

Major initiative taken in debate over Marine Protected Areas at Edinburgh RACs event

Members of all seven Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) met in the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh last week to discuss and debate the implementation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in offshore European waters.

Organised jointly by the North Sea, Pelagic, South Western Waters and North Western Waters RACs, the meeting was hosted by Roseanna Cunningham MSP, convener of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee at the Scottish Parliament.

Members of DG Environment, DG Fisheries and scientists from member states and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) also attended, and gave presentations on the current status of the implementation of EU's Natura 2000 network under the Habitats Directive.

The event was considered by everyone who attended to be a significant step forward in the debate about MPAs and the implementation of the Habitats Directive in the marine environment.

Presentations were given by a range of speakers from industry, Non Governmental Organisations, scientists and the European Commission.

Delegates came from 10 EU countries, demonstrating the high level of interest in the subject.

Debate was open, frank and constructive with key issues highlighted including the need for consultation at all stages in developing Natura sites and the need for review of the sites.

A big talking point was the fact that Natura 2000 sites are designated to meet conservation objectives and are not fisheries management tools, nor are they designed specifically to enhance commercially important species.

The fact that the designation for these sites does take account of socio-economic data was also raised as an issue of concern.

The catalyst for the meeting was the urgent deadline for member states to submit their site proposals for offshore MPAs by September 1, 2008.

During the meeting, a number of examples of designation by member states were discussed, for example in Ireland, the UK and Germany.

It was felt that the best outcome was reached when stakeholders were consulted at a very early stage, as was done in the Rockall closures.

Euan Dunn, chairman of the North Sea RAC spatial planning working group, which played a pivotal role in the organisation of the meeting, said:
"The most important thing is that, with the help of the EC, RACs now have a roadmap of how fisheries and other stakeholders can make progress on squaring up to the issues raised by the emergence of MPAs in EU Waters."

Sean O'Donoghue of the Pelagic and North Western Waters RAC said he felt that the meeting was an invaluable exercise.

This is evidenced by the huge level of interest by all of the RACs," he said. "This afforded the Pelagic RAC the opportunity to reiterate its concerns about banning pelagic gears and I'm glad that the Commission took due note of this."

Chairman of the North Sea RAC, Hugo Andersson, noted that the RACs have a critical role to play in consultation on MPAs.

He said: "It is the only forum that can broker trans-national concerns of the stakeholders and it was useful to have senior officials from both relevant DGs at the meeting, but a better procedure is needed to ensure that the RACs are kept in the loop by the relevant authorities in the Commission on MPAs."

Yves Foëzon, vice-chairman of the SWRAC, said: "MPAs are one of the tools for biodiversity protection and a long term management of the marine environment. It is a top interest for the fishing industry to support the implementation of an MPAs' network and this seminar shows the European fishing industry is ready to play a proactive role.

"We need the European Commission to ensure global coherence within the different proposals from the Member States and within the different activities at sea.

"The RACs are the only regional and trans-national structures in the European marine policy. They constitute the right level playing field to discuss management measures for offshore MPAs where there are fleets from different countries. RACs will help us to allow the consultation upstream rather than the showdown downstream."

Reinhard Priebe, Director of Conservation Policy in DG Fish, congratulated the four RACs for taking the initiative to arrange a joint meeting on MPAs.

He added: "This has been an excellent opportunity to discuss in depth the issue of MPAs, which are essential both for implementing the NATURA 2000 Directives and for taking appropriate conservation measures in the framework of the Common Fisheries Policy."

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