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PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

Westminster Hall Adjournment Debate: Protecting Ocean and Marine Eco-systems

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Key points:

- Managing our oceans in a sustainable and equitable manner is essential for our future and is now more critical than ever.
- Oceans provide a home to nearly half the species on Earth, provide the largest source of protein to the world's growing population and regulate global climate patterns. However, despite occupying over 70% of the world's surface, there are clear signs of degradation both at depth and far away from land. We can therefore no longer view the oceans as an infinite source of food and energy and a sink for pollution.
- Out of sight, out of mind simply won't work to secure the enormous natural capital that our oceans can offer if managed sustainably. Over 63% of the global value of natural resources currently comes from the oceans.
- Our inaction and lack of effective governance of global fisheries alone is costing us an estimated \$50 billion a year according to the World Bank.

Background

Oceans and seas play a critical role in sustaining the Earth's life support systems. They provide a habitat for nearly 50% of all species on the planet, and they protect us all by moderating our climate through absorbing carbon and heat. They also provide 2.6 billion people with their primary source of protein and contribute \$70 trillion to global GDP.

Managing our oceans in a sustainable and equitable manner is therefore essential for our future. We can no longer allow resources that so many communities depend upon for their livelihoods, food security and economic development, to be so poorly governed. The equitable and sustainable management of our seas and oceans is currently under threat in 2 ways:

1. The health of our oceans is suffering from unsustainable use both at sea and on land, from overfishing to fertiliser run-off. We are fundamentally changing the composition and equilibrium of our oceans through overuse and poor management. On top of this, the increased volume of carbon in the atmosphere is causing the oceans to acidify,

reducing biodiversity and destroying coral reef and polar ecosystems. We can no longer see the oceans as an infinite source of food and energy and a sink for pollution and excess carbon.

2. Overfishing, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing are the main cause of the demise of many of the world's fish stocks. The World Bank estimates that economic losses in marine fisheries from poor management amount to \$ 50 billion annually. And with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimating that 85% of global marine fish stocks are fully exploited, over-exploited or depleted; they are in a more perilous position now than ever before.

The very nature of our oceans requires international cooperation to sustainably manage such a complex and vast expanse of our planet. In the UK, we have already done much with our world-leading Marine Act, under which Marine Conservation Zones are currently undergoing the process of designation. On Fisheries, the UK is doing its part to enshrine environmental sustainability in the reform the European Common Fisheries Policy. In the past few weeks, the UN has taken the unprecedented step of designating the High Seas MPA in international waters, the Charlie-Gibbs fracture zone in the Atlantic. If managed correctly, could set a precedent for further designations in the future.

Governments should fully recognise the importance that the oceans play in supporting global economies and more locally in addressing poverty and maintaining food supply in many coastal developing nations.

Internationally 4 current commitments/actions are needed:

1. **Improve ocean health:** Ensuring the health of the oceans for current and future generations requires regulating activity at sea and halting harmful effects from land-based activities on ocean and coastal ecosystems. Countries need to work to increase governance and responsibility of the world's oceans, including effective Marine Spatial Planning to reduce conflicts in an increasingly busy space and creating networks of Marine Protected Areas to ensure a space for nature.
 1. **Commitments to improve ocean health:** by calling on all nations to honour their commitments on a timely basis to establish well managed networks of MPAs through their own national designations, Habitats and Birds Directives and Natura 2000 to improve and afford protection to marine biodiversity.
2. **Update UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):** This defines the responsibilities of nations in their use of the world's oceans beyond national waters (around 64% of the ocean). However, since it came into force almost 20 years ago, the way we use and impact on the oceans has changed, so UNCLOS must evolve to stay relevant. Also effort is needed to reduce the gap between states' commitments and their actual implementation.
 1. The UN General Assembly to convene, as a matter of urgency, a diplomatic conference **to deliver a new implementing agreement under UNCLOS** that would address the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, particularly through representative networks of Marine Protected Areas.
3. **Protecting the Polar Regions:** The Arctic and Antarctic are changing at an unprecedented rate, not least due to the impacts of climate change. They face significant direct human pressure, including illegal fishing, oil and gas development (in the Arctic), and shipping.
 1. **Ensure ecosystem-based management and the establishment of comprehensive networks of MPAs and marine reserves.** WWF's new conservation tool RACER (Rapid Assessment of Circum-Arctic Ecosystem Resilience) has been developed to map and identify areas of conservation importance on the basis of ecosystem resilience.

2. **Identify and implement offshore oil and gas no-go zones in the Arctic**, during a rapid and sustained shift to a renewable future.
3. Timely agreement and implementation of a mandatory **Polar Shipping Code**.
4. **Maintain or restore depleted fish stocks** to sustainable levels by all States by 2015, reaffirming earlier commitments to do so, in particular **through combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing**. They must also end harmful subsidies which encourage overfishing and undermine sustainability.

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