

Cross Party Group for Biodiversity

Wednesday 28th February 2017, 11:30am – 13:00pm
Seminar Rooms 1 & 2, Pierhead Building

MINUTES

Attendees

Simon Thomas AM (substituting for Llŷr Gruffydd AM)	Plaid Cymru – acting as Chair for CPG	(ST)
Phil Newman (Speaker)	MCZ Monitoring Team, Natural Resources Wales	(PN)
Gill Bell (Speaker)	Marine Conservation Society	(GB)
Clare Reed	Marine Conservation Society	(CR)
Mark Isherwood AM	Welsh Conservatives	
Ioan Bellin	Staff of Simon Thomas AM	
Catrin Davies	Plaid Cymru Group Office	
Laura Murton	Staff of Julie James AM	
Camilla Beaven	Staff of Jane Hutt AM	
Thomas Pinder	Staff of David Melding AM	
Helen West	Staff of Julie Morgan AM	
Robin Lewis	Staff of Vikki Howells AM	
Sharon Davies	Marine Conservation Branch, Welsh Government	
Sean Evans	Higher Research Officer, Research Service	
Jim Evans	Welsh Fishermen's Association	
Dr Leanne Cullen-Unsworth	Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff Uni	
Ben Jones	Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff Uni	
Jonathan Monk	Environmental Manager, Port of Milford Haven	
Dan Crook	Natural Resources Wales	
Scott Fryer	Wildlife Trusts Wales / Wales Environment Link	
Roger Thomas	Wales Environment Link (Chair)	(RT)
Karen Whitfield	Wales Environment Link	
Liz Smith	Wales Environment Link	
Clare Reed	Marine Conservation Society	
Annie Smith	RSPB	
Sarah Young	WWF Cymru	(SY)
Steve Lucas	Bat Conservation Trust	

Key Points from the Meeting

1 – Opening remarks

- ST opened the meeting, explaining that he was filling in for Llŷr Gruffydd AM (Chair of the Cross Party Group and sponsor of the event), who had unfortunately suffered a family bereavement so could not attend.
- ST set out that he is Plaid Cymru's Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change, Energy and Rural Affairs, which includes biodiversity. In terms of his own constituency – Mid & West Wales – he highlighted that whilst 70% of it is land mass, it includes the whole of Cardigan Bay too, so is constituted by a lot of marine environment. He added that this is the case particularly if, after Brexit, the marine borders are extended.
- He set out that this was a particularly good time to think about marine conservation, planning and the sustainable use, pointing to the Wales National Marine Plan which

is expected to be published in the summer and with the CCERA Committee (on which he sits) looking at marine planning in a current inquiry.

- ST detailed that, a few weeks ago, the Committee met with the Marine Institute in the Republic of Ireland, which is an on-going strand of work. He added that the 'big question' is still Brexit and the on-going possibility of environment legislation around Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and how it will be constructed within UK and Welsh legislation.
- In short, he remarked that marine management could be "*a mess*", and is a "*huge jigsaw*" that is difficult to piece together. Partly he believed this was down to it being hard to understand where marine protection comes from; what measures work; what doesn't. He noted that not much of this was discussed at a political level and they had to understand more that was going on.
- From gathering the evidence, he noted that politicians would do their best to understand it and make the best possible policy from what they've gathered. Although, he noted that one issue is that evidence is thin on the ground.
- After these comments, ST introduced the two speakers: Phil Newman (PN) as Natural Resources Wales' Senior Marine Conservation Officer of Skomer Island and Gill Bell (GB), Head of the Marine Conservation Society.

2 – 'Skomer Island's Marine Conservation Zone' – Phil Newman, NRW

PN spoke on how the team at Skomer's MCZ work together to protect marine wildlife, as well as ensuring that the general public are educated on it and that tourism has a safe and positive impact on the area.

As Wales' only MCZ, PN outlined that it had been chosen as it has a huge range of habitats in one small area with a corresponding diversity of species. He explained that they work on its protection, as well as conduct research, monitoring, surveillance, visitor management and liaison. PN showcased some of the warm-water, Mediterranean-Atlantic species, including the pink sea fan and yellow trumpet anemones.

PN also explained how research is physically conducted, by divers using non-destructive methods undertaking intensive and regular surveying. He went on to outline other species' roles in the marine ecosystem, as well as seal pup production and survival since 1992.

For more information, PN signposted attendees to the Skomer MCZ's reports:

<http://naturalresources.wales/conservation-biodiversity-and-wildlife/find-protected-areas-of-land-and-seas/skomer-marine-conservation-zone/>

The presentation slides are available on request from the Cross Party Group's secretariat, Wales Environment Link, by emailing liz@waleslink.org.

3 – Q&A following presentation

- RT asked what the long-term data sets for Skomer show and how they compares to previous years.
- PN responded that some species are good, stable or increasing but others have decreased. Seals have been increasing in the last few years, but the pink sea fan has decreased as, although there have been 10 new sea fans over the last 25 years, there has been a loss of 20 overall.
- SY asked where the visitors to Skomer Island and the MCZ were predominantly from. PN stated that both for visitors to the Island and divers in the MCZ were from all over the world.

- JM asked how eel grass deals with increasing temperatures due to climate change, within the MCZ. PN stated that there was not enough data on the correlation as the main issue in the MCZ with eel grass was historical damage from mooring.

4 – ‘Marine Conservation in Wales’ – Gill Bell, Marine Conservation Society

GB gave a rundown of the main mechanisms for marine conservation and monitoring, including Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR), the upcoming Wales National Marine Plan and Natural Resources Policy and National Ecosystem Assessments.

She emphasised the problem in not having enough robust marine evidence, but where there is evidence, it points to a worrying state of decline for marine habitats. SoNaRR did not identify any habitat in Wales to have all the features required for resilience.

Whilst 36% of Welsh seas are in Marine Protected Areas, GB pointed out that this does not mean they are necessarily actively managed or protected, as designation alone cannot do this; the resources have to follow. A well-funded evidence strategy is also integral and these same issues are present in drafting the Wales National Marine Plan; recognising problems alone does not mean they are being solved.

GB concluded by listing 5 ways marine conservation can be improved in Wales:

- Ensure protected sites are actually protected, not just designated.
- To stop damaging activities in protected areas, until evidence proves they are safe.
- Sufficient resources provided monitor, manage activities and enforce sites.
- During the UK’s exit from the EU, ensure there is no weakening of the EU Directives on birds, habitats or fisheries.
- When using marine resources in future, ensure it is actually sustainable and in a resilient and healthy ecosystem.

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5 – Q&A following presentation

- ST asked how Areas Statements (as part of the Environment Act) should cover the marine environment.
- CR said that there needs to be one at a national scale that compliments the developing Marine Plan, but there should also be sub-regional ones that cover the land sea interface and identify local opportunities and risks.
- RS stated that there is a worry that the Marine Plan could be used as the ‘marine Area Statement’. This would not work as the Marine Plan is not designed to identify risks and opportunities in the same way Area Statements will.
- Responding to a question on Skomer, PN stated there is currently no guarantee work will continue into the long-term future, and this would affect the collection and reliability of long term datasets.

6 – Discussion and Questions

ST wrapped up the session, thanking the presenters and contributors. There was some final discussion with ST.

RT questioned whether they did have enough evidence to help the AMs understand in the Assembly what needs to be done. ST did believe it was becoming more fully understood on

the basis to make evidential choices, noting that it has been debated in the Assembly. He indicated that sustainable management was coming more to the forefront of public policy making, but not much in the marine context.

ST continued that the National Marine Plan could be the opportunity to set this all out; he said the CCERA Committee will need to look at all the data, see what needs to be produced in order to make decisions later on. He said they will be asking NRW about ensuring that is in Area Statements as well.

He highlighted the SoNaRR report (produced by NRW last year). He said that from his reading of the document, a lot of it was based on NRW's "*best guess*" – adding that this was based on reasonable scientific inference from data – but was quite weak in terms of over-reliance on a very current and large-scale set of data.

CR added that as it is the first iteration of SoNaRR, it's not going to be "*perfect*" but the "*bottom line*" was the need for a strategic evidence programme. ST agreed, adding that it is also a terrestrial issue, highlighting that they needed to ensure SSSIs are successful in the characteristic they were established for.

RS raised concerns that, in terrestrial and marine, they have simply not seen the monitoring of protected sites and that is being amplified. She explained that, whilst it is a long-term question, they had to ensure they did not get a suite of designated sites without the resource to be maintained, enhanced and enforced. Without this element, she stated that the [designation] is "*effectively bits of paper*". She gave examples of some of the "*multitude of threats*" facing marine sites and the most important thing is to make the case on the lack of evidence so these could be tackled appropriately.

ST replied that when MCZs were first "*floated*" as an idea, certain things were prohibited but with little evidence backing them up. He noted that it can be difficult to get the public and communities on side of some aspects with that. He believed it would be an on-going area of work to deal with marine statements.