

6 REASONS WHY BEACHY HEAD EAST IS WORTH PROTECTING

The sea between Beachy Head and Hastings on the Sussex Coast is well known for its wealth of biodiversity and rich seabed habitats. The area, known as Beachy Head East, is a recommended Marine Conservation Zone (rMCZ). Between 8th June and 20th July 2018, Defra held a public consultation on the final round of English rMCZs. The Government will now take up to 12 months to decide whether Beachy Head East should become a Marine Conservation Zone.

In the meantime, here are six reasons why Beachy Head East should be protected as a Marine Conservation Zone.

1. ITS RARE REEFS AND VULNERABLE WILDLIFE

There are very few offshore rocky reefs in the English Channel. Beachy Head East has two rocky reef areas designated as Sussex marine Sites of Nature Conservation Importance. Both areas 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 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.

Marine life abounds in these 'underwater oases' and includes a variety of sponges, anemones, native oysters and seahorses. Soft corals colonise the reef, together with tube worms. Masses of blue mussels and fused tubes of ross worms form rich, living reefs (biogenic reefs), which in turn provide homes for an array of marine life. The waters form one of the most important nearshore nursery areas for plaice and Dover sole. They provide feeding grounds for cuckoo wrasse, bib, poor cod, black seabream, European eel and small spotted catshark. The gravel beds here are also thought to be spawning beds for herring. Black-headed gulls, black-legged kittiwakes and common terns all come here to feed.

The reefs are also home to some rare marine species, including:

- 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, suffering an 80% population declines in recent decades.

2. ITS PREHISTORIC CHALK

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

Subtidal (below the low tide mark) chalk is particularly important to marine life – the action of the sea forms reefs and sea caves, a refuge for fish. Subtidal chalk is home to many burrowing creatures, such as piddocks, crabs and lobsters, and rare species of sponge can be found there.

3. ITS SEASHORE CITIES

Specialised communities of hardy animals and seaweeds live on the chalk and sandstone seashore rocks, ledges, pools and gullies, which are repeatedly inundated then exposed by the crashing tide. Despite their resilience to a violent and ever-changing environment, these 'littoral' (seashore) communities are relatively scarce, and very vulnerable to both pollution and human disturbance.

4. ITS MAGNIFICENT MUSSEL GARDENS

The waters of Beachy Head East have some of the best blue mussel beds in the region, including Bexhill Mussel Garden. These masses of shellfish form a fragile living reef and provide a home for many marine species. In 2017, Seasearch* divers surveyed the Bexhill Mussel Garden, reporting that although the living reef is still intact it urgently needs protection from the threat of bottom-towed fishing gear. Seasearch confirmed the scientific value of the area, saying: "It is hoped that the data from this survey and the photographic evidence will illustrate the importance of this area for this significant biogenic habitat – and therefore the importance of its protection."

5. ITS NAVAL HISTORY

There are important wrecks in the Beachy Head East area. *The Amsterdam*, a Dutch East Indiaman, sank in 1749 and has been stuck in the muddy foreshore at Bulverhythe near Hastings ever since. A shipwreck at Norman's Bay, between Bexhill and Eastbourne, is known to be a large warship of the period 1600–1800 and recent research suggests it was a 17th-century Dutch ship lost during the Battle of Beachy Head. Although these wrecks are already protected, the area around them is small. Wider seabed protection will help continue the wrecks' preservation.

6. THE LOCAL COMMUNITY SUPPORTS IT

The protection of Beachy Head East as a Marine Conservation Zone is supported by those who use the sea for a living, for leisure and for inspiration throughout Eastbourne, Bexhill and Hastings, including divers, anglers, photographers and artists. The three MPs for those towns publically support the establishment of the MCZ, as do local community groups and businesses, which believe that it will help enhance the local economy and attract new visitors. Local fishermen 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.

Protection of Beachy Head East as a Marine Conservation Zone will reduce damage to the seabed, allow marine wildlife to recover and flourish, and provide important benefits to the local communities now and for generations to come.

* Seasearch is a volunteer driven survey programme run by the Marine Conservation Society with the Wildlife Trusts.