

PRESS RELEASE, EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01, 20th March 2024

Rewilding projects show recovery of marine wildlife and habitats is possible

To celebrate *World Rewilding Day* (20th March 2024) the [Marine Conservation Society](#) shares some of its most successful restorative projects.

Gareth Cunningham, Director of Conservation at the Marine Conservation Society said, "We know that when we give wildlife space to recover, we see results. From restoring seagrass meadows in local areas, to protecting sensitive areas of seabed from damaging construction and bottom trawling, we have proof that we can reverse biodiversity decline.

"We need restoration and rewilding of our seas at scale. Our seas are not only home to magnificent marine life, but vital carbon stores that are crucial for combating the climate crisis and providing for our economy."

Recovery of biodiversity can be done by actively restoring an area with species that once thrived, or by actively managing people to allow natural recovery. Marine recovery needs a mix of these approaches depending on where the area is and how badly it has been degraded.

Data from the charity provides valuable evidence that marine wildlife and habitats can be recover if given the space and opportunity to do so.

Significant seagrass regrowth

Seagrass protects our coasts from coastal erosion and is one of the most important species in helping us to tackle the climate crisis, absorbing 10% of the total carbon buried by ocean sediment.

The Marine Conservation Society and Ocean Conservation Trust have reported a 212% increase in seagrass cover over the last four years, since replacing traditional moorings with new floating moorings within the mooring area of Cawsands Bay, Plymouth Sound.

The chain from traditional swing mooring systems can drag along the seabed, harming seagrass and preventing ocean recovery. The new *Advanced Mooring System* uses buoys, floats or bungee-type devices to keep the chain off the seabed.

For the UK to reach its goal of net zero by 2025, rewilding of marine ecosystems that play a key role in carbon capture, such as seagrass, is crucial. Many fish species also use seagrass as nursery or feeding areas, highlighting the importance of replacing traditional block-and-chain moorings for the restoration of seagrass meadows and increasing the biodiversity of our ocean.

Oyster restoration

Oysters are known as 'ecosystem engineers', creating reefs that encourage the formation of complex microhabitats. These reefs provide a surface for species such as barnacles and mud crabs to live on, contributing to a diverse marine ecosystem. Oysters are filter feeders and improve water quality by removing harmful pollutants and chemicals from the ocean, as well as extracting and storing carbon from the atmosphere.

The Marine Conservation Society is a founding partner of the [Dornoch Environmental Enhancement Project](#) (DEEP) which is working to reintroduce Native European oysters to the Dornoch Firth. These oysters were once abundant in the area but have been absent for the last century due to overfishing. Since the project began, tens of thousands of oysters have been reintroduced to the Dornoch Firth with an end goal of four million.

In Wales, through the Natur am Byth project, Marine Conservation Society are working with partners to restore the native oyster population of Milford Haven. While early days, in this rewilding story, work is underway on this exciting four year project.

Rewilding of ecosystem engineers is a conservation priority, and the ongoing work of innovative projects such as DEEP and Natur am Byth is critical for protecting the long-term health and biodiversity of our ocean.

Recovering UK marine wildlife and habitats

Rewilding isn't just about putting species back in the water. For the open seas of the UK, recovery of our wildlife often means creating the space and removing external pressures for them to recover. This can be achieved by manging damaging activities such as bottom-towed fishing, away from sensitive areas or removing them entirely.

Analysis conducted by the Marine Conservation Society on fishing activity in Marine Protected Areas (MPA) shows just how effective byelaws removing bottom-towed fishing from sensitive areas can be to allow wildlife stocks and the seabed to recover.

Since a recent byelaw removing bottom-towed fishing the English Dogger Bank MPA came into effect in 2022, the area has seen a 98% decrease in seabed fishing. The steep decline in damaging fishing activity is evidence of how effective proper protections in these areas can be.

As of January 2024, a further 13 byelaws have been introduced, protecting 12% of the English seabed from bottom-towed fishing, with the UK Government aiming to fully protect all English offshore MPAs by the end of 2024. As well as providing protection for a range of marine species such as the pink sea fan and sea anemone, safeguarding these areas is estimated to be worth over three billion pounds to the UK economy.

The charity is calling for the UK Government to support and incentivise a just transition of the UK fishing industry away from unsustainable, high impact practices towards sustainable, low impact and climate supporting solutions. This should include significantly reducing fishing damage in Marine Protected Areas that have been designated to protect the seabed and other vulnerable areas.

Marine wildlife and habitat recovery in UK Overseas Territories

The Marine Conservation Society has been supporting the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) for over 20 years with the conservation of their marine wildlife and management of Marine Protected Areas.

Since 2016, the charity's work on the Blue Belt Programme has enhanced marine protection across more than 4.3 million km² of marine environment. Blue belt has been supporting management of local fisheries to reach sustainable catch levels and ensure best practice, while also funding outreach projects to improve waste management and reduce plastic waste.

The UKOTs are home to 94% of the UK's biodiversity, including hydrothermal vents, whale sharks, and six of the seven species of sea turtle. Protecting these areas from the pressures of overfishing, pollution, and tourism is a critical step towards rewilding of the marine ecosystem.

To support this recovery, and the vital role the UKOTS play in our Ocean health, the Marine Conservation Society is calling for the UK Government to maintain current levels of support for the Blue Belt programme by committing at least £50 million from 2026 for the following five years.

Please get in touch if you would like to speak with a member of the team about any of these topics.

- Ends -

Press Contact

Evie Martin, Media Relations Manager (evie.martin@mcsuk.org / 07891 057102)

Lauren O'Brien, PR & Events Officer (lauren.obrien@mcsuk.org)

Notes to Editors

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is the UK's leading ocean charity, working towards cleaner, better-protected, healthier seas. The charity highlights the importance of our ocean, and the life within it, through working with governments, communities, and industry to take action to restore and protect the marine environment.

The Marine Conservation Society and Ocean Conservation Trust's Advanced Mooring System project is part funded by the [EU LIFE funded ReMEDIES project](#) seeks to reduce the impact of recreational activities (largely boating) on the seabed in five south coast Marine Protected Areas. It is doing so by supporting the replacement of up to 79 traditional swing moorings with Advanced Mooring Systems between 2019 and 2024.

The Marine Conservation Society is a proud partner of the [Dornoch Environmental Enhancement Project](#), formed in 2014 by The Glenmorangie Company with the Marine Conservation Society and Heriot-Watt University.

[Great Blue Ocean](#) is a coalition between the Marine Conservation Society, the Blue Marine Foundation, Greenpeace, the Pew Trusts, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Zoological Society of London. The Blue Belt Programme is a UK Government initiative with a goal to protect and sustainably manage over four million km² of oceans around the UK Overseas Territories.

Byelaws in Marine Protected Areas - In June 2022 a byelaw came into force that banned damaging fishing activities from four of English offshore Marine Protected Areas: Dogger Bank Special Area of Conservation; Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge Special Area of Conservation; South Dorset Marine Conservation Zone; The Canyons Marine Conservation Zone. Please find more [info here](#).