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UK Ocean Recovery: A Shared Mission For 2020 And Beyond

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SUMMARY

- The ocean is the blue heart of a healthy planet and stable climate, and ocean recovery is key to tackling the nature and climate emergency. Yet UK seas are still in crisis, failing 11 of 15 indicators of a healthy ocean. Current efforts to manage our domestic waters are fragmented and lack ambition, urgency and accountability.
- WWF is working with Sky Ocean Rescue to drive urgent and transformative action to bring UK seas back to life in the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. True global ocean leadership must start with action at home.
- The UK will not meet its climate and nature targets without urgent and large-scale action to bring our seas back to life. WWF and Sky Ocean Rescue are calling on the UK Government to use 2020 as the year to develop a radical world-leading domestic UK Ocean Recovery Action (ORCA) programme, backed by legal commitments and investment.

INTRODUCTION

The ocean has been the buffer around our shores, absorbing over 90% of heat and a third of carbon dioxide humans have ever created, and producing over half the oxygen we breathe. Without the ocean to protect us, the planet would be 35°C hotter than it is today.ⁱ

In 2019, the world woke up to the critical role the ocean has played in keeping us safe, but also the devastating changes that are already happening and will continue to worsen unless we act now. The impacts from acidification, heatwaves, dead zones and food web disruption are profound, and already being felt here in the UK and globally, as put into shocking context by the IPCC Special Report on Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (SROCC),ⁱⁱ and for the UK, by the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP).ⁱⁱⁱ

At the same time, our domestic waters are in crisis, failing 11 of 15 key indicators of a healthy marine environment despite around 25% of our waters being formally within marine protected areas.^{iv} The recent near collapse of North Sea cod is a wakeup call, with North Sea fish catches expected to fall by more than a third by 2050 even in a best-case climate scenario.^v The overwhelming economic damage to natural assets in the UK will be from the loss of coastal ecosystems and collapsing fish stocks, unless we take action now to protect and restore them, as demonstrated by the recently published Global Futures report^{vi}.

DELIVERING ON THE 2020 “OCEAN SUPER YEAR”

2020 is an “ocean super year” and the world must respond to this challenge with a new mindset. Business as usual is not an option: we must bring all our work together to drive recovery at pace and scale. The transformative change that will be needed to proactively recover the ocean will require global leadership, supported by civil society and business leaders. This is shared advocacy in action, and we welcome the UK Government’s strong ambition on the world stage at such a critical juncture.

Throughout the year, key global moments, culminating in the world coming to Glasgow for COP26, must collectively ladder up to a set of agreements that put the ocean on a path to recovery by 2030. To do this, the UK must at least halve the footprint of our production and consumption of ocean resources in a decade, including by rebuilding fish stocks, properly protecting at least a third of the ocean in effective marine protected areas

“30x30”) and investing billions in restoring key ecosystems that play such a critical role in tackling the climate and nature crises together.

UK OCEAN RECOVERY – A TEST OF CREDIBLE LEADERSHIP

Ocean recovery is a powerful message of hope. With the fifth largest marine estate in the world and its new role as an Independent Coastal State, the UK has a huge opportunity and responsibility to provide global leadership to drive ocean recovery at home and abroad. The UK has rightly championed ocean protection on the global stage and in its overseas territories and must also do so in its own back yard.

If recovered, UK seas can be a true hero. Seagrass, for example, captures carbon 35 times faster than tropical rainforests^{vii} at the same time as providing a critical nursery habitat to a fifth of the world’s major fisheries. In the UK, a square metre of sediment stores more carbon than peatlands.^{viii} Offshore renewable energy is now cheaper than the wholesale price of electricity^{ix}, and if restored, fish stocks could capture carbon, contribute to food security, and deliver income and livelihoods for generations to come.

If we can put our seas on the pathway to recovery, they can be the hero in the fight against climate change, help reduce our environmental footprint and take pressure off agricultural and land systems. Simply preventing further decline is not enough, we need to change the dial to recover them before it’s too late.

Where this agenda requires legal changes, these should be brought together and delivered through an integrated ocean recovery framework. As part of this, domestic legislation currently underway, for example the Environment and Fisheries Bills, should be seen as stepping-stones for all administrations on the path to a holistic ocean recovery programme.

A WORLD-LEADING OCEAN RECOVERY ACTION PROGRAMME (ORcA) BY THE END OF 2020

We stand at a pivotal moment in deciding the fate of the ocean here in the UK. WWF and Sky Ocean Rescue are campaigning for the UK Government to use 2020 as an “ocean super year” and develop a truly world-leading Ocean Recovery Action programme (ORcA) for domestic waters, translating bold global commitments into practical action at home. This ocean recovery agenda could be launched in Glasgow at COP26, with the world watching, setting an exemplar for other countries to follow suit.

Crucially, this must be a properly integrated agenda, which includes immediate action to:

1. Put ocean recovery into law and break down the governance silos
2. Support deepest possible emissions reductions from marine sources
3. Make fisheries/seafood climate and nature positive
4. Fully or highly protect at least a third of UK seas by 2030 (“30x30”) to support whole-ocean recovery
5. Rapidly scale up restoration of climate combatting ecosystems like seagrass, working with coastal communities
6. Inject and direct mainstream finance into ocean recovery

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ⁱ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/grantham-institute/public/publications/briefing-papers/Ocean-heat-uptake---Grantham-BP-15.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mccip.org.uk/impacts-report-cards/full-report-cards/2020/>

^{iv} <https://moat.cefas.co.uk/summary-of-progress-towards-good-environmental-status/>

^v https://report.ipcc.ch/srocc/pdf/SROCC_FinalDraft_Chapter5.pdf#page=77

^{vi} <https://www.wwf.org.uk/global-futures>

^{vii} <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/latest-news/onemillionseedstobeplantedinuksbiggestseagrassrestorationscheme.php>

^{viii} <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-43049001>

^{ix} <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-record-low-uk-offshore-wind-cheaper-than-existing-gas-plants-by-2023>