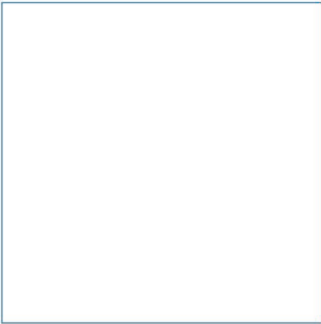
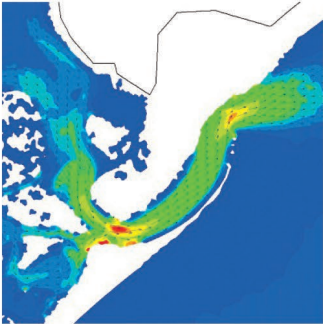
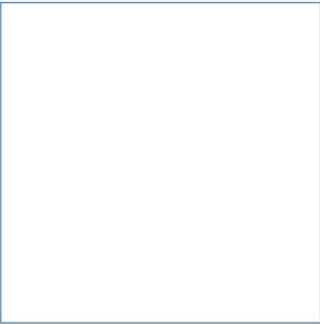
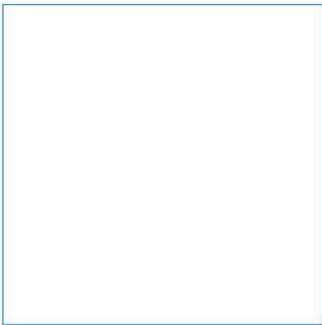




Yorkshire Wildlife Trust on behalf of the EASTME Forum

EASTME Annual Report 2023-24

September 2026



Innovative Thinking - Sustainable Solutions

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EASTME

Annual Report 2023-24

September 2026



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ABPmer

Quayside Suite, Medina Chambers, Town Quay, Southampton, Hampshire SO14 2AQ
T: +44 (0) 2380 711844 W: <http://www.abpmer.co.uk/>

Executive Summary

The EAST Marine Ecosystems (EASTME) project was established in 2024 to provide an annual assessment of changes in the marine environment and its management across the East of England, from Flamborough Head to the southern Suffolk border. Developed from a Defra-funded scoping project undertaken in 2023, EASTME aims to improve understanding of the region's marine and coastal ecosystems while strengthening collaboration between organisations involved in their management and conservation. It serves as a platform for communicating and synthesising evidence from a wide range of ongoing research, monitoring and management activities, with the ultimate goal of supporting informed decision-making and ecosystem recovery.

A central component of the programme is the establishment of thematic Communities of Practice (COPs), covering topics including oceanography, habitats, marine species, fisheries, marine planning, Marine Protected Areas, water quality, marine debris and marine energy. These communities bring together specialists from different organisations to share knowledge, experience and emerging evidence, helping to build networks and strengthen stakeholder engagement across the region. EASTME is intended to operate on an annual reporting cycle, providing a mechanism for tracking environmental change and identifying emerging issues and priorities.

The first EASTME Conference was held on 23 May 2024 at the University of Lincoln, bringing together 90 participants from across the marine sector to share research findings, practical experience and policy developments relevant to the EASTME area. This report presents a synthesis of the COP findings and presentations from the conference, covering the 2023-24 reporting period.

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1 Introduction

In 2024, the EAST Marine Ecosystems (EASTME) project commenced to report on the annual changes in the natural marine systems from Flamborough Head to the Suffolk border. The idea for EASTME arose from an initial scoping project funded via Defra's marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (mNCEA) – Land Sea interface programme in May 2023. The east marine region was selected as a pilot because it is the region most unlike the [south-west](#) where a regional conference already exists. There is also an extensive programme of marine planning currently underway in the east region of England.

In essence EASTME is a programme of communication and reporting observations and findings from a wide range of current work and projects that apply to the East marine and coastal region. The aim of EASTME is *"To report on the state of the East regional sea area and build the relationships between leading stakeholders who are engaged in understanding and managing this environment."* Supporting objectives include:

1. To hold a one-day conference that reports on the state of a number of thematic topics for the EAST Region from Flamborough Head to the south Suffolk border;
2. To build the EASTME process and the Communities of Practice that support that; and
3. To produce an EASTME State of the Sea annual report

EASTME has established a range of Communities of Practice (COP) based on thematic topics, as outlined in Table 1, as a tool to build social capital and create opportunities for stakeholder engagement to share knowledge and experience.

Table 1. 2024 thematic COPs

Thematic COP
1. Oceanography, Plankton and Productivity
2. Seabed and Seashore
3. Coastal and Estuarine Habitats
4. Marine and Coastal Birds
5. Marine Mammals – Seals and Cetaceans
6. Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish
7. Marine Planning
8. Marine Protected Areas
9. Water Quality
10. Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris
11. Energy in the Marine Environment

The first EASTME Conference was held in May 2024 and saw multiple presenters from the East region report on the local marine environment based on the thematic COPs. This report covers the reporting year 2023 and provides a summary of the COP talks from the 2024 conference, alongside introductory talks. Links to where the 2024 PowerPoint presentations can be viewed [online](#)¹, and recordings of each talk are provided in each presentation in Sections 3 to 14. A summary of the 2024 conference is provided in Table 2.

¹ <https://eastme.co.uk/archive/>

Table 2. Summary of the 2024 EASTME conference

Date and Venue
The 2024 East Marine Ecosystems Conference was held on 23 May 2024 at University of Lincoln, Lincolnshire, England. The conference brought together a wide range of experts, practitioners and other stakeholders to share the latest research, practical experience, and policy developments in marine conservation in the East of England regional sea area.
Attendance
90 people
Organisations Represented
Delegates represented 38 organisations, representing a diverse range of disciplines and career stages. Participants included researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations.
Conference Format
The conference comprised keynote presentations, thematic oral presentations on 11 thematic topics across marine ecology, oceanography and management, and Q&A panel discussions.
Evidence Sources
This synthesis draws upon multiple sources of evidence generated through the thematic COP. In order to bring the latest evidence and developments together COP participants are drawn from a range of organisations specialising in this specific thematic field. While every effort is made to include all individuals and organisations with relevant evidence into the COP, gaps remain.
How conclusions were developed
Conclusions presented in this report were developed through thematic synthesis of the conference proceedings. Key findings, recurring messages, areas of consensus, and emerging priorities were identified within presentations. Rather than summarising individual presentations, the report highlights overarching themes and recommendations that reflect the collective insights of conference participants.

2 Programme

- 08:45 – 09:30 *Doors open, refreshments and registration*
- 09:30 – 09:35 **Welcome to the conference** from Mark Schuerch, Associate Professor Physical Geography, University of Lincoln
- 09:35 – 09:45 **Introduction to the marine Natural Capital Programme**, Mike Nelson, Senior Advisor, mNCEA Land-Sea Interface Project Lead, Environment Agency
- 09:45 – 10:00 **Introduction to East Marine Ecosystems and next steps**, Bob Earl
- Session 1**, Chair: Mark Schuerch
- 10:00 – 10:20 **Oceanography, Plankton and Productivity**: Rodney Forster, University of Hull
Seabed and Seashore: Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions
Coastal and Estuarine Habitats: Jeff Kew, RSPB
 Discussion of the relationships and interactions between thematic topics
- 11:10 – 12:00 *First break: Sandwiches and refreshments*
- Session 2**, Chair: Tammy Smalley, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust
- 12:00 – 12:15 **Marine and Coastal Birds**: Dave O'Hara, RSPB
Marine Mammals – Seals: Beth Thompson, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Marine Mammals – Cetaceans: Peter Evans, SeaWatch Foundation
Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish: Rui Viera, Cefas
Marine Planning: Alex Curd, Marine Management Organisation
- 13:05 – 13:25 Discussion of the relationships and interactions between thematic topics
- 13:25 – 14:15 *Second Break: Cakes & refreshments*
- 14:15 – 14:30 **Session 3**, Chair: Adele Powell, The Wash and North Norfolk Marine Partnership
Marine Protected Areas: Jennifer Love and Georgina Roberts, Natural England
Water Quality: Sewage, Storm Overflows and Other Pollutants: Kayleigh Gadd and Emily Ball, Environment Agency
Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris: William Fitter, Eunomia & East of England Plastics Coalition
Energy in the Marine Environment: Jon Rees, Cefas
- 15:15 – 15:35 Discussion of the relationships and interactions between thematic topics
- 15:35 – 16:30 EASTME Next steps – facilitated discussion
- 16:30 Conference close

3 Introductory talks

Table 3. Introduction to the marine Natural Capital Programme

Speaker and presentation
Speaker: Mike Nelson Link to talk
Summary
Mike Nelson introduced the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) Programme, a Defra science and innovation programme that seeks to improve understanding of England's natural assets, the benefits they provide to society, and how natural capital approaches can support better environmental decision-making. Natural capital provides a framework for recognising and valuing the services delivered by marine, estuarine and coastal habitats such as seagrass meadows, kelp forests and saltmarshes. These habitats support biodiversity, improve water quality, store carbon, reduce flood and erosion risk, and provide important cultural and recreational benefits. However, they face significant pressures from development, pollution, population growth and climate change, with substantial losses of key habitats recorded across England. The NCEA programme aims to address these challenges by improving data collection, monitoring and evidence on habitat extent, condition and ecosystem service provision, while developing tools, metrics and indicators that can be incorporated into policy and management decisions. The programme also promotes innovation, citizen science and a more integrated "source-to-sea" approach that links activities occurring on land with impacts in estuarine and marine environments. A key theme of the presentation was the importance of social capital and collaboration. Mike highlighted the South-West Marine Ecosystems (SWME) model as an example of how regional COPs can bring together diverse experts, share observations across disciplines and provide timely assessments of marine ecosystem change. Such networks can act as an early warning system for emerging environmental issues and help strengthen evidence-based decision-making. Looking ahead, the NCEA programme is entering its third year and will continue developing evidence, tools and partnerships, while exploring opportunities to expand this collaborative regional approach to other parts of England.

Table 4. Introduction to East Marine Ecosystems and next steps

Speaker and presentation
Speaker: Bob Earll Link to talk
Summary
Bob Earll introduced the EASTME initiative, explaining that it was developed as a pilot project inspired by the successful SWME model and funded through the marine NCEA programme. The aim of EASTME is to create a sustainable communication network that enables annual reporting on the state of the marine environment across the East region while building social capital through collaboration, knowledge sharing and partnerships. EASTME brings together scientists, policymakers, environmental managers, practitioners and citizen scientists through a regional steering group and eleven thematic communities of practice covering topics such as marine habitats, fisheries, marine mammals, planning, pollution and offshore energy. A central theme of the presentation was the importance of annual regional reporting as a means of providing timely information on environmental change, rather than relying solely on national and international reporting cycles that occur every five to six years. Bob suggested that annual reporting can help identify emerging issues, communicate both positive and negative environmental trends, support earlier action, and improve the transfer of knowledge between organisations and sectors. He also highlighted the value of reporting at a regional scale, as most environmental management and decision-making occurs locally, and regional communication can better engage those responsible for taking action. Drawing on the experience of SWME, he demonstrated how COPs, conferences, annual reports, webinars and online communication platforms can strengthen networks, foster interdisciplinary collaboration and improve understanding of interactions across marine ecosystems. The presentation concluded by emphasising that EASTME's future success depends on continued participation and engagement from the regional marine community. Bob encouraged delegates to become involved, contribute their expertise and help EASTME grow into a long-term, community-led "coalition of the willing" that supports effective communication, collaboration and evidence-based environmental management in the east marine region.

4 Oceanography, plankton and productivity

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Rodney Forster, Hull Marine Laboratory, University of Hull.

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Rodney Forster's talk reviewed the East marine plan area through an oceanography, plankton and productivity lens. The East inshore and offshore region is physically varied, including Dogger Bank, Silver Pit, Norfolk Banks, the Wash and Humber–Tees continuum, but lacks long-running observatory datasets comparable with the Plymouth observatory. Using open datasets from the Environment Agency, Met Office, Wavenet and Copernicus, the talk highlighted 2023 as a very warm, wet and stormy year, with record June temperatures, a September heatwave, high River Trent flows and named storms that generated waves and surges. Sea surface temperatures in 2022 and 2023 were among the highest in the available record, with 2024 demonstrating a continuing warming trend. Salinity, nutrient and chlorophyll data point to strong freshwater and nutrient influences, variable blooms and unresolved biological responses. The talk concluded that further EASTME analysis should focus on nutrients, chlorophyll anomalies, turbidity/light, zooplankton and links to higher trophic levels.

Key themes and trends

Data-rich inshore, data-poor offshore: EA water-quality monitoring provides strong inshore evidence, while offshore understanding relies on fewer wave, cruise and remote-sensing records.

Warming and extremes: 2022–2023 stood out for high sea-surface temperatures; 2023 also brought June and September heatwaves, heavy rain and autumn storms.

Freshwater, nutrients and blooms: High River Trent flows, low salinity signals and nutrient inputs shape productivity, with phosphate declining but nitrate loads harder to resolve.

Biological uncertainty: Plankton, turbidity, zooplankton and links to birds, seals, dolphins and fisheries remain priorities for joined-up interpretation.

Priority actions

Build the EASTME evidence picture: Complete analyses of nutrient loads, chlorophyll anomalies, turbidity/underwater light and zooplankton.

Connect physics to ecology: Use the COP to link oceanographic change to food-web, fisheries and unusual-sighting evidence.

5 Seabed and Seashore

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions

Contributing Organisations: Benthic Solutions, Natural England, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Seasearch

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Ian Wilson summarised seabed and seashore evidence for EASTME, noting that no major seabed incidents were recorded in 2023, including no major storm wash-outs. Ongoing Shoresearch and Wildlife Trust surveys continued in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, with Seasearch, Natural England and Eastern IFCA contributing evidence. Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) condition assessment classified the chalk reef feature as 'no change', while Eastern IFCA is supporting a three-year study on potting impacts. Offshore wind surveys in the southern North Sea generated extensive baseline, habitat mapping, grab and seabed camera data, but private-sector time lags and reporting limitations restrict annual assessment. Offshore wind impacts include soft-sediment loss at monopiles, hard-substrate creation, construction disturbance and possible scour. The talk highlighted eDNA as a promising tool for faster, broader biodiversity monitoring, including non-native species surveillance, and called for quicker reporting, interpretation and better communication between agencies and industry.

Key themes and trends

No major 2023 incident: The community reported no major seabed incidents or storm wash-outs.

Survey activity continues: Shoresearch, Wildlife Trust, Seasearch, Natural England and Eastern IFCA work supported site evidence and condition updates.

Offshore wind evidence lag: Baseline and habitat mapping surveys are comprehensive but often commercially owned and delayed before public release.

Habitat change not chemical impact: Wind farms alter soft sediment to hard substrate and create construction disturbance.

eDNA opportunity: eDNA offers quicker, broader biodiversity monitoring, especially for ports, non-native species and future time-series comparisons.

Priority actions

Improve reporting flow: Request quicker headline reporting from regulatory and private surveys to support annual EASTME assessments.

Build routine monitoring: Use eDNA and better agency-industry communication to create comparable monthly, seasonal and annual seabed evidence.

* **Note:** Based solely on the recording transcript due to the lack of access to the presentation slides.

6 Coastal & Estuarine Habitats

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Jeff Kew, RSPB

Contributing Organisations: ABPmer, Alde & Ore Community Partnership, Cefas, Environment Agency, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Water Management Alliance

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Jeff Kew outlined the coastal and estuarine habitats theme for EASTME, focusing on the status of dynamic natural systems and the management measures needed for their protection, restoration and recovery. The talk highlighted the difficulty of reporting annual change on sedimentary coasts. There are a wide range of coastal and estuarine habitats ranging from saltmarsh, mudflats, dunes, lagoons which together form extensive wetlands. The pressures and changes to these habitats were highlighted including sea-level rise, coastal squeeze, storms and wet weather which affect erosion, accretion patterns. Although saltmarsh status shows a mixed picture, the wet winter of 2023/24 contributed to increased erosion. No extreme storm events were reported for 2023.

A range of positive progress was reported including the joint partnership between Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trusts and Orsted on the Seascape Demonstrator (Wilder Humber) to introduce 500,000 native oysters and restoration of 2 ha of seagrass and 2 ha of saltmarsh. Other projects include The Coronation Coast Reserves, a range of beneficial use of dredged sediment projects, flux towers, landscape recovery projects and restoration potential mapping. The East Coast Flyway's addition to the UK and UNESCO tentative lists recognises the coast's global importance and creates an opportunity for EASTME thematic studies to support future designation work. The extent of managed realignment and coastal adaptation delivery was also summarised, including details which can be viewed on the <https://www.omreg.net/> website.

Key themes and trends

Dynamic systems and uncertain annual change: Sedimentary coastlines, transition habitats and climate pressures make one-year status reporting difficult; saltmarsh shows a mixed pattern of loss and gain.

Restoration and resilience delivery: Practical initiatives include oyster, seagrass and saltmarsh restoration, dredged sediment reuse, realignment, flux towers and landscape recovery projects.

Collaboration and social capital: The talk stressed partnership working, shared evidence and public stories such as Clive the bar-tailed godwit to communicate coastal value.

Global recognition opportunity: The East Coast Flyway tentative World Heritage status could align regulatory, community and thematic work around outstanding coastal value.

Priority actions

Build the shared evidence base: Continue coordinated monitoring, restoration potential mapping and thematic studies to support adaptation and World Heritage nomination work.

Use communication to build support: Pair technical reporting with clear public stories that explain why coastal habitats, mudflats and flyway sites matter.

7 Marine and Coastal Birds

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Dave O'Hara, RSPB

Contributing Organisations: ABPmer, Lincolnshire Wildlife Truste, Natural England, RSPB, Spurn Bird Observatory

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Dave O'Hara highlighted the international importance of the east coast for marine and coastal birds, focusing on breeding seabirds, wintering wildfowl and wading birds, and breeding birds of shoreline wetlands. The presentation emphasised the extensive Special Protection Area (SPA) network and the role of coastal and marine habitats in supporting globally significant bird populations. It reviewed major pressures including climate change, sea-level rise, fisheries by-catch, coastal development, disturbance and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Positive developments in 2023 included Spurn little terns having their best breeding season, record pink-footed goose and black-tailed godwit counts on the Humber, and continued partnership working to protect vulnerable breeding sites. The talk also highlighted the East Coast Flyway World Heritage proposal, wider conservation projects, Flamborough and Filey Coast seabird monitoring, tracking work, inshore auk feeding linked to sprat aggregations, changing bird movement patterns and the UK sandeel fishery closure as a positive conservation outcome.

Key themes and trends

Internationally important populations: The East Coast supports globally significant seabirds, wintering wildfowl and waders, plus breeding birds of shoreline wetlands.

Multiple pressures: Climate change, fisheries by-catch, development, disturbance and HPAI continue to affect marine and coastal birds.

Partnership conservation works: Little tern protection through fencing, wardening and local collaboration produced strong results at Spurn and wider species benefits.

Monitoring reveals change: Long-term counts, productivity monitoring and tracking show changing seabird recovery, feeding areas and movement patterns.

Growing strategic protection: The East Coast Flyway proposal, seabird strategies, fisheries work and sandeel closure show increasing conservation focus.

Priority actions

Strengthen collaborative site protection: Continue partnership approaches to disturbance management, little tern protection and coastal bird conservation across key sites.

Expand evidence-led conservation: Support monitoring, tracking and fisheries measures to understand changing bird distributions, food availability and climate impacts.

8 Marine Mammals – Seals and Cetaceans

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Beth Thompson, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

Contributing Organisations: British Divers Marine Life Rescue, Friends of Horsey Seals, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Natural England, Seal Research Unity, Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU), The Seal Alliance, Yorkshire Seal Group, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Beth Thompson outlined the state of seals in the EASTME region, covering the 2023/24 breeding season, key threats and current research. The talk introduced the UK's importance for grey and harbour seals, while noting the logistical challenges of monitoring animals that split time between land and sea. The local picture was described as a broadly normal year, but with contrasting trends: grey seal abundance and pup production have risen since surveys began, with signs of plateauing at some sites, while harbour seal abundance is declining across the region, including a 27.6% decline in the Wash. Key pressures include disease, storms during the pupping season, climate-related changes, reduced food availability, pollution, entanglement and disturbance. A major concern was the loss of around 1,200 grey seal pups at Horsey Point during storm events and high spring tides. Knowledge gaps remain around offshore wind, interspecific competition, cannibalism and disease. Continued monitoring, research, knowledge sharing and public engagement were highlighted as central to protecting East Coast seals.

Key themes and trends

Two contrasting population stories: Grey seals have increased strongly, while harbour seals are declining across the region, with less data available for harbour seals.

Monitoring is difficult but essential: Counts depend on seals being ashore and aligning surveys with weather, tides, seasonal timing and site constraints.

Threats are overlapping: Disease, storms, climate change, food availability, pollution, entanglement and disturbance all affect East Coast seals.

Knowledge gaps remain: Further evidence is needed on offshore wind, interspecific competition, cannibalism and disease risks.

Collaboration is central: Practitioners and volunteers are improving understanding through monitoring, reports and shared regional knowledge.

Priority actions

Improve shared evidence: Support coordinated monitoring and research into harbour seal decline, storm impacts, disease and offshore wind effects.

Reduce human pressures: Strengthen visitor education, disturbance management and action on entanglement risks, including plastic ring frisbees.

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Debbie JF Russell, University of St Andrews

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Debbie Russell presented an overview of a project investigating harbour seal decline in southeast England, with a focus on the Wash and North Norfolk Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Monitoring by the Sea Mammal Research Unit and partners has shown a major harbour seal decline, including around a 25% fall in the Wash between 2018 and 2019, with no indication of recovery from two August 2023 surveys. The project is exploring the relative roles of natural and anthropogenic pressures, including increasing offshore wind development, rapid growth in grey seal numbers, disease risks and grey seal predation. Recent work includes tracking 40 harbour seals and 20 grey seals in 2023, collecting health and condition metrics, assessing biotoxins and disease exposure, and analysing diet from seal scats. Diet studies draw on a time series from 2011, with 1,500 scats processed and further samples collected in the Wash and other sites. The talk stressed the need for more evidence, especially on mortality causes and predation prevalence, to inform effective conservation strategies.

Key themes and trends

Harbour seal decline: The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC remains the key English hotspot, but surveys show no recovery in 2023.

Changing species overlap: Grey seal numbers have increased strongly, creating greater land and at-sea overlap with harbour seals.

Multiple possible drivers: offshore wind, grey seal population growth, disease, diet change, health and predation.

New evidence streams: Tracking, health metrics, diet analysis and scat metabarcoding are being used to understand movements, condition and prey use.

Predation uncertainty: Grey seal predation is geographically widespread, but prevalence and local population-level impacts need more evidence.

Priority actions

Strengthen evidence for conservation: Continue tracking, health, diet and disease work to identify the relative drivers of harbour seal decline.

Improve mortality reporting: Report dead or unusual seals promptly so causes of death and predation frequency can be better understood.

COP speaker and presentation
Speaker: Peter Evans, Sea Watch Foundation Link to talk
Summary
Peter Evans reviewed cetacean status and monitoring in the east of England, using SeaWatch Foundation sightings data collected since the 1960s. The network now includes 35 regional groups, around 4,000 observers and approximately 335,000 records, supported by online forms and the SeaWatch app. Fifteen cetacean species occur in the region, but four are regular inhabitants: harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, white-beaked dolphin and minke whale. Harbour porpoise remains the most frequently observed species and was recorded every month in 2023, with a peak in August when mean group sizes increased. Bottlenose dolphin sightings increased sharply in 2023, with regular groups between April and December, peaking in August and September, reflecting continuing southward range extension from east Scotland. White-beaked dolphin and minke whale remain uncommon in coastal waters because the region is at the southern edge of their main ranges. Key pressures include fisheries conflicts, chemical contaminants and underwater noise, although reduced gill netting has lowered bycatch risk.
Key themes and trends
Citizen science evidence base: Sea Watch uses regional observers, training, photographs, online forms and app submissions to improve sightings quality. Four regular species: Harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, white-beaked dolphin and minke whale are the regular regional inhabitants. Harbour porpoise pattern: Harbour porpoise sightings in 2023 were similar to 2022, below 2021, and peaked in spring and late summer. Bottlenose dolphin expansion: Sightings increased sharply in 2023, with groups more regular and a continuing southward range extension. Pressures remain: Fisheries, chemical contaminants and underwater noise are key concerns, while gill-netting has declined locally.
Priority actions
Increase effort-based watches: Expand year-round standardised watches south of Flamborough Head to support stronger trend interpretation. Improve verified sightings: Encourage photographs, trained observers and app submissions to confirm species identification and reduce bias.

* **Note:** Based solely on the recording transcript due to the lack of access to the presentation slides

9 Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Dr Rui Vieira, Principal Fisheries Scientist, Cefas

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Dr Rui Vieira gave an overview of Cefas fisheries science for fish, fisheries and shellfish in the east marine region. Cefas provides evidence for ecosystem-based fisheries management, sustainable exploitation of marine resources and protection of marine biodiversity. The talk explained stock assessments as estimates of spawning stock biomass, fishing mortality and reference points, with advice depending on data quality and uncertainty. Commercial and fisheries-independent data show squid distribution expanding across the North Sea over recent decades, with cephalopods now recognised as highly mobile species whose population structure, spawning and nursery grounds, and environmental drivers remain poorly understood. For 2023, important fisheries in the central and southern North Sea included crabs, cockles, haddock, nephrops, herring, plaice, whelks, scallops, lobsters and squids. In the EASTME region, key fisheries include crabs, cockles and whelks, many of which are non-quota stocks with limited catch controls. The presentation also linked fisheries evidence to Fisheries Management Plans, ecosystem-based management, marine heatwaves and invasive species transported by marine litter.

Key themes and trends

Evidence-led fisheries advice: Cefas stock assessments estimate stock status, exploitation rate and reference points, with less information creating greater uncertainty.

Cephalopod expansion: Squid distribution has expanded in the North Sea and is linked to climate variables, but stock structure remains poorly understood.

Important non-quota fisheries: Crab, cockle and whelk fisheries are important in the EASTME region, with many stocks not currently subject to catch limits.

Policy and management links: Fisheries science supports Fisheries Act 2020 duties, MSY-based management and Fisheries Management Plans.

Ecosystem pressures: Marine heatwaves, climate variability, food-web interactions, gear impacts and marine litter all affect ecosystem-based fisheries management.

Priority actions

Improve data for priority stocks: Strengthen monitoring and assessment for non-quota shellfish and cephalopods to reduce uncertainty in management advice.

Embed ecosystem evidence: Use climate, biodiversity, food-web and seabed evidence to support Fisheries Management Plans and sustainable exploitation.

10 Marine Planning

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Alex Curd, Marine Management Organisation

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Alex Curd outlined marine planning in the east and the Marine Management Organisation's (MMO) work to update the current East Marine Plans, first adopted in 2014. Marine planning was described as the process for managing increasing demand on marine resources by optimising co-existence, co-location and sustainable development so the right activities happen in the right place, at the right time and in the right way. The talk explained how marine planning links with licensing: marine plans inform consenting decisions and the MMO licensing team uses a policy assessment tool to check proposals against applicable marine plan policies. Current work focuses on identifying issues and gathering evidence, including legislation, national policy, local plans, research, spatial information and stakeholder interests. Key areas include renewables, aquaculture, fisheries, marine protected areas and climate change, supported by evidence projects and a sustainability appraisal using a natural capital approach.

Key themes and trends

Increasing spatial pressure: The marine environment is becoming busier, requiring strategic coordination of overlapping activities and resources.

Plan-led consenting: Marine licensing decisions are informed by marine plans and assessed against applicable marine plan policies.

East Plan replacement: The 2014 East Marine Plan is being updated to reflect new legislation, targets and improved, more spatial marine planning.

Evidence-based development: Evidence sources include legislation, policy, stakeholder interests, spatial data, plans, strategies and research.

Key issues for the East: Renewables, aquaculture, fisheries, marine protected areas and climate change are central policy topics.

Priority actions

Provide supporting evidence: Share information on key issues and topics in the East marine plan area during stakeholder engagement.

Maintain evidence-led planning: Use natural capital, climate-smart planning and coexistence evidence to shape policies and plan drafting.

11 Marine Protected Areas

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Jennifer Love and Georgina Roberts, Natural England

Contributing Organisations: Cefas, Eastern IFCA, Humber Nature Partnership, JNCC, Marine Conservation Society, MMO, Natural England, North Sea Wildlife Trusts, WDC, Yorkshire Marine Nature Partnership

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Jennifer Love and Georgina Roberts outlined Marine Protected Area (MPA) work in the EASTME region, drawing on Community of Practice discussions. The region contains many SACs, SPAs and MCZs and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) protecting habitats and species including biogenic reefs, chalk reefs, sandbanks, mudflats, birds and seals. It was highlighted that the sea is also busy with fisheries, wind farms, aggregates and other industries. No new designations were reported over the last year; work has focused on understanding existing sites, evidence gaps, pressures and condition. Conservation advice packages compile the best available evidence for protected sites and guide decision-makers. Monitoring in 2023/24 included *Sabellaria* reef surveys in The Wash, invasive species surveys, Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds work, cockle and mussel surveys, oystercatcher mortality work and seabird monitoring. Condition assessments show a mixed picture, with known pressures including bottom-towed fisheries, cables, pipelines and water quality. Positive progress includes inshore and offshore fisheries management, work on non-licensable activities, and developing strategic approaches to compensation for offshore wind, but monitoring, data and collaboration remain critical.

Key themes and trends

Busy protected seas: EASTME MPAs protect diverse habitats and species while overlapping with fisheries, wind farms, aggregates and other pressures.

Evidence-led cycle: Conservation advice, monitoring and condition assessment are used iteratively to identify data gaps and management needs.

Mixed condition and pressures: Assessments highlight favourable, unfavourable features alongside data-deficiencies, with water quality, infrastructure and fisheries recurring.

Management progress: Fisheries measures are advancing inshore and offshore, alongside work on non-licensable activities and the Wildlife Trusts MPA reality check tool.

Future challenges: Offshore industry impacts, compensation, fisheries recovery, restoration, climate change and monitoring data remain major issues.

Priority actions

Share evidence and fill gaps: Coordinate monitoring, condition data and site evidence so organisations can target effective MPA recovery actions.

Improve practical management: Use fisheries, non-licensable activity and compensation evidence to reduce pressures and support recovery of protected features.

12 Water Quality

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Kayleigh Gadd and Emily Ball, Environment Agency

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Kayleigh Gadd and Emily Ball presented Environment Agency water quality data for rivers and estuaries, bathing waters and storm overflows, and explained where these datasets can be accessed. The talk described bathing water monitoring under the Bathing Water Regulations 2013, including seasonal sampling, bacteria thresholds and four-year classifications. In the East Inshore MMO region, 41 coastal bathing waters were reported: 24 excellent, 12 good, two sufficient and three poor, with Swimfo providing profiles, results and advice on bathing waters. Storm overflows were described as safety valves for the sewerage network, monitored by Event Duration Monitors. By the end of 2023, all storm overflows in England had Event Duration Monitors (EDMs), making future comparisons more complete. In 2023, 14,318 storm overflows returned data nationally, while the EASTME coast had 56 overflows within 1 km of designated bathing or shellfish waters. The talk also summarised river water quality data sources, including Environment Agency Water Quality Archive Open Water Information Management System (OpenWIMS), River Surveillance Network monitoring, Water Framework Directive (WFD) classifications, OSPAR data, Catchment Data Explorer and Hydrology Data Explorer.

Key themes and trends

Bathing water classifications: East Inshore MMO coastal bathing waters are largely excellent or good, but three were classified poor.

Public access to data: Swimfo, OpenWIMS, Catchment Data Explorer, EDM returns and Hydrology Data Explorer make EA datasets accessible.

Storm overflow monitoring: EDM coverage reached 100% by the end of 2023, improving the evidence base for future comparison.

Rainfall and spill patterns: Recorded spills rose in 2023, with rainfall identified as a primary driver of storm overflow use.

Routine river monitoring: River Surveillance Network (RSN) and WFD programmes provide physico-chemical, ecological, hydrological and chemical water quality evidence.

Priority actions

Use official data sources: Draw on Swimfo, OpenWIMS, EDM annual returns and Catchment Data Explorer when reporting regional water quality change.

Interpret trends carefully: Account for monitor coverage, rainfall and sampling programme limits before comparing storm overflow or water quality data.

13 Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: William Fitter, Eunomia and East of England Plastics Coalition

Contributing Organisations: East of England Plastics Coalition membership

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

William Fitter presented the East of England Plastics Coalition's (EEPC) work on plastic pollution and marine debris. EEPC is a coalition of partners working to reduce plastic pollution across East Anglia, with Marine Debris and Unflushables working groups. The Marine Debris Working Group, initiated in 2021, focuses on removing plastic marine debris from the environment, finding circular end-of-life solutions and preventing items entering at source. The talk highlighted abandoned, discarded or lost fishing gear, including ghost pots, as a key regional concern. Partner beach-clean activity in 2023 removed substantial debris, with Keep Britain Tidy recording 287 beach cleans and Marine Conservation Norfolk Action Group (MCNAG) reporting 220 beach cleans, 173 bags of litter and 1,602 kg of additional marine debris including crab pots, canisters, net, ropes and buoys. EEPC projects included fisher workshops, a Natural England-funded marine debris recycling pilot that collected 400 kg of material and 57 crab/lobster pots, and a WWF-funded pot tagging feasibility study. Current work includes RWE-sponsored fisher amnesty days, recycling routes and expanded beach-clean coordination.

Key themes and trends

Coalition model: EEPC uses working groups, partner meetings, speakers and project coordination to generate knowledge and action.

Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ADLFG) and ghost pots: Fishing-related plastic debris is a major focus, especially crab and lobster pots from the regional potting sector.

Beach-clean evidence: Partner beach cleans provide data on bottles, cigarette butts, vapes, crab pots, rope, net, buoys and canisters.

Circular solutions: Projects seek end-of-life recycling routes, fisher amnesty days and responsible disposal for marine plastic debris.

Collaboration opportunities: External funding and industry compensation measures have helped initiate and expand marine debris work.

Priority actions

Expand collection and recycling: Support fisher amnesty days, beach-clean coordination and recycling pathways for pots, ropes, net and rigid plastics.

Prevent debris at source: Use pot tagging, fisher engagement and partner knowledge-sharing to reduce abandoned, discarded and lost fishing gear.

14 Energy in the Marine Environment

COP speaker and presentation

Speakers: Jon Rees, Cefas, and Bob Earll

Contributing Organisations: Cefas, MMO

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Jon Rees and Bob Earll discussed energy in the EASTME marine environment, focusing on the East as a major UK energy hub and on how offshore wind impacts should be evidenced. The region already produces significant energy and has a long history of energy infrastructure, including offshore wind, gas, nuclear and coastal power stations. Offshore wind is expanding, with multiple developments, export cables and interconnectors creating cumulative pressure on the coast and seabed. The talk highlighted the need for co-location, coexistence and multi-use approaches across sectors, while recognising the energy sector's socio-economic benefits and low-carbon electricity contribution. Bob Earll then considered whether published 2023 evidence showed harmful impacts from offshore wind on seabed, fish, birds or mammals beyond known issues such as construction disturbance, rock armour habitat change and fishing exclusion. The presentation emphasised uncertainty, confidential or under-used monitoring data, and a gap in accessible evidence.

Key themes and trends

Energy hub role: Eastern England is a major contributor to UK offshore wind and wider energy generation, with further growth expected.

Cabling and grid pressure: Export cables, interconnectors and offshore transmission planning create cumulative issues needing strategic coordination.

Coexistence and multi-use: The talk identified co-location, coexistence and multi-use of marine areas as important future issues.

Known versus evidenced impacts: Construction disturbance, rock armour habitat change and fisheries exclusion are known, but accessible 2023 harmful-impact evidence was not identified.

Evidence accessibility gap: Monitoring, survey and strandings evidence is fragmented, delayed or not routinely translated into usable community outputs.

Priority actions

Make evidence usable: Summarise offshore wind monitoring, post-installation reports and strandings evidence in accessible EASTME outputs.

Address cumulative effects: Coordinate work on cables, coexistence, underwater noise, strandings and multi-use planning across energy and nature interests.

15 Abbreviations/Acronyms

ABP	Associated British Ports
ADLFG	Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Decarded Fishing Gear
COP	Community of Practice
EA	Environment Agency
EAST	East of England marine region
EASTME	East of England Marine Ecosystem
EDM	Event Duration Monitor
eDNA	Environmental DNA
EEPC	East of England Plastics Coalition
HPAI	Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (H5N1)
IFCA	Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
MCNAG	Marine Conservation Norfolk Action Group
MCZ	Marine Conservation Zone
MMO	Marine Management Organisation
mNCEA	Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MSY	Maximum Sustainable Yield
NCEA	Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment
OpenWIMS	Open Water Information Management System
OSPAR	Oslo and Paris Conventions
RSN	River Surveillance Network
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SPA	Special Protection Area
SSSIs	Special Site of Scientific Interest
SWME	South-West Marine Ecosystems
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WFD	Water Framework Directive

Cardinal points/directions are used unless otherwise stated.

SI units are used unless otherwise stated.

Contact Us

ABPmer

Quayside Suite,
Medina Chambers
Town Quay, Southampton
SO14 2AQ

T +44 (0) 23 8071 1840

F +44 (0) 23 8071 1841

E enquiries@abpmer.co.uk

www.abpmer.co.uk

