

Press release: World-leading 'Blue Belt' expands as new marine protections revealed

Environment Secretary Michael Gove will today set out plans to create more than 40 new Marine Conservation Zones across the UK – safeguarding almost 12,000 square kilometres of marine habitats and marking the most significant expansion of the UK's 'Blue Belt' of protected areas to date.

The proposed protections – announced on World Oceans Day – will cover an area almost eight times the size of Greater London.

The new sites will reach right the way across England's coastline – from the South West to Berwick on the Scottish border, with two sites in Northern Irish offshore waters.

No new activities deemed damaging – such as dredging, or significant coastal or offshore development – will be allowed to take place in these areas. Existing harmful activities will be minimised or stopped to allow important habitats to be restored over time.

Rare or threatened marine habitats and species which will be protected include the short snouted seahorse, stalked jellyfish and peacock's tail seaweed.

At the same time, the Prime Minister will be making a call for urgent global action to protect the world's oceans from plastics and other harmful waste.

Speaking at the G7 summit in Canada, she will implore other world leaders to follow the UK lead in working with business, industry and Non-Governmental Organisations to find innovative and effective solutions to this issue.

She will say that without joined-up, global action, we cannot effectively tackle this shared environmental challenge.

The Prime Minister is expected to say:

Marine plastics pollution is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing the world today.

The UK government is a world leader on this issue, with our 25 Year Environment Plan setting out a clear ambition to eliminate avoidable plastic waste to protect our rivers and seas.

There is an urgent need for greater global action and co-ordination on marine plastics pollution, including working with business, industry and Non-Governmental Organisations to find innovative and effective solutions.

This is a global problem, requiring global solutions.

The Environment Secretary is today announcing a total of 41 new Marine Conservation Zones.

Some 50 zones have already been designated around England as part of the UK's ambitious Blue Belt programme, including the first tranche of 27 zones designated in 2013, followed by the second tranche of 23 sites in 2016.

This third and final tranche will be designated within 12 months of the consultation, which will last for a period of six weeks. It will cover approximately 11,700 square km, bringing the total area of protection to over 32,000 square km.

Marine Conservation Zones are just one type of the many Marine Protected Areas in place around the UK to conserve rare, threatened and nationally important habitats and species for future generations. Marine Protected Areas currently cover a total of 209,000 square km.

If approved, the new tranche will take the total figure to around 220, 000 square km – meaning two fifths of the UK coast would be protected.

Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, said:

The UK is surrounded by some of the richest and most diverse sea life in the world. We must protect these precious habitats for future generations.

Today marks an important step towards completing our Blue Belt. We are creating safe havens for our cherished wildlife and putting the UK at the forefront of marine protection.