

If one topic has been on the agenda of Solent Protection Society Council meetings more than any other in the past three years it is Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ). This is not because Solent Protection Society saw MCZ as a threat to the Solent, on the contrary, but the Society was concerned about the level of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge that was circulating around the MCZ proposals. The confusion was not confined to those who suspected that they would be adversely affected i.e. the various users of the Solent but extended to those organisations who would be instrumental in making MCZ a reality. SPS saw its role in this situation as an advisory one so that all involved would be aware of what the consequences, intended and otherwise, would be particularly so far as the Solent was concerned.

Solent Protection Society has, within its Council, the expertise to perform this role and had the local knowledge together with access to the local network of concerned bodies to correct misunderstanding. The view of SPS has always been that the principle behind the creation of MCZ is an entirely admirable one and the announcement on 17 January 2016 of 23 new MCZ provides an opportunity to look at the current position with particular reference to the Solent.

The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 facilitated the creation of MCZ which are designed to protect nationally important wild-life, habitats and geology and which would contribute to 'the conservation or improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area'. It is rationally impossible to oppose so virtuous an ambition nor does the SPS do so. The Minister with responsibility for the marine environment, Mr George Eustace, said

"It is vital we protect our marine environment to ensure our seas remain healthy, our fishing industry remains prosperous and future generations can enjoy our beautiful beaches, coastline and waters".

This is almost a paraphrase of the mission statement of SPS and it follows that the MCZ programme is one which SPS fully supports.

Nonetheless, the trite saying that the devil is in the detail is as applicable to the MCZ programme as it is to other laudable environmental initiatives and it is this detail that has chiefly concerned SPS. Much good work has been done by the RYA in persuading Government policy makers to have regard to the legitimate expectations of the boating community both in relation to leisure and economic activity when designating MCZ and particularly in the management of them.

A major area of concern, perhaps the major area, has been the lack of detail regarding management of MCZ, a concern voiced by SPS, and it is gratifying to note that the Government has stated that management will not be put in place where activities do not have a detrimental effect (on conservation) and management will only be imposed where necessary to achieve the objective of the MCZ in question. There remain those who doubt that progress is really being made.

"Despite the MCZ, the UK's rich marine life has very little protection. That may sound paradoxical, but six years after the Marine Act was passed, MCZs are still paper parks. They have no management at all, so life within them remains unprotected. They will be worse than useless, giving the illusion of protection where none exists". (Professor Callum Roberts of York University).

Whilst this does not represent the view of SPS, it does express the concern regarding management, which has not yet gone away. The government has said that it is working to ensure that management measures are put in place within two years and SPS will continue to keep this under review for the reason mentioned below.

None of the 23 MCZ recently announced are within the Solent area (the Needles MCZ is beyond Hurst Spit) but a number of the third tranche on which public consultation will be invited later in 2016 certainly will be. It is to be expected that SPS will take a keen interest in those MCZ and will pay particular attention to the proposed management measures ; there can be nowhere around the UK coast which has a greater concentration of leisure boating and the Solent Protection Society will have significant allies in ensuring that management measures are necessary and proportionate.

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27/ 1/2016