

Update on Marine Protected Areas– Opening statement

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Introduction

1. My name is Richard Cronin, and I am the Principal Adviser for the Marine Environment in the Water Division of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I am joined today by my colleague Dr Oliver Ó Cadhla who is a Scientific Policy Adviser in the Department.
2. The Marine Environment Section has among other things responsibility for Ireland's implementation of the 2008 EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (or MSFD), and the 1992 OSPAR Convention¹ for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic. I am currently the Chairman of the OSPAR Commission.
3. I will now provide the Committee with a synopsis of the process so far and the next steps to expand Ireland's network of Marine Protected Areas (or MPAs for short). However please note that I cannot provide an update on national processes or actions under the Birds and Habitats Directives or the Wildlife Acts, which come under the responsibility of Department's Heritage Division.

Marine Protected Areas in Ireland - background

4. In one line, our national mission is to ensure that Ireland has **clean, healthy, biologically diverse, productive and sustainably used seas that are resilient to the effects of climate change** within our broader Atlantic Ocean environment. This is not just for now but also for future generations.
5. The marine environment supports our climate, our economy, our coastal communities, our cultural traditions and heritage, our health and our wellbeing.
6. From a legal standpoint, Ireland's drive to establish Marine Protected Areas comes from the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which sets out to achieve and maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in the EU's marine area by 2020.
7. In 2016 Ireland's MSFD Programme of Measures included a measure to develop a national strategy to create and manage Ireland's network of MPAs. This was part of a broad suite of measures aimed at achieving or maintaining Good Environmental Status.
8. Both the MSFD and OSPAR adopt an ecosystem based approach with the aim of ensuring that the combined effect of all human activities and the health of the marine environment are kept in balance. GES is assessed and updated every six years by the member states across the EU using a broad swathe of measurable parameters – ranging from the health of species and habitats to the levels of pollution in the sea including marine litter and noise, for example.
9. However, with the exception of protected sites designated under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and the Wildlife Acts, Ireland has not had a legal tool with which to define,

¹ OSPAR covers 13.5 million km² of the North-East Atlantic and provides a platform for cooperation and action between 15 countries and the European Union.

identify, designate and manage MPAs. As a result, many species, habitats and processes occurring in our extensive maritime area have fallen outside the scope of area-based conservation with consequent risks to marine biodiversity and ecosystem services that are of benefit to people and nature.

MPA process to date

10. So, shortly after the establishment of the Marine Environment Section in 2019 we initiated a process aimed at expanding Ireland's network of MPAs. This work was further underpinned in the Programme for Government (June 2020) which contains commitments to realise our outstanding target of 10% MPA coverage in Irish waters as soon as is practicable, aiming for 30% coverage by 2030, and to develop comprehensive legislation for the identification, designation and management of MPAs.
11. The first step in the process was to convene an advisory group to provide independent expert advice and recommendations on the processes required and the challenges to be addressed in expanding Ireland's MPA network. This group was chaired by Professor Tasman Crowe, Director of the UCD Earth Institute. It had its first meeting on 18 December 2019 and it subsequently met on a monthly basis, including remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.
12. As an important part of its research and deliberations, the advisory group gathered the views of more than 100 key societal, community, business and sectoral stakeholders. The information gathered by the advisory group in August-September 2020 fed into its final report.
13. On 22 October 2020 the group submitted its report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, and the Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan TD. The full report² was subsequently translated and then published by the Department on 26 January of this year.
14. The report provides a wealth of material and includes a proposed MPA definition; an overview of existing protected sites in Ireland's maritime area; plus analyses and recommendations on what should be protected, why it should be protected and how Ireland should go about doing so.
15. In general terms, the expert group found that MPAs can be considered to be geographically defined maritime areas that provide levels of protection to achieve a set of conservation objectives.
16. While actively supporting long term conservation, MPAs can also support economic activity. Protection can go well together with human activities, provided those activities go together with the conservation objectives. This can be through conserving areas of particular importance to marine ecosystems and ensuring that human activity is kept at a level that will protect and conserve biological diversity and natural productivity, as well as protecting human health.
17. MPAs can also help reduce the effects of climate change and ocean acidification by ensuring that marine ecosystems are healthy and resilient, and can capture and sequester carbon naturally.

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/135a8-expanding-irelands-marine-protected-area-network/>

18. There also exists a set of long term conservation measures known as Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (or OECMs) that the report concluded could also contribute to overarching conservation goals.
19. A public consultation phase centred on the report and the wider MPA process began in mid-February 2021 and ran until the end of July. This consultation and associated communications by the Department encouraged all stakeholders and the wider public to get involved by sharing their views on the process by which Ireland's network of MPAs will be expanded into the future.
20. In total the Department received approximately 2,400 individual submissions from members of the public and other stakeholders. An independent review and analysis of all responses to the public consultation is being carried out at the moment. The findings and conclusions from this analysis will be published in the form of a detailed report and we anticipate this report will be completed and published in early 2022.

Ongoing work and next steps

21. We have now commenced work on developing a General Scheme for new MPA legislation. The development of this legislation is expected to continue into 2022. Its formulation, structure and legal provisions will be informed among other things by the requirements of Article 13(4)³ of the MSFD, the OSPAR Convention, other international agreements, European Community level policies and principles, and supporting strategies such as the EU's Green Deal and its Biodiversity Strategy 2030.
22. While we cannot say precisely where the new MPAs will be placed we do have good information about the potential features that may need area-based conservation beyond that afforded by the Birds and Habitats Directives and the Wildlife Acts.
23. These include species and habitats listed as threatened and declining by OSPAR; the protection of features and ecosystem components that play a role in climate processes; the need for the network to be representative, coherent and connected; and the overarching advice and recommendations of the MPA advisory group and stakeholders that have participated in the MPA process so far. It is important to note that we also have extensive monitoring programmes in place to provide high quality and up to-date information on these features.
24. From our work on the MPA process so far, it is heartening to see the keen interest from society and stakeholders in Ireland's achievement of its national targets and overarching conservation goals. This ongoing involvement and engagement will be central to the process in 2022 and thereafter.

Thank you.

³ spatial protection measures, contributing to coherent and representative networks of marine protected areas, adequately covering the diversity of the constituent ecosystems, such as special areas of conservation pursuant to the Habitats Directive, special protection areas pursuant to the Birds Directive, and marine protected areas as agreed by the Community or Member States concerned in the framework of international or regional agreements to which they are parties