8 March 2005

Three actions to save our coasts and seas

English Nature's maritime strategy, released today 8 March 2005, on the future of our coasts and seas highlights three actions that are vital for to them recover - (i) new legislation to create a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs); (ii) moving from coastal defence to coastal management; and (iii) effective marine spatial planning.

Our coasts and seas - making space for people, industry and wildlife, is the culmination of over two years of discussions with hundreds of people who use and manage our seas and coasts for business, recreation and conservation. It builds on the Maritime State of Nature report published in 2002 and takes account of further evidence showing marine and coastal quality is still declining, with the number and diversity of plants and animals in the sea having been significantly altered by man's activities. It highlights the need for action across a variety of issues, ranging from the stresses on marine ecosystems caused by over-fishing and uncoordinated development, to disappearing coastal habitats that protect the land from rising sea levels.

Helen Rae, Maritime Strategy Project Manager said: "There is little doubt that there is a need to act now, the time for reviewing issues and problems has passed. We now look to the Marine Bill to provide the new legislation and approaches that are now required".

English Nature identifies, amongst others, 3 key priorities –

1. The need for new legislation to take forward a network of MPAs that represents all habitats and species. Such a network will include areas that have varying levels of protection, including some that are highly protected to stop all damaging commercial and recreational activities. The network of MPAs will contribute to the recovery and protection of the whole marine ecosystem rather than focusing specifically on individual habitats and species. This approach will bring multiple benefits. It will allow exploited species to recover which can lead to bigger fish catches; a healthier environment that is more resilient to change; and it will afford greater protection to both common and rare species. To deliver these benefits, at least 20-30% of all marine habitats will need to have strict protection from damaging impacts. Elsewhere, improved sustainable management of on-going activities will also be required.

2. Moving from coastal defence to coastal management. Our coasts are constantly evolving. The sea eats away at the base of cliffs, causing them to erode; this releases sediment that is then moved along the shore to nourish and sustain our existing beaches. Climate change is causing sea levels to rise as well as more and bigger storms. As a result, our coasts are suffering from unprecedented changes. Old and expensive to maintain sea defences, inappropriate development and rising sea levels are squeezing out the habitats, such as saltmarshes and intertidal mudflats, that protect us from the sea and are also home to important wildlife. We need more innovative management, such as the award winning managed realignment at Abbots' Hall in Essex, which works with coastal processes to create the space for coastal habitats and geodiversity. This will allow coastal habitats and

their wildlife to adapt and move, thereby offering greater protection, conservation and opportunities for sustainable tourism.

3. Marine spatial planning. As the sea becomes more congested there is a growing need to balance often conflicting marine uses while protecting and managing the marine environment. Currently there is no overview of new applications for potentially harmful activities in our seas. This means that, hypothetically, if applications for a windfarm, port expansion and gravel dredging were being evaluated at the same time by different regulators, there would be no assessment of their cumulative effect. Individually each may not be harmful but together there can be problems. This would be addressed by co-ordinated and effective spatial planning.

Achieving our ambitions set out in this report at the coast and in our seas will –

- Help people living on the coast to better adapt to long-term change;
- Provide better information so that new developments are sited in more suitable locations, taking into account likely long-term changes;
- Give us better water quality;
- Allow fish stocks to recover with clear benefits for sustaining fishing communities over the longer term;
- Create healthier and more robust seas that can better cope with some of the major impacts we have little direct control over, such as climate change; and
- Provide a long-term future for wildlife and all those who depend upon the services provided by the marine and coastal environment.