



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

PADDY TIPPING LABOUR MP FOR SHERWOOD

Making Waves with a Marine Bill

The Government's draft Marine Bill has finally been published for pre-legislative scrutiny. It has the potential to be one of the most radical pieces of environmental legislation for years. Let's make sure we get it right, and delivered on time, says Paddy Tipping

Back in 2001, Conservative MP, John Randall, tabled a Private Member's Bill that aimed to extend the protection of Britain's wildlife to cover our seas. The Marine Wildlife Conservation Bill was defeated in the House of Lords the following year, but its good intentions were never forgotten. Seven years on, and following calls from all the main parties for its introduction the Government have now published a Marine Bill in draft. I know I speak on behalf of my colleagues in welcoming this new bill, which establishes a long-term vision for the protection and recovery of our fragile marine ecosystem.

The Marine Bill has spent years in the pipeline. For many years, environmental groups and a range of sea users including fishing associations, marine industries, ports, recreation organisations, and renewable energy providers have sent consistent messages to Government to deliver effective marine legislation. A number of strategies, consultations, forums and election manifesto commitments have been published. Over the last few months, with talk of a potential general election in either 2009 or 2010, a great many of us have been wondering whether time is running out to deliver this much anticipated bill.

Why is a marine bill so important? As an island nation, we have always had a special relationship with our seas and we cannot underestimate their value. No UK citizen lives more than 72 miles from the coast. 128 MPs have coastal constituencies. 5% of the UK's GDP is generated through coastal and maritime activities. UK seas also have the greatest potential for renewable energy in Europe. The Government is looking more seriously at harnessing offshore wave, wind, and tidal energy to meet its climate change targets, so it is vital that we have an efficient marine planning system to enable this resource to be used swiftly and effectively. This can only be achieved by the proper marine spatial planning system proposed in the new bill.

It has long been recognised that we need to update our marine legislation to keep up with growing demands on our seas. Current legislation is made up of a complicated mixture of existing laws that are outdated and inefficient. Astonishingly, less than 2% of the UK's seas are adequately protected, despite the fact that a significant proportion of the UK's biodiversity is found in the seas. Our marine environment harbours an amazing wealth of wildlife from cold water corals and deep sea sponges to the massive basking shark. Yet, sadly, our seas are in crisis; only 0.001% of our seas are fully protected from all damaging human activities. There should be little surprise then, that a recent report showed the North Sea to be one of the seas worst affected by human impacts. In 2005, WWF-UK published a Marine Health Check Report, which concluded that 13 out of 16 key species and habitats are in decline in UK waters. This decline must be halted if we are to protect our biodiversity, maintain a healthy ecosystem and manage marine activities sustainably. In addition, a well-managed coastal and marine environment could help to protect us from some of the worst effects of climate change.

The marine bill is divided into five key areas; a new system of marine spatial planning; a new independent Marine Management Organisation; a new 'one project one licence' marine licensing system; a network of marine conservation zones including highly protected marine reserves and a new

LOCAL OFFICE
TEL: (0115-9640314)
FAX: (0115-9681639)
E.mail paddy@paddytippingmp.com

Sherwood Parliamentary Office
1st Floor, Council Offices,
Watnall Road, Hucknall, Notts, NG15 7LA



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framework for inshore fisheries. The bill also includes clauses on coastal access, which was widely welcomed during consultation in June 2007.

This represents another significant step forward in access to the countryside. However, the devil is in the detail. As the bill undergoes Parliamentary scrutiny, the Parliamentary Committees considering this bill will need to ensure that it does achieve the Government's vision for 'clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas'. We must also ensure that the UK bill is implemented effectively in devolved countries to provide adequate protection for the full length of our seas. With over half of UK waters in Scotland, we also need an effective Scottish Marine Bill.

This is a particularly crucial time to look to UK seas as they are facing the global environmental challenge of climate change as well as the continuing pressures of human activities. The publication of this bill has now generated considerable momentum, which needs to be built upon. A bill proper must be revived in November's Queen's speech followed by timely implementation. Further delay is no longer an option.

Paddy Tipping is Labour MP for Sherwood

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