

The Canyons Marine Conservation Zone

This document sets out why this site is important, the features protected and general management information.

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Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities © National Oceanographic Centre

Overview

This site became a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) in October 2013. This means that specific features within this area are protected and, where necessary, regulators will manage marine activities. Two additional features were added to the site in May 2019: coral gardens and sea-pen & burrowing megafauna communities.

Where is the site?

The Canyons MCZ is an offshore site located to the far south-west corner of the UK's continental shelf area. The site covers an area of around 661 km² and lies more than 330 km from Land's End on the Cornish coast, where the seabed drops from 100m to over 2000m.

Why is the site important?

MCZs, together with other types of marine protected areas, will form the UK contribution to an international network of protected sites in the north-east Atlantic. The network will help to deliver the government's vision of clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas. MCZs protect typical, rare and declining habitats and species found in our seas.

The Canyons MCZ protects a number of habitats and species. Large areas of deep-sea bed are protected within the site. This habitat is typically made up of a range of seabed types including bedrock, limestone pavements, boulders, sand, gravel and mud.

Cold-water coral reefs are found around the world in deep, cold water and typically form on topographic features such as slopes and underwater mountains where subsurface currents bring plentiful food supplies. Within the site there are cold-water corals known to be growing on one of the canyon walls. The reefs provide a source of food and shelter for many animals including fish, sea urchins, anemones and sponges. They are also thought to act as breeding grounds for commercially important fish species. In addition, there are aggregations of one or more coral species that make up coral gardens recorded within the site. Cold-water corals can live for a very long time but are extremely slow growing, at a rate of about 6 mm a year. This slow growth, combined with their brittle skeletons, means the reefs are particularly vulnerable to damage from a variety of pressures.

Fine mud on the seabed provides habitat for animals to burrow beneath the surface, whose burrows in turn provide shelter to a range of other species. These burrowing communities includes sea-pens which protrude from the surface of the mud and capture their food from the water column. Sea-pens can grow over 2 m in height but, like cold-water corals, they are slow growing and therefore at risk to damage from human pressures.

Designation of this site as a Marine Conservation Zone protects the following features. You can find detailed information about each of the protected features on the [JNCC website](#).

Protected features	General management approach
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities	Maintain in favourable condition
Coral gardens	Recover to favourable condition
Deep-sea bed	
Cold-water coral reefs	

Management of the site

The General Management Approach for three of the protected features of this site is to 'Recover to favourable condition' and for the remaining feature to 'Maintain in favourable condition'. To ensure that the site achieves its conservation objectives, some activities may need additional management. Activities and the management measures used to regulate them may need to change if new evidence becomes available.

Most marine activity is already regulated by the relevant regulatory bodies (see section below). There is an existing legal framework that regulators use to manage fishing, offshore industry, recreation and pollution. This also applies in MCZs.

Regulators will manage each site according to the features and activities in, or near, a specific area. Management measures will be implemented at sites most at risk of damage first, regulating only those activities which have a detrimental impact on the designated features. Any management measures that are required for MCZs will be applied on a case-by-case basis.

Management in MCZs can take several different forms, including introducing voluntary measures, use of the existing planning and licensing framework, specific byelaws and orders. There has to be public consultation on permanent byelaws and orders. For activities that already need a marine licence, regulators consider the MCZ in their decision as soon as the site is consulted on. Find out more about marine licensing in MCZs at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/marine-conservation-zones-mczs-and-marine-licensing>.

Regulators

This table lists the authorities responsible for MCZs and the activities they manage.

Lead regulator	What it manages
Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) http://www.association-ifca.org.uk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisheries in the inshore area (0-6 nautical miles (nm)) including commercial fisheries and recreational sea angling.
Marine Management Organisation (MMO) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/marine-management-organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisheries within British limits around the coast of England. Licensable activities such as construction, alteration or improvement of works, dredging and disposal, other removals or deposits, incineration or the scuttling of vessels within England's marine area. Section 36 (of the Electricity Act 1989) Consents and Safety Zones for offshore renewable energy installations producing up to 100MW.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities requiring a marine wildlife licence.
Environment Agency (EA) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fisheries for migratory and freshwater fish. • Coastal protection and flood management. • Water quality, including environmental permits for discharges from terrestrial sources.
Oil and Gas Authority https://www.ogauthority.co.uk/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensing for exploration and exploitation of oil and gas reserves.
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-energy-and-industrial-strategy Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning (OPRED) – Part of BEIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oil and gas related activities • Renewable energy related activities • Environmental approvals and consents for offshore oil and gas related activities, Carbon Capture and Storage and Gas Unloading and Storage, and decommissioning activities.
Harbour Authorities and Local Planning Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harbour authorities have management responsibilities for ports and coastal waters within their limits. • Local planning authorities manage activities at the coast. These include coastal recreation, public rights of way (including the English Coastal Path), tourism, economic regeneration, flood protection, and planning and development on coasts and estuaries, including aquaculture in the intertidal zone.
Department for Transport (DfT) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy on environmental impacts associated with ports and shipping, including pollution from ships. • Policy on maritime safety including navigation safety.
Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) - An Executive Agency of the Department for Transport https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/maritime-and-coastguard-agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vessel safety consents, including certification of seafarers and equipment.
Natural England (NE) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment and management of the English

nisations/natural-england	Coastal path. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities requiring consents and ascents within or adjacent to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). • Activities requiring wildlife licences for terrestrial and intertidal species.
The Planning Inspectorate https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/planning-inspectorate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities requiring Development Consent Orders under the Planning Act 2008, regarded as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects

Further information

Read about government policy on MCZs at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/marine-conservation-zone-designations-in-england>

Read the scientific advice provided by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on MCZs at:

<http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-7119>



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