

Irish Whale
and Dolphin
Group



**EXPANDING
IRELAND'S
MARINE
PROTECTED
AREA NETWORK**

IWDG Submission on Expanding Ireland's Marine Protected Area Network

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) was established in December 1990 and is an All-Ireland group “dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation”. In December 1999, the IWDG was granted charitable status (CHY 11163) and became a Limited Company in October 2000. The IWDG is a credible, effective NGO with a growing membership and increasing influence on government policy and actions. In this submission we restrict our comments to address issues in which the WDG has a competency.

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Front cover: Humpback whale breach
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**Vibrant,
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Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) are top predators and reflect the health of our marine ecosystems. Vibrant, healthy and abundant cetacean populations are indicative of healthy ecosystems. In addition, cetaceans are flagship species and resonate with the public. They can be used to promote the benefits of MPAs and for monitoring. The IWDG recommends MPAs with cetaceans as species of interest are designated early so that the public can engage with the MPA process.

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) welcomes the expert advisory group report on Expanding Ireland's Marine Protected Area Network. The IWDG considers an expanded network of Marine Protected Areas in Irish waters to be key to achieving good environmental status for Ireland's seas and achieving the sustainable use of the many valuable ecosystem services that our ocean provides. IWDG is a partner in the Sustainable Water Action Network (SWAN) and support their submission. Here we provide additional comments specific to the IWDG.

THE IRISH WHALE AND DOLPHIN GROUP IS DEDICATED TO
THE CONSERVATION AND BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF CETACEANS (WHALES, DOLPHINS AND
PORPOISES) IN IRISH WATERS, THROUGH STUDY, EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION.



The Irish Whale and Dolphin group is working towards identifying critical habitats for cetaceans through research and citizen science which will be the first step towards good management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) for cetaceans.



Existing Special Area of Conservation Network

- The existing Special Areas of Conservation for cetaceans in Ireland are inadequate due to their small size and fragmented nature.
 - A coherent network of large MPAs is required to protect adequate representative habitat for wide ranging species such as cetaceans.
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- The government's own monitoring programme shows a decline in the number of porpoises within the Roaringwater Bay and Blasket Islands SACs, most likely due to a shift in the local distribution of porpoises in these areas rather than a population decline. A comparison can be made with the UK approach of designating very large MPAs for harbour porpoise covering a wide swathe of representative habitat. This is welcome, providing it includes appropriate management targets or actions.
 - The Irish SACs, with cetaceans as a qualifying species, are poorly managed with no coherent management plan or actions. For example the continued industrial fishing within the Lower River Shannon SAC, which includes prey species important for bottlenose dolphins. The IWDG strongly requires site specific Conservation Plans to be published and reviewed regularly with ongoing communication and engagement from local stakeholders.
 - The MPA expansion process must include a revision of the boundaries, goals and objectives of our existing marine SAC network with a view to creating larger SACs for cetaceans with more ambitious conservation and recovery targets and effective management plans and actions for each SAC.
 - Expansion of the current marine SAC network under current legislation should be considered for species and habitats listed under the Habitats Directive, with ambitious conservation and recovery targets and effective management plans and actions for each SAC.

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IWDG's ambitions for an expanded MPA network

The target 30% of Ireland's Sea areas designated as MPAs should be a minimum and the majority of new MPAs should be highly protected. The seas around Ireland are in crisis and at no time in their history have our seas been under so much pressure from human actions both individual and cumulative including:

- Global Warming
- Ocean Acidification
- Marine plastic pollution
- Noise pollution
- Unsustainable fisheries
- Habitat destruction due to bottom fisheries
- Cetacean bycatch
- Offshore oil and gas exploration and development
- Offshore wind energy exploration and development
- Legacy pollution including heavy metals, PCBs and organochlorines
- Agricultural runoff and sewage pollution in our bays and estuaries
- Future deep sea mining

The IWDG wish to see a strong and coherent management plan, with robust measures leading to the protection of existing biodiversity and ambitious biodiversity and habitat restoration goals for each new MPA.

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UNDERSTAND REFLECT AND ENGAGE

Local stakeholder engagement is essential to the success of MPAs. A full suite of engagement tools are available and adequate time must be allowed for communities and individuals affected by MPA designation to understand, reflect and engage with the process and management.

IWDG recommends a number of pilot schemes are established immediately to identify key pressures and issues to local stakeholders. A number of schemes in different locations could identify synergies between sites or consistent issues.

Management powers should be devolved to local stakeholder groups who are provided with the responsibility and accountability to ensure effective management of local MPAs. This is the only way these MPAs will be effective, especially coastal ones

Adequate enforcement of measures is essential and resources required to achieve this for each MPA must be obtained. Existing agencies such as the SFPA, IFI, NPWS could be provided with these additional powers.

An emphasis on 'no take zones' and the ability to update and change boundaries based on continuous monitoring should be a strong part of this MPA network.

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NEW MPAs

The IWDG has proposed nine new MPAs for cetaceans and provide supporting data and publications on <https://iwdg.ie/marine-conservation-zones/>. These include:

- Rockall Bank Extension (extension to the existing Rockall Bank SAC) – Species of interest: sperm whale and long-finned pilot whale.
- Continental shelf edge and slopes – Species of interest: Sowerby's beaked whale, Cuvier's beaked whale, Northern bottlenose whale, sperm whale, long-finned pilot whale.
- Donegal Bay – Species of interest: bottlenose dolphin.
- Brandon and Tralee Bay (extension to the Lower River Shannon SAC) – Species of interest: bottlenose dolphin.
- Blasket Islands to Mizen Head – Species of interest: fin whale, humpback whale, Risso's dolphin, common dolphin, harbour porpoise, minke whale
- Porcupine Seabight – Species of interest: fin whale, blue whale, sei whale
- Goban Spur to Whittard Canyon – Species of interest: beaked Whales, long-finned pilot whales, common dolphin, striped dolphin
- Fastnet to Hook Head – Species of interest: fin whale, humpback whale, common dolphin, harbour porpoise, minke whale
- Skerries to Howth Head Inshore and Offshore (extension to Dalkey to Rockabill SAC) – species of interest: harbour porpoise, minke whale.
- More sites will be identified and recommended in the future. Many of the sites are of interest for a range of other species and habitats and the IWDG considers multi-interest sites to be important for effective management.

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The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group has been actively involved in the management of the Shannon Estuary MPA since it was designated in 2000.



Designation Process

The main goal or outcome of new MPAs must be to conserve nature.

- The legislation required for proper designation of MPAs should be prioritised asap
- A national MPA coordinating body and stakeholder group, including regional stakeholder fora, should be established ASAP.
- The MPA designation process needs to be sped up to catch up with the NMPF process and the designation of offshore licenses for industrial development (including windfarm development) and extraction.
- Following an initial round of MPA designation a gap analysis should be conducted to identify gaps in designated habitat distribution across the MPA network, followed by further designations to fill these gaps and ensure a truly coherent network of MPAs protecting.
- MPAs should be designated in consultation with local communities (where applicable) and all user organisations.
- A number of Highly Protected Marine Areas should be selected for pilot projects. These can be started in advance of legislation to identify issues and problems in the process as well as to expedite the creation of MPAs and to establish clearly benefits to local communities.

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Designation Process

The IWDG consider themselves partners in the identification of potential MPAs and their management and monitoring. The IWDG have unique datasets that can be accessed and good outreach to coastal communities.

Newly designated MPAs should adhere to IUCN Guidelines in that the main goal or outcome of new MPAs must be to conserve nature and must exclude unsustainable extractive activities:

- these objectives must apply to at least 75% of the designated MPA.
- The MPA must be of a suitable size, location and design to enable conservation of the target species or habitat.
- The MPA must have a management plan with well-defined management measures and objectives.
- Objectives must be clearly defined and measurable
- The MPAs must be adequately resourced to allow for its management and monitoring.
- Any industrial activities and infrastructural developments (e.g. mining, industrial fishing, oil and gas extraction) are not compatible with MPAs and should be excluded

The MPA designation process and objectives must be strongly linked to habitat recovery and fish stock recovery to the benefit of ocean ecosystem services including Ireland's fisheries.

Dudley, N. (ed.) (2008). Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN



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