

Science for Environment Policy

Users value Marine Spatial Planning in pilot project

A pilot Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) project in the UK has found MSP to be a useful approach in managing marine waters sustainably. Sharing the knowledge and experiences gained in developing the Shetland Islands' Marine Spatial Plan (SMSP) can help other authorities in the process of developing similar plans, says the project team.

This is timely, as European Commission proposals¹ for a common EU framework for MSP and integrated coastal management were debated by Member States during 2013. The resulting Directive² establishing a framework for Maritime Spatial Planning was adopted by the European Parliament in 2014 and will require Member States to develop Maritime Spatial Plans by 2021, applying an ecosystem-based approach to support sustainable development and growth in the maritime sector.

In 2006, the Shetland Islands, UK, produced a Marine Spatial Plan³ as a pilot study to test the MSP approach to the sustainable management of Scotland's coastal and marine environment. The Plan, developed by an MSP project team and assisted by local stakeholders and the community, provides a policy framework to help the local authority guide the placement of future aquaculture developments in coastal and marine waters. Although use of the Shetland Islands' Marine Spatial Plan (SMSP) has been voluntary until now, the local authority is in the process of adopting it as Supplementary Guidance to its Local Development Plan in 2014.

In 2012, the SMSP's project team reviewed the usability and effectiveness of the plan. The review provided a valuable synopsis of how the plan has progressed and shows a good example of 'learning by doing'. The project team also believes the pilot study will be useful for other comparable regions when developing marine spatial plans. To conduct the evaluation, the project team reviewed marine licences for works within Shetland's marine and coastal waters, planning reports and scientific studies. They also surveyed relevant stakeholders, including industry representatives (in aquaculture, for example), marine planners and regulators.

Users of the SMSP reported that it was a valuable resource. It provided key guidance and local information on the feasibility of obtaining consent for marine licensing and development projects, and the application processes for these. The SMSP, which included an atlas of maps, was particularly useful in detailing environmental restrictions and sensitivities, exclusion zones, cultural and heritage uses and opportunities for development in the seas around Shetland. In 2009, 46% of successful marine-related planning applications submitted to the Shetland Islands' Council had referenced the Plan. In 2013, since the review, this figure has risen to 88%.

A major success has been for members of the SMSP team to work with the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation (SSMO), which manages local shellfish fisheries, in closing shellfisheries to scallop dredging. These areas had been identified as [sensitive seabed habitats](#) that could be negatively affected by shellfish fishing. This measure has resulted in economic benefits for local shellfish industries as they can promote their products as being sustainably sourced, which attract a product premium.

An important aspect of marine spatial plans is identifying areas for development opportunities where different activities can co-exist. The review found that some industry developers did not think that zoning (creating areas where only certain activities can take place) would be the most suitable way to do this. As a result, the SMSP team used a sensitivity-led approach, based on information gathered from local advisors, planners, regulators, communities and developers, to produce maps of areas where development is either restricted, likely to be in conflict with other users or more likely to succeed via the location of activities in the same place.

An adaptive management approach to MSP, as adopted in the SMSP, allows for initial plans to be refined and regularly updated as part of a continuous review, evaluation and monitoring process. The feedback from this process is fundamental in addressing uncertainty over time within an evolving discipline.



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1. Proposals for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management (2013/0074). See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0133:FIN:EN:PDF>

2. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014L0089&from=EN>

3. See: <http://www.nafc.ac.uk/SMSM.asp>
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