



Marine
Management
Organisation

MMO Evidence Strategy

2021-2025



...ambitious for our seas and coasts

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Foreword

In 2020, we celebrated our ten-year anniversary and we used this milestone to develop and launch our “MMO Story”. Our MMO Story sets a clear identity for MMO – who we are, what we do, and our ambitions for our seas and coasts.

As England’s marine manager we have a significant contribution to make toward delivering the government’s vision for clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas, and their aims to protect and enhance our precious marine environment, and support UK economic growth by enabling sustainable marine activities and development. Working across government and with others, we want to harness the best evidence and technology to make decisions and help deliver our objectives, whether supporting fishing quotas and licensing wind farms, or helping respond to climate change and biodiversity objectives.

This Evidence Strategy sets a clear direction for how we will develop evidence to help us respond to these new challenges. These include increasing our use of social and economic science, testing using pilot studies, and evaluation research, as well as greater use of advanced technologies and collaborative programmes with partners, stakeholders, and citizens.

We are proud of what we have achieved with our first two evidence strategies and we are looking forward to delivering this Evidence Strategy over the next five years.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T McCormack', written in a cursive style.

Tom McCormack, CEO of Marine Management Organisation

Purpose and introduction

The purpose of the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) Evidence Strategy¹ is to indicate how we will use and develop evidence to achieve MMO's goals, support decision making aligned to service delivery, and evaluate our contribution. The MMO has completed a process to assess and prioritise new evidence needs that are required to implement government policy and fulfil our role. The strategy is underpinned by a programme that fills evidence gaps in a resourceful, timely, and cost-effective way. This indicates how evidence can best contribute to achieving MMO's vision and mission.

The MMO's Vision is for

'a prosperous future for our seas, coasts and communities'.

The Mission of the MMO is that

'as England's marine manager, we protect and develop our seas, coasts and communities for the benefit of generations to come'.

This Evidence Strategy is divided into the following sections:

- What is driving new evidence and analysis requirements at the MMO
- How the Evidence Strategy is adapting to that
- What evidence is required to evaluate MMO's effectiveness
- Our current five-year evidence programme (2021 – 2025)

The MMO is England's main marine manager and regulator and an evidence driven organisation. Evidence underpins The MMO's role in implementing government policy and contributing to clean, healthy, safe, productive, and biologically diverse oceans and seas. To help achieve the government's vision and goals for the sea and people we need to use evidence strategically and effectively to manage and regulate.

The MMO Story (2020) highlighted the important role that evidence plays in setting, as well as delivering MMO's ambitions and outcomes, and in evaluating effectiveness. The MMO contributes to delivering ambitious outcomes for:

- sustainable fish stocks and the fishing industry;
- enabling marine developments that minimise impacts on the environment;
- achieving protection of nature in England and advising on protection in UK Overseas Territories;

¹ Evidence covers a range of information, tools and sciences spanning social science, natural science, economics, statistics, data science, operational research, and technology. It can be explored and applied via research and development, monitoring and surveillance, and secondary analysis and synthesis (Defra Evidence Strategy).

- improving and restoring the environment;
- contributing to achieving net zero carbon emissions and climate mitigation; and
- supporting coastal communities.

Adapting our strategy to new drivers of evidence and analysis at the MMO

There are new drivers of evidence and analysis work for MMO arising from new government ambitions and legislation, as well as changes to our responsibilities following the UK's exit from the EU. They are -

- Restoring nature as set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan
- Achieving the eight objectives in the Fisheries Act (2020)
- Achieving Net Zero carbon emissions by 2050
- Protecting 30% of the world's ocean by 2030
- Implementing Highly Protected Marine Areas
- Monitoring and evolving Marine Plans
- Implementing the Environment Act 2021
- Responding to the biodiversity and climate emergencies

This MMO Evidence Strategy has a greater focus on human activities and how these are managed. We recognise the importance of reducing negative impacts on nature and climate, so that the health, wellbeing and livelihoods nature provides for people is secure. Industry and people's economic and societal demands on nature are increasing which requires us to collectively tackle challenges and conflicts using best practice in decision making and management. The Das Gupta Review (2021), commissioned by HM Treasury is explicit about the need for better governance of natural resources so that they are available and healthy for all the people that depend on them. The MMO needs to understand the complex interactions between nature, society and the economy and how best to balance use with protection and restoration, to ensure we and future generations continue to have the elements of nature we rely on.

The adaptations and changes in this Evidence Strategy are listed and explained below. The MMO will

- Use a broad base of evidence to set its strategic goals and inform how to deliver its services,
- Increase its capability in social science, behavioural insights, system and complexity science, and economics,
- Co-develop more trans-disciplinary teams, research and projects with diverse collaborators and partners to address complex challenges and provide guidance, methods, and more specific and targeted information,
- Establish and embed MMO's capability in evaluation research to understand the effectiveness of interventions, outcomes, and impact that steers improvements and changes in a dynamic way,
- Conduct more action research and piloting of ways of working in the field especially through collaboration with industry to assess the effectiveness of measures and support rapid adaptations to iterate towards improved outcomes,

- Alter the way evidence products are prepared for use to make them more suitable for the needs of users and facilitate more effective knowledge utilisation and proactive dissemination,
- Use technology to enable existing, different, and more complex data sets and evidence to be interrogated and cross-analysed in smarter ways to inform decision making,
- Work in an agile way with colleagues in MMO, Defra, Natural England, JNCC, EA, Cefas, the Crown Estate, IFCA and Seafish to deliver integrated evidence that makes the most of our different roles and responsibilities and people and funding resources,
- Build on the good relationships formed with academia during the 2015-2020 Evidence Strategy period to influence strategic priorities and research funding, and
- Co-develop collaborative partnerships with mutual benefits for MMO, stakeholders and citizens to foster knowledge exchange of new evidence and to support fisheries co-management.

Informing Strategic Goals

MMO's strategic goals will contribute to the achievement of local, national, and international objectives. MMO will assess what aspects of each policy area it can contribute to based on its role, capabilities, and the current regulatory framework. System mapping, logic models and theories of change will be used to examine and explore how to enable the achievement of ambitious outcomes as well as the evidence gaps that inform both the goals and their achievement. These approaches will allow MMO to explore and share openly with others the options and alternate routes, including where regulatory change might be required to achieve ambitions. This will allow a range of evidence to be gathered, included and used, and other experts to co-develop the approaches. They will provide a narrative on assumptions, resources, and the context in which MMO will deliver its outcomes. It will be a reference that can be returned to and iterated when new situations and evidence arises.

Increasing Capability in People Research

Understanding people's perceptions, attitudes and behavioural responses to management and policy interventions at local, national, regional and international scales can help tailor decisions that impact access to and use of our seas. MMO requires a greater ability to understand people's behaviour, their values and motivations, the dynamics of communities, and best practice in participation, empowerment, engagement, and cooperative outcome delivery. This will be vital to achieving multiple goals for nature restoration, the wellbeing of people and the economy. Interactions in the socio-ecological domain are complex, often with emergent properties that are difficult to predict and require adaptive management implemented at pace. Achieving outcomes in these circumstances requires a system-based approach that takes multiple perspectives and feedback into account while being flexible enough to respond rapidly to new evidence.

Inter and Trans-Disciplinary Research

Using a system-based approach to deal with the complexity within the marine social-ecological system requires combining several disciplines and professional specialisations. Managing the negative impacts on the marine environment and its species has meant that understanding and monitoring nature has been a priority activity, however this information alone cannot achieve the government's goals for nature. The knowledge and expertise of different disciplines set out consecutively is also not adequate. What will be required is different disciplines working together from the start of a programme to develop integrated approaches, innovations, and solutions to problems. This approach will build robust evidence and contribute to system-based working but also support the need to embrace complexity.

Evaluation Research

Assessing the effectiveness of MMO's contribution to multiple outcomes using evaluation research will be an important new activity for MMO. MMO is committed to becoming an adaptive and proactive organisation that learns and flexes in a way that achieves outcomes at pace and is therefore developing an enduring capability in evaluation to embed its use. Evidence from evaluation provides insights into the outcomes we are achieving for the marine activities, industry, and people that we manage, the environment we are protecting, and how this links into wider impacts. As well as supporting the continuous improvement of our services, evidence from evaluation will support business cases for funding and help to apply the principle of value for money that underpins MMO's role in public service.

Action Research

New challenges arising from becoming an independent coastal state and the National Fisheries Authority brings the necessity to test and pilot real-world change through agile and iterative action research. This approach to regulatory and management change means that evidence plans need to be embedded into the implementation process from the outset and requires dedicated funding to support the work. MMO will work closely with government organisations within the marine system and academics to make the most of evidence and programme funding and achieve good value from collective Defra system commissioning. This is an emerging evidence capability in MMO, and we will learn from our recent experience in leading the innovative Marine Pioneer Programme.

Wider and Faster Utilisation of Evidence Products

The evidence produced by and for the MMO will evolve into a broad spectrum of products that are delivered to suit the end user and achieving outcomes. In addition to the traditional evidence reports and datasets the MMO will expand into producing syntheses, briefs, methodologies, interactive reports, videos, bulletins, seminars, and webinars. This will make the research more readily accessible more quickly to a wider audience with the aim of getting the research into use faster, more consistently and across a larger group of people and organisations. Supporting the development of repositories of both quantitative and qualitative social and economic information at a range of scales will be useful for decision making. The evidence team will seek and use feedback to ensure that evidence is appropriate and well used.

Greater Use of Advanced Technologies

MMO is a data-rich organisation. We gather and store large amounts of quantitative data, primarily on fishing activities but also license monitoring data, and this will increase as more of our services are delivered through digital interfaces. We have developed a new cloud-based central data repository with strong data management rules and utilising internationally recognised data formats, this is now the default location for all data from newly implemented digital systems. We are undertaking a progressive migration of live data assets from legacy systems to bring all our quantitative data together in one place.

We will increasingly subject these data assets to more advanced analytic techniques to enable us to distil richer evidence, identify key relationships and make inferences to inform MMO's work. The development and proliferation of a new generation of data capture capabilities, whether earth observation, image capture or remote sensing, will bring a step change in data volumes and will enable us to develop capabilities in more advanced techniques such as machine learning and artificial intelligence. We will also be able to increase the ease of access to our information assets. Building on our experience in marine planning we will embrace developments in Geographical Information System (GIS) technologies and other information management tools to ensure greatest use can be made of our growing evidence base.

Agile Collaboration and Partnership

The evidence requirements are wide ranging and reflect the breadth of MMO's responsibilities and extensive portfolio of activity. This necessitates MMO to work in collaboration and partnership with organisations and people across the spectrum of government, non-government, academia, industry, and communities. Developing and improving the culture of multi-lateral collaboration and partnership will be required to ensure that benefits of working in this way are maximised. MMO will implement good governance principles of cohesion, openness, participation, effectiveness, and accountability, among others, to engender effective engagement spanning scales from local to national to international.

Influencing Research and Funding

The evidence requirements of the MMO have increased in complexity, scope and scale and require more innovative, trans-disciplinary evidence production as well as more primary research to fill knowledge gaps. The MMO will increasingly seek to influence, support and collaborate with research funders to ensure that the requirements for evidence will have an impact on improving and restoring nature and the wellbeing of people and communities will be fulfilled through research funding in the UK.

Collaborative Partnerships and Co-development

MMO recognises the value of working closely with others toward shared outcomes because of the wide-ranging benefits this brings. There is a huge amount of evidence in existence, being developed and yet to be produced by many different groups and sources. The scale of the requirement and undertaking is such that it cannot be done by one organisation and

collaborations and partnerships are necessary and advantageous. MMO intends to use co-development and co-design to get the most from its collaborations and partnerships to produce the most comprehensive evidence.

Evidence to evaluate effectiveness

Previous MMO evidence strategies have placed a prime emphasis on information for decision making based on natural science, particularly environmental data. In this strategy we are placing a much greater emphasis on research that will facilitate the MMO in achieving its mission, vision, and strategic goals. This means MMO needs to balance evidence on environmental data with that from the economic and social sciences. Our priority is to establish a coherent and more comprehensive evidence base about how well the organisation is achieving its ambitions. Understanding our effectiveness in delivering the regulatory services for which we are responsible is important not only for accountability but also to guide improvements and future changes.

We recognise that examining the relationship between our operational activities and the achievement of high-level environmental, economic, and social impacts represent a significant challenge. These are complex systems with many processes and actors therefore, drawing causal relationships and quantifying them is fraught with methodological difficulty. That is why we have been specifying exactly what we are seeking to achieve through our operational activities using strategic outcomes or goals. They lie between our operational activities and the high-level impacts laid down in government policy.

As might be expected for an organisation that is primarily a regulator, many of our Outcomes relate to the effect we are having on the people whose activities we seek to influence – their awareness, satisfaction, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and, in particular, their behaviours. It is only through these mechanisms that our activities can contribute to the environmental, economic, and social goals set out in our Vision. Our evaluation research programme will scrutinise these relationships to establish the extent to which our interventions are effective.

The main purpose of the evaluation programme will be to enable us to better understand the complex relationship between our activities, the outputs they deliver and the outcomes to which they lead, and thus to feed a process of continuous improvement in our effectiveness with evidence.

To deliver this ambitious step change in our self-examination and thus knowledge, we have committed to establishing an evaluation research capability, independent of the operational services being evaluated, staffed by appropriate specialists. We already have strong marine science, fisheries science, and statistical capabilities, and these will be supplemented with skills in social and behavioural science, social and evaluation research, and economics.

Our evaluation strategy is at an early stage and will in many instances begin with a process to map the underlying theories of change – the relationships between our activities, outputs and outcomes, and to establish the way these outcomes have a bearing on impacts at the environmental, economic and social level from local to national to international scales.

It is anticipated that the bulk of the evaluation research programme will focus on examining specific outputs to establish their consequences, and the extent to which they produced the Outcomes intended for them. A mixed method research approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative data will be employed. MMO has access to extensive quantitative datasets

and will also act on the results of ad hoc surveys that we will initiate. This will help us understand the scale of our impacts, and ideally how this will change over time as we adapt our activities and fill any identified gaps. The qualitative research, by contrast, will help us better understand the mechanisms at play, and in particular gain insight into the ways those whose activities we regulate are affected by our own interventions.

However, for some of our services, marine licencing or financial grants are perhaps the most likely candidates, it may well be possible to draw a direct causal relationship between individual outputs and measurable environmental or economic impacts. This may require us to capture the information in new ways and systems to enable analysis.

As well as requiring the additional skill sets mentioned above, this greater emphasis on evaluation and learning will also need some cultural change. It will need an acknowledgement that evaluation should be embedded as an essential element of policy and regulatory change at the very outset.

MMO's Evidence Programme 2021-2025

Since vesting in 2010, the MMO has drawn on a wide range of evidence including intelligence, knowledge and insights using the expertise of its staff and Chief Scientist, combined with collaborations with other experts within government, academia, non-government, and industry. We have commissioned a baseline of evidence in the period 2011-2015 and leveraged research and evidence through publicising our requirements and building relationships with evidence providers during 2015-2020. During this time, we sought to provide value for public money, share information widely, provide access to and invite people to build on our evidence base. We have published all the evidence outputs online at [MMO Evidence Projects Register](#) in a timely and open process. We also maintain a public [register of evidence requirements](#) that is regularly updated. We will continue to carry out our evidence work in this way.

The 2021-2025 Evidence Programme will build on these successful programmes with an increased scope to meet new ambitions and tackle long-standing challenges. Examples include;

- evolving fisheries management to align with the new circumstances,
- managing pressures and impacts on designated habitats and species, protecting the marine environment from damaging activities and managing sites with the highest level of protection
- limiting the negative impacts and maximising the positive impacts of marine developments e.g. achieving net zero and Good Environmental Status (GES),
- integrating multi-purpose and multi-scale assessments with decision making to reduce cumulative effects and achieve sustainability while considering space for all activities,
- increasing participatory governance (decision making) and partnership delivery and co-management to recover biodiversity and reduce climate impacts.

By introducing new ways to evaluate the effectiveness of MMO's activities, the aim is for our evidence-based strategy to enable MMO to be agile and nimble in responding to evidence-based decision-making. Below illustrates some of the key priority areas.

Fisheries management

Becoming an independent coastal state in 2021 has created many opportunities and challenges for fisheries management in the UK. MMO's goal is to manage a prosperous, sustainable and climate friendly fishing industry. These changes have created related evidence requirements. Evidence is required to set the vision for fisheries management and build trust and relationships so that these can inform our management approaches and practices through using good governance principles. Evidence on international best practice in fisheries management will be mined and used to underpin decisions about how, where, and when to intervene with management measures. Transparency in evidence used and how decisions are made will be key to building trust through effective knowledge exchange engagement activities.

Evidence and knowledge from a variety of sources including industry will inform our input to the development of Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs). Improvements will be made in linking ecological, social and economic fisheries data that can inform real time sustainable fisheries management and ensure it is adaptable, flexible and accessible to others so we can share stewardship responsibilities and progress toward co-management. Co-management is a process that will require case studies, evaluation research and especially social science relating to behavioural insights, culture, perceptions, and community structures. Case studies will be important to the evolution of fisheries management, for example, we have new opportunities to link stock levels, FMPs, management measures and licensing options and trial different approaches to suit different socio-ecological and economic situations. This requires a mixed methods approach and relies on interdisciplinary experts to make the connections across a diverse range of disciplines and issues.

In addition, new insights into alternate means of control including through co-management and incentives will be explored. Traceability of fisheries products has become a priority and requires a mix of evidence, data, technology, and digital research to contribute to our ambitions for a prosperous and sustainable fishing industry. Data processing requirements have increased and using data science and technology will be key to improving the intelligence extracted from information gathered and analysed. This will integrate different programmes and increase the value of the work carried out on the landing obligation, remote electronic monitoring, and fully documented fisheries.

MMO will work closely with Defra, other government bodies and industry to develop and prioritise information that leads to more sustainable fishing and climate friendly fishing practices. The impact of busier seas on fishing activity will need to be examined collaboratively to ensure fairness, equity and just transition are part of the process of change. As outlined previously evaluation research will be a new part of how we learn and make the most of our evidence work and the work of others.

Conservation and protection

The MMO will continue to establish management measures within England's network of designated sites which requires ecological, social, and economic evidence for impact assessments, as well as an overview of the relative importance of each of these to sustainability. Integrated and collaborative monitoring evidence collated and assessed across government organisations will be crucial for this work. The Fisheries Act 2020 has introduced new powers for MMO to manage offshore areas which also requires a suite of evidence that can be analysed and used to make management decisions. The process by which potential management measures are deliberated and implemented requires social science expertise and applied methods.

There is a strong requirement to use evidence for ecosystem-based management and connect the various aspects of protection work from across the organisations including fisheries, licensing, and planning. The introduction of highly protected marine areas (HPMAs) is generating evidence requirements that relate to best practice in behavioural insights and control measures. There has been much discussion about what protected areas can do to reduce the climate crisis and further evidence about how to apply the science available to management is needed to make a positive contribution. In particular, there is a

knowledge gap on the social and economic impacts of MPAs on individuals, communities and different sectors in the UK and beyond. Emerging natural capital analyses and practical testing of approaches could provide useful integrated assessment of information for us.

The biodiversity crisis is indicating that more conservation and protection is needed but this will generate conflicts and challenges for people and industry therefore, it is vital that evidence gathering, and application covers the social and economic aspects of this as well as the ecological aspects. An important element is to make sure that the value of nature in a resilient and robust state to wellbeing and livelihoods is understood by everyone so that the benefits of nature are considered in economic and social decision making alongside environmental factors and the benefits and disbenefits are fairly distributed or managed. This is a complex science policy delivery area and will require a multi-disciplinary approach.

Creating a single, integrated marine regulatory framework

Evidence will be required to deliver the next generation of marine plans and build on the baseline underpinning the plans and presented through the Marine Planning Portal. This includes information about how activities interact with nature, other industries, and people. This will require more development and testing of decision support tools that assess and analyse multiple drivers and impacts while providing information that can be used in regulatory decision making. Marine licensing mainly operates at a site basis, therefore the scale and specificity of the information including spatial information will need to be refined. The marine planning monitoring activity will increase now that all marine plans are complete, and this will require further evidence as well as feeding into evaluation research.

Social and economic values and evidence alongside system understanding of the drivers and actions that will improve the outcomes for nature especially climate-based actions are also required. Although there has been a huge emphasis on gathering and analysing ecological information for marine plans there are still evidence requirements that would greatly improve the regulatory framework such as better habitat maps and spatially linked ecological impacts of activities information.

The UK's goal to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050 will be at the heart of what we do so we need to understand our contribution and how to achieve that. A large feature of achieving this government ambition is through offshore wind. 40GW of offshore wind is to be in place by 2030 with minimal environmental impact. There is a very big evidence need associated with achieving this. Producing and using this evidence requires a substantial collaborative and partnership programme of planning, delivering, and implementing multiple complex and integrated evidence streams relating to ecological, social, economic, and technological factors.

Providing financial support and assistance through grants

The extent to which MMO will be able to play a direct and influential role in shaping the terms of these funding mechanisms over the lifetime of this evidence strategy is not clear, nor is the extent to which evaluation of outcomes will be led by MMO or by Defra. It seems likely that the schemes may take a UK-wide perspective so MMO will be one of many

stakeholders. However, we are confident that our overall evidence programme, and our greater focus on evaluation of outcomes, will enable us to make an informed contribution to debates on how financial support can be best targeted to strengthen wider outcomes and impact.

Supporting global marine protection

This is a new core service for the MMO, building on the success of our role in Blue Belt and the greater international focus of Defra and wider government since the UK's departure from the European Union. The process of determining the contribution that the MMO Evidence Programme can make to what will be a much broader collaborative initiative, is in progress. We anticipate that much of the evidence we develop through our work that relates to managing multiple activities to achieve multiple benefits and take account of shared values which will be useful for supporting global marine protection. In particular, our developing understanding of social and economic impacts of MPAs on individuals and communities. The new methods for developing and producing evidence such as action research, evaluation research, multi-disciplinary teams and being system-based could apply to other places and we could learn from through collaboration and partnership.

Evidence that cross cuts MMO services

Restoration and climate

People have realised that nature underpins our existence and the quality of our environment is directly related to the quality of people's lives. A degraded environment means people cannot achieve health, prosperity, and wellbeing. Signs of the impact of degradation in the environment are already shown by the indicators of Good Environmental Status, Good Ecological Status and climate change that are measured for UK seas and coastal waters. This has resulted from the way people in society live, work, and recreate and will require changes in behaviour, culture, and lifestyle. Importantly it also requires active restoration of nature and action to draw down the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to stop and in time reverse catastrophic climate change. The MMO will contribute collaboratively to efforts to restore nature and stop climate change within its areas of responsibility and capability. Restoration will require a shared evidence base across a broad partnership about where, how, and when to restore habitats, species and environmental processes. We will work with others to develop the evidence base and approaches that will achieve agreed ecological, environmental and climate targets for the marine environment. This will apply across all areas of MMO's work.

Integrated assessments

Integrated assessments evidencing the state of nature are vital to underpinning evidence for MMO that are produced by Natural England, JNCC, Cefas and the Environment Agency for England and for the UK in collaboration with statutory bodies from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They are based on multi-annual monitoring programmes and modelled information that describes the condition of habitats, populations of species including fish stocks, cetaceans and birds, and the processes that create and support life in the sea. In the future, the MMO will benefit from assessments that integrate and describe social and economic impacts as well. One proposed way to do that is by using a natural capital

approach based on asset and risk registers. The MMO will be exploring with others the opportunities and challenges of this approach with the aim of improving the evidence base and our decision making. The natural capital approach has been developed as a method that puts the importance of nature and the environment at the heart of every decision, however it is still to be implemented as the basis for decision making. The MMO has benefitted from leading the [Marine Pioneer](#) between 2017 and 2020 which developed an approach to applying the natural capital approach in practice at a local scale with the input of stakeholders.

Concluding remarks

The start of the period of this Evidence Strategy has been marked by significant changes in the status of the UK as an independent coastal state and the establishment of new legislation for the environment and fisheries in England including an Office for Environmental Protection. Although the MMO has developed and implemented a successful approach to fulfilling its evidence needs in its first decade, the goals and desired outcomes for the marine environment in the next five to ten years are such that new strategic approaches to evidence and evaluation work are required. The new Evidence Strategy has been designed to enable MMO to respond in an agile and more nimble way to new and old evidence challenges. This evolved way of working will provide greater support for evidence-based decision making.

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