

## BRIEFING

### WHY BEACHY HEAD EAST SHOULD BE MADE A MARINE CONSERVATION ZONE

*“A real and momentous opportunity to preserve the area”<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION

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The coastal waters between Beachy Head and Hastings on the Sussex coast are well known as a haven for a wealth of wildlife and for their rich seabed habitats. In these waters you can find:

- rare chalk and sandstone reef systems,
- fragile living reefs made by the tube-building ross worm and blue mussels,
- two marine Sites of Nature Conservation Importance: the Royal Sovereign Shoals and the Horse of Willingdon Reef,
- diverse habitats for a wide range of marine life, including important and declining species such as the native oyster and short-snouted seahorse,
- feeding grounds for cuckoo wrasse, plaice, sole, lobster, European eel and small spotted catshark, and possible spawning beds for herring.

The inshore sea site is known as Beachy Head East. Because it is recognised as a special place, it has become a recommended Marine Conservation Zone (rMCZ). From the 8th June to 20th July 2018, Defra held a public consultation on the final group of English recommended MCZs. The Government will now take up to 12 months to decide whether Beachy Head East should become a Marine Conservation Zone.

However, it remains clear this area needs protection. The site is currently fished by non-local mobile-gear fishing boats. They are damaging the precious seabed habitats with their heavy, bottom-towed gear. The local community, including local fishers and businesses, is backing the campaign to make Beachy Head East a MCZ.

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<sup>1</sup> *Huw Merriman, MP for Bexhill and Battle.*

## BEACHY HEAD EAST

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### The area

Beachy Head East rMCZ runs from Beachy Head lighthouse to Hastings Pier and extends six nautical miles out to sea. It covers 195km<sup>2</sup> – making it the largest inshore MCZ in Sussex and a significant contributor to Britain's network of MCZs.

### Unique geology

There are very few offshore rocky reefs in the Eastern English Channel. Beachy Head East has two areas designated as marine Sites of Nature Conservation Importance. They range from around 5 to 15 metres in depth and are considered two of the best examples of sandstone reef in Sussex. They are the:

- Royal Sovereign Shoals. A sandstone reef with chalk reef outcrops and areas of mixed sediments, sandy sediments and biogenic structures.
- Horse of Willingdon Reef. A sandstone reef of flattened outcrops with gullies and overhangs with vertical faces.

Underwater chalk reefs, such as those found in Beachy Head East around the Royal Sovereign Shoals and Holywell, are rare in Europe. Some of the best examples of chalk reef are found off the Sussex, Kent and Norfolk coasts. These chalk reefs were formed millions of years ago through the fossilisation of prehistoric plankton.

### Unique habitat

The area hosts a wealth of marine wildlife, and provides feeding grounds for a wide range of fish. The habitats proposed for protection at this site include:

- Blue mussel beds, including Bexhill Mussel Garden: these are some of the best beds in the region, forming a fragile living reef and hosting many marine species.
- Littoral chalk: communities of animals and seaweeds live on the chalky seashore rocks, ledges, pools and gullies.
- Subtidal chalk: this is particularly important to marine life, especially where it forms reefs and sea caves. As a soft rock, chalk is good for burrowing sea creatures such as piddocks and worms. Chalk reefs are home to many creatures, including rare sponges, crabs, lobsters and seaweeds.
- Peat and clay exposures: these are a rare underwater habitat, excellent for ragworm, piddock and crabs.
- Ross worm reef: an important habitat creator, this worm uses sand and shell fragments to build tubes that create a living reef when fused together.

Particularly important species include:

- the short snouted seahorse: protected by UK law and thought to be threatened;
- the native oyster: a threatened species throughout Europe that needs conservation action to halt its decline;

- the European eel: considered to be critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, having suffered an 80% population declines in recent decades.

Recent research by Seasearch, a volunteer diver survey programme run by the Marine Conservation Society with the Wildlife Trusts, has further confirmed the scientific value of the area.

### **Shipwrecks**

The rMCZ also incorporates protected wrecks, including the The Amsterdam (sank 1749) and the Norman's Bay shipwreck (probably sunk at the Battle of Beachy Head in 1690).

### **A resource to the community**

The campaign to make Beachy Head East a MCZ continues to gain widespread support from the Sussex coastal community. Businesses believe that establishing the zone, and allowing wildlife to recover, will help enhance the local economy and attract new visitors.

Local anglers are enthusiastic about conserving the marine environment through the establishment of an MCZ. They want to see an end to destructive fishing practices that damage the reef and destroy the habitat on which fish depend. Over many years it has been proved that the better the quality of marine habitat, the bigger and more abundant the fish.

Local fishermen are keen to protect their local marine environment and during the consultation process engaged in discussions with Defra about the content of the consultation documents.

### **The threat**

The most immediate threat to Beachy Head East waters is unsustainable fishing practices. Beam trawlers, a type of heavy bottom-towed fishing gear, are often seen in the area. There is a wealth of evidence showing that these are bad for the seabed, digging into and destroying underwater reefs and mussel beds – the natural habitats for fish and other marine life. It also churns up sediment in the water column, this can smother fragile oysters and mussel beds.

Human activities such as construction or aggregate extraction can damage underwater reef landscapes, and pollution affects the larger seaweeds that grow on a chalk seabed. The wildlife and habitats of Beachy Head East are also threatened by the changes affecting the whole ocean: warming, acidification, and plastics and other pollution.

Protection and management as a MCZ will mean that heavy bottom-towed fishing gear will not be permitted around vulnerable and fragile seabed ecosystems – giving those ecosystems a chance to recover and become more resilient to the other threats all marine life faces.

### **What happens now?**

The UK government has recognised that setting up a network of well-managed protected areas in UK seas is an important way of managing our marine resources. It has already

designated 50 MCZs in British waters, protecting a range of nationally important marine wildlife, habitats, geology and geomorphology from damaging human activity.

MCZs are needed because the marine environment is coming under increasing pressure from human activity that is damaging ecosystems. Protecting the marine environment now can make ecosystems more resilient to ocean change, such as warming and acidification, and ensure that British seas continue to contribute to our society for generations to come. Protection usually involves restrictions on more damaging human activities, such as some types of fishing.

While the Government works to reach a final decision on the new designations, you can help us keep Beachy Head East on the agenda by:

- signing [this petition](#) telling Westminster why you think it should be protected.
- contacting your MP and telling them you support the designation.
- showing your support on social media with the #BackingBeachyHeadEast. Say why you're backing Beachy Head East to become a MCZ and what it is you love about your local ocean.
- telling others about Beachy Head East rMCZ and why you think it's important.

This campaign to protect Beachy Head East through designation as a Marine Conservation Zone is run by Agents of Change and hosted by the Marine Conservation Society. Agents of Change is an initiative of Marine CoLABoration – a group of NGOs concerned with ocean protection. See more at [marinecolab.org](http://marinecolab.org).

For further information please email Alice Tebb: [alice.tebb@mcsuk.org](mailto:alice.tebb@mcsuk.org)

### **What people say...**

“I was very concerned to learn from our meeting that the delicate marine environment off our local beaches is showing signs of damage from industrial fishing and beam trawling, which destroys and scars the sandstone and chalk reef. If these marine environments are not protected we risk losing precious habitats, rare species and important fish breeding grounds. That is why I am putting my full support behind the bid to include Beachy Head East in the final tranche of marine conservation zones. My government is doing more than has ever been done in the past to protect our precious ‘Blue Belt’ and I will be working hard to make sure that the East Sussex coast is recognised for its biodiversity and conserved for generations to come.”

*Huw Merriman, MP for Bexhill and Battle*

“The inner sandstone reefs have dinosaur footprints (Iguanodon) embedded in them from 130 million years ago... I found some at Normans Bay and this set me off to try and protect the reefs and ledges from damaging beam trawling.”

*Graham Doswell, fisherman, Eastbourne*

“It is essential that the unique features we have here, which help support our varied fish species, are properly protected and that anglers can continue to enjoy fishing in one of the

busiest angling areas along the south coast. The seas off the coast here are a wonderful asset for Bexhill, Hastings and Eastbourne.”

*Tim McPherson, Director of the Angling Trust*

“I note that the designation of the Beachy Head East rMCZ is supported by key stakeholders within my constituency and that there are clear and recognised advantages, particularly with regard to fishing and tourism.”

*Amber Rudd, MP for Hastings and Rye*

“We are supporting the Marine Conservation Society's recommendation for a Marine Conservation Zone from Beachy Head to Hastings, which is our bit of sea. We think that this will add value to the town as a visitor destination.”

*Hillary Randall, Chair of the Bexhill-on-Sea Town Team*

“I believe its designation and proper management will ultimately be good for the people of my constituency... It is vital that these habitats are properly protected from these damaging activities as soon as possible.”

*Stephen Lloyd, MP for Eastbourne and Wilmington*

#### **Horse of Willingdon Reef: the results of recent research by divers**

“This site is a more well-known area of rocky reef located between approximately 7 and 12 metres depth. The rocky reef consists of flattened outcrops with gullies and overhangs with vertical faces up to approximately 0.5 metres in height. Three distinct habitats were established: top surfaces of the reef; reef walls, deeper surfaces and overhangs; and flatter areas with scattered cobbles and pebbles.

“Species of interest encountered across this site included goldsinny wrasse..., tompot blenny..., bib..., velvet swimming crab..., ross worm..., candy striped flatworm..., and common starfish.”

*From a report by Sesearch, a partnership between the Marine Conservation Society and the Wildlife Trust.*

“It is so important that we protect the sensitive biogenic habitats found at Beachy Head East rMCZ (made by living organisms). The reef supports amazing corals, sponges and mussel beds, all of which provide essential nursery grounds and feeding habitats for mobile animals, and also help to clean our inshore waters. We have lost so many examples of biogenic habitats around the UK to destructive human activities, so it is imperative that we look after those that have survived, and allow them to recover and flourish”.

*Dr Emma Sheehan, Senior Research Fellow, University of Plymouth*