

EN/05/06 FOR IMMEDIATE USE
1 March 2005

Time to see change

Three years on from the launch of the Marine Stewardship Report 'Safeguarding our Seas' Defra has set out the current state of our coasts and seas and charts the progress made to date towards achieving the vision of "clean, safe, healthy, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas" with the publication of 'Charting Progress'.

The Government's advisors on the health of the marine environment in England, English Nature, today (Tuesday 1 March) welcomed its publication as a step towards tackling the two most serious threats facing the sea: over-exploitation of some marine species and the impacts of climate change.

Cod stocks are under pressure. The common skate is no longer common. Commercial fishing is over exploiting resources.

Dr Dan Laffoley, Head of Marine Conservation, said: "We agree with the key findings that commercial fishing and climate change represent major threats to marine ecosystems and that the cumulative effects of human activities need to be better understood and managed."

"We are only beginning to understand the effects of climate change on the marine environment. Sea temperatures are rising and the distribution of plankton species is changing. This could threaten the whole balance of the marine ecosystem" he added.

Much of England's coastline is responding to the effects of climate change which include rising sea levels and increased storminess. The resulting changes are leading to the loss of intertidal habitats as a result of coastal squeeze as salt marsh and sand dunes get trapped between rising sea levels and fixed sea walls. This has implications for the management and cost of flood defences, many of which rely on coastal habitats to reduce wave energy.

Moves to co-ordinate monitoring and data into a standard format are also welcome.

Dan Laffoley continued: "We back Defra's recommendation to make better use of information about our coasts and seas by pooling the expertise of all UK bodies which deal with the marine environment. This is the only way to gain a better understanding of the size of the problems we face. Then can we take informed action to safeguard our seas."

English Nature has been consulting widely with partners and stakeholders during the past two years to develop ways of addressing many of the issues raised in Defra's report. Next week we will be publishing our Maritime Strategy which will outline actions which will result in more benefits for biodiversity and for people and recognition of ways in which better management can be delivered in territorial waters.