and restores nature, protects blue carbon stores and is fair to other industries, such as the fishing sector.

Coastal communities can and should be the guardians of their localities. By working with these groups, local issues can be identified and addressed more effectively.

The UK Government must:

- Develop and deliver a prioritised marine spatial plan to reduce conflict and ensure a sustainable blue economy for all.
- Avoid development and prevent damage in Marine Protected Areas, to build resilience to support sustainable economies.
- Ensure coastal communities are listened to, and just and fair transitions are supported towards sustainable practices.

7. Leveraging ocean, climate, and biodiversity interlinkages.

Even in their current degraded state, UK seas could capture up to three times as much carbon dioxide as the UK's combined forests. Our Blue Carbon Mapping Project worked in partnership with scientists from the Scottish Association of Marine Science to provide the first estimate of

carbon stored in UK seabed habitats, including in Marine Protected Areas[5]. The findings of this research, published in 2024, found that 240 million tonnes of organic carbon are stored in just the top 10cm of the UK's seabed sediments, with 43% of this carbon stored in existing MPAs. Seabed disturbances, including from bottom trawling and offshore development, are identified as significant threats to these blue carbon stores. These vital blue carbon stores must be afforded better protection. Such protection would help meet climate and biodiversity targets, including net-zero and protecting 30% of seas by 2030.

The UK Government needs to:

- Stop damaging activities within the whole area of Marine Protected Areas to protect biodiversity *and* carbon.
- Include blue carbon in our marine planning, and mandate blue carbon to be included in all impact assessments.
- Invest in more research into blue carbon.

8. Promoting and supporting all forms of cooperation, especially at the regional and subregional level.

Our seas are all connected, wildlife does not adhere to our political boundaries. Utilising conventions, which touch on many cross-cutting themes, offers the opportunity for member states to work together to find collective solutions to support nature's recovery.

Cooperating at the regional and subregional levels offers the opportunity to work collectively and accelerate actions to support nature's recovery. Tackling challenges such as climate change, ocean acidification, and rising sea levels and temperatures is critical to achieving the goals of the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR).

The UK Government needs to:

- Leverage the cross-cutting elements within the OSPAR convention to support collective action with other member states.
- Agree on an ambitious underwater noise reduction strategy with other coastal states in the Northeast Atlantic.
- Ensure that OSPAR and domestic legislation, including the Environmental Improvement Plan, implement international obligations which are signed up to at UNOC.

9. Promoting the role of sustainable food from the ocean for poverty eradication and food security.

The long-term future of the UK's fisheries depends on a restored and healthy marine environment. UK fisheries need to be managed holistically as part of an ecosystem level approach. There is substantial evidence that Marine Protected Areas can help achieve sustainable fisheries through the 'spill over' effect – when effectively managed, marine life within a Marine Protected Area becomes more abundant and spills over into the wider area outside, helping to restock our seas[6].

5 www.wildlifetrusts.org/blue-carbon

6 https://www.lymebayreserve.co.uk/science/

Sustainable aquaculture could in the future be one way of producing protein and other products with a lower environmental impact as well as playing a role in the UK's food security and alternatives to plastics.

The UK Government must:

- Incentivise fishing methods which maximise social and economic gain while minimising environmental impacts.
- Support and encourage consumption of local sustainably caught seafood.
- Develop a UK sustainable aquaculture strategy and support pioneer low impact farms with seed funding to develop wider markets, including the need to monitor to better understand their benefits and effects.

10. Enhancing the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the UNCLOS agreement.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Agreement to conserve marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), otherwise known as the High Seas Treaty, has yet to be ratified by the UK Government. Whilst we commend the Government for their support of this treaty and its partnership with the Global Ocean Alliance to work towards 30% of the world's seas managed by 2030, action is required at home to ensure our own network of MPAs in UK waters is effectively managed to contribute towards the 30x30 target.

The UK Government must:

- Ratify the BBNJ / High Seas Treaty urgently to stay on track with the global goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's ocean by 2030.
- Damage to Marine Protected Areas must be stopped, through a presumption against damaging development within seabed Marine Protected Areas, including offshore wind farms, and byelaws that ban destructive fishing practices in MPAs implemented immediately.

Leading by example – what we as The Wildlife Trusts are doing to achieve sustainable development goal 14

The Wildlife Trusts are the largest marine environmental Non-Governmental Organisation in the UK. With local Wildlife Trusts and a central charity, together we have over 100 marine staff and 900,000 members. We work with a huge variety of people, from fishers and farmers to community leaders and politicians, with the aim of better protecting our wildlife and wild places, increasing people's awareness and understanding of the natural world, and deepening people's relationship with it so they can take meaningful action.

Together we are working to conserve and sustainably use UK seas:

- We campaign for the protection of our seas, advising on the designation and protection of Marine Protected Areas and measures to achieve Good Environmental Status.

- We advise on offshore development and work across government and with regulators, statutory nature conservation bodies and industry to influence future policy that has nature recovery at the heart of all future planning decisions.
- We inspire people about our seas, holding events, leading citizen science projects and empowering local communities to learn about and speak up for our seas. Our monitoring work and citizen science projects are mapping our seas and collecting vital data on their health, and by working with schools and young people, we are inspiring a generation of advocates for the sea.
- We advise on fisheries management measures, support sustainable fisheries and encourage the public and businesses to make good seafood choices.
- We are helping bring our coasts back to life by restoring coastal habitats and species, such as saltmarsh, seagrass, oysters and kelp.

Read more about our work: https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/marine-conservation-and-wildlife-trusts