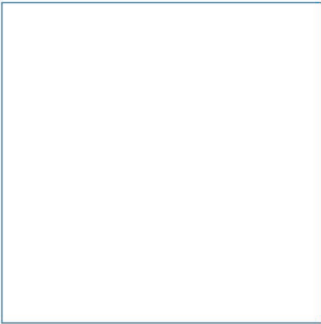
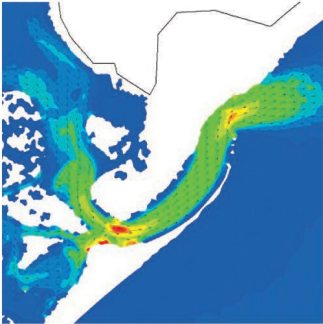
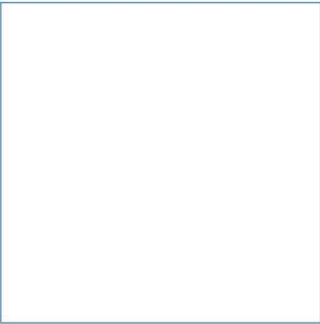
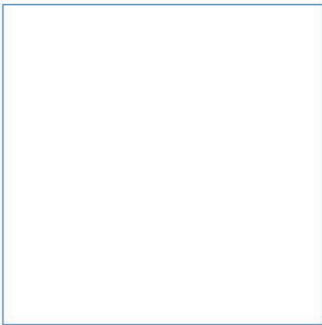




Yorkshire Wildlife Trust on behalf of the EASTME Forum

EASTME Annual Report 2024-25

September 2026



Innovative Thinking - Sustainable Solutions

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EASTME

Annual Report 2024-25

September 2026



Credit: Finn Varney

Document Information

Document History and Authorisation		
Title	EASTME	
	Annual Report 2024-25	
Commissioned by	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust on behalf of the EASTME Forum	
Issue date	September 2026	
Document ref	R.5341b	
Project no	R/5823/01	
Date	Version	Revision Details
26/08/2026	1	Issued for client review
28/09/2026	2	Issued for client use

Prepared (PM)	Approved (QM)	Authorised (PD)
Tania Davey	Natalie Frost	Natalie Frost
		

Suggested Citation

ABPmer, (2026). EASTME, Annual Report 2024-25, ABPmer Report No. 5341b.
A report produced by ABPmer for Yorkshire Wildlife Trust on behalf of the EASTME Forum, September 2026.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are extended to all speakers and members of the Communities of Practice for their ongoing contributions to EASTME and for their valuable input to this Annual Report. Special recognition is given to EASTME Coordinators, Ana Cowie and Bex Lynam, whose extensive efforts throughout the year have been instrumental in supporting the Communities of Practice and delivering the annual conference.

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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 second EASTME Conference was held on 13 May 2025 at the University of Lincoln, bringing together 105 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 2024-25 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 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. 2025 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
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 second EASTME Conference was held on 13 May 2025 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 2024 and provides a summary of the COP talks from the 2025 conference, alongside introductory talks. Links to where the 2025 PowerPoint presentations can be viewed [online](#)¹, and recordings of each talk are provided in each presentation in Sections 3 to 12. A summary of the 2025 conference is provided in Table 2.

¹ <https://eastme.co.uk/archive/>

Table 2. Summary of the 2025 EASTME conference

Date and Venue
The 2025 East Marine Ecosystems Conference was held on 13 May 2025 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
105 people
Organisations Represented
Delegates represented 42 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 9 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

09:15 *Doors open, refreshment and registration*

10:10 Welcome to the conference – Mark Schuerch, University of Lincoln

10:15 Introduction & interactive session – Tammy Smalley, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust

Session 1

Chair: **Kelly-Ann Wilson**, The Wash & North Norfolk Marine Partnership

10:40 Oceanography, Plankton and Productivity – Rodney Forster, University of Hull

10:55 Seabed and Seashore – Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions

11:10 Coastal and Estuarine Habitats – Milo Sumner, RSPB

11:25 Q&A

11:40 *First break: sandwiches and refreshments*

Session 2

Chair: **Tammy Smalley**, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust

12:40 Marine and Coastal Birds – Dave O'Hara, RSPB

12:55 Marine Mammals: Seals – Izzy Langley, Sea Mammal Research Unit

13:10 Marine Mammals: Cetaceans – Simone Evans, Sea Watch Foundation

13:25 Marine Planning – Mark Maguire, The Marine Management Organisation

13:40 Q&A

14:00 *Second break: cakes and refreshments*

Session 3

Chair: **Mark Schuerch**, University of Lincoln

14:40 Marine Protected Areas – Jennifer Love, Natural England

14:55 Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris – Alisdair Naulls, The Rivers Trust

15:10 Energy in the Marine Environment – Jon Rees, CEFAS

15:25 Q&A

15:40 Closing – Mike Elliott, IECS Ltd and University of Hull

3 Introductory talks

Table 3. Introduction to the 2nd EASTME conference

Speaker and presentation
Speaker: Tammy Smalley, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust Link to slides
Summary
The presentation “The North Sea: Connections” was a personal and reflective call to strengthen relationships between people, nature and place in support of North Sea recovery. The talk used personal stories, family history and experiences connected to Lincolnshire, The Wash and the North Sea to emphasise that environmental stewardship begins with human connection and a shared sense of responsibility. Tammy asked delegates to reflect on their own experiences, motivations and aspirations for the North Sea, asking what fascinates them, what concerns them most, and what role they can play in its future. A recurring theme was the interconnectedness of ecological, cultural and community values. The presentation highlighted how individual memories, local heritage, species, habitats and coastal communities are all linked to the health of the marine environment. Alongside reflections on environmental pressures and uncertainty about the future, the talk encouraged participants to focus on hope, recovery and practical action. Examples of restoration, conservation partnerships, habitat work and community engagement illustrated the importance of collaboration in delivering positive outcomes for nature. The presentation also promoted ocean literacy, defining it as creating a society capable of making informed and responsible decisions about ocean resources and sustainability. The overall message was that meaningful change depends not only on science and policy, but also on public understanding, shared ownership and personal commitment. Delegates were encouraged to identify species and habitats they would prioritise for recovery and to consider what single action could help unlock a healthier future for the North Sea. The talk concluded with a call for attendees to reflect on who they are, what they value, and what they will do after the conference to give nature a stronger voice.

4 Oceanography, plankton and productivity

COP speaker and presentation

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

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

2024 brought a warm, very wet first half to the East Coast marine system. High river flows following the wet winter of 2023-24 resulted in high freshwater input, with salinity later recovering, while sea-surface temperatures remained among the warmest on record and the long-term warming trend continued. Tide-gauge records also show continuing sea-level rise. Storm activity and wave conditions were broadly similar to 2023, with Storm Darragh prominent in December, while summer conditions were calm. Suspended particulate matter and chlorophyll remained comparable with recent years: chlorophyll peaked in spring and showed no clear trend since 2016. Coastal phytoplankton counts peaked strongly in May 2024 but varied substantially between years. Zooplankton activity was concentrated from spring into early autumn and was dominated offshore by copepods, linking seasonal plankton production to the wider food web. Overall, 2024 plankton and productivity measures remained within previous ranges, but the combined effects of warming, freshwater input, turbidity and seasonal timing require continued, spatially detailed monitoring.

Key themes and trends

Warm, wet conditions: 2024 was a warm year with a very wet first half. Record wet conditions across winter 2023-24 drove high river flows and freshwater inputs; 2025 was beginning from a contrasting low-flow position.

Persistent physical change: Sea-surface temperatures show continued trends of warming. Lowestoft tide-gauge data also showed long-term sea-level increase, while 2024 wave activity was similar to 2023 and included Storm Darragh.

Light and productivity controls: Turbidity and suspended sediment shape light availability. Inshore waters carried more sediment and chlorophyll than offshore waters, and broad spatial averages may conceal features such as the East Anglian plume.

Strong seasonality, high variability: Chlorophyll peaked in April-May; coastal phytoplankton reached a marked May 2024 peak. Zooplankton production followed from spring to September, with copepods dominant offshore, supporting fish, seabirds and the wider food web.

Evidence gaps: The available indicators were mostly within recent ranges, but full nutrient and loading analysis, integrated plankton assessment and longer time series are still needed to explain year-to-year and local differences.

Priority actions

Complete the integrated assessment: Add nutrients and catchment loadings, complete the full plankton analysis, and bring the supporting datasets into a written EASTME report that records the 2024 baseline.

Strengthen targeted monitoring: Track salinity, turbidity, chlorophyll and plankton across inshore, offshore and frontal areas, using 2025's low-flow conditions to test how freshwater, light and warming alter productivity.

5 Seabed and Seashore

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions

Contributing Organisations: Benthic Solutions, Eastern IFCA, Marine Conservation Network Action Group (MCNAG), Natural England, Seasearch, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk reviewed evidence on east coast seabed and seashore conditions, while emphasising that available data remain sporadic, delayed and unevenly distributed. No major seabed incidents were reported through the Community of Practice, although the March 2025 ship collision off the Humber affected the seashore and several localised storm wash-outs occurred. Citizen-science strandline surveys at Filey provided a useful 2024 baseline, showing reduced summer strandings and a community dominated in diversity by molluscs and crustacea, but changing survey effort means the data require normalisation. In The Wash, cockle biomass showed a slow recovery, while mussel biomass reached its highest recorded level for reasons that remain unknown. Seasearch observations raised concerns about fishing-related damage to north Norfolk chalk habitats, including rope, anchor and pot impacts. Shoreline litter was largely fishing-related. Across the sector, repeat surveys, timely reporting and regulatory engagement were limited. The presentation highlighted eDNA monitoring as a complementary method capable of broad biodiversity coverage, alongside traditional benthic surveys, and called for better data transparency, communication and collaboration.

Key themes and trends

Uneven evidence base: Seabed and seashore monitoring is sporadic across space and time, with reporting delays, few repeat surveys and limited engagement from professional regulators. Volunteer and NGO evidence currently carries much of the annual picture.

Citizen science adds regional insight: Filey strandline surveys captured broad biodiversity and seasonal storm effects. Summer strandings fell, molluscs represented 50% of recorded diversity and crustacea 20.4%, but effort changes and approximate abundance records require normalisation.

Mixed shellfish signals: The Wash cockle population showed a slow increase after previous mortality, while surveyed mussel beds reached their highest biomass on record. The cause of the mussel increase was not identified.

Chalk habitats under pressure: Seasearch reported rope, anchor and pot damage, reduced structural complexity and rubble formation across north Norfolk chalk areas, while concerns were raised about assumptions and controls in the rugged chalk review completed by Eastern IFCA.

Technology and communication opportunity: eDNA produced broader biodiversity coverage than traditional sampling in the cited oyster-restoration baseline, but requires transparent procedures, quality control and use alongside established survey methods.

Priority actions

Create a reliable reporting pipeline: Normalise and verify volunteer datasets, improve regulatory and private-sector reporting, and publish key observations, changes and longer-term patterns promptly.

Build coordinated routine monitoring: Combine repeat benthic surveys, citizen science and quality-controlled eDNA monitoring, with stronger industry engagement and clear communication of results.

6 Coastal & Estuarine Habitats

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Milo Sumner, RSPB

Contributing Organisations: ABPmer, Environment Agency, Humber Nature Partnership, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Suffolk, Coast and Heaths National Landscape, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, University of Essex, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The presentation reviewed key coastal and estuarine habitat activity across the EASTME region during 2024. Major habitat restoration progress included completion of the Skeffling to Outstrays managed realignment scheme on the Humber, creating around 170 hectares of intertidal habitat, alongside planned realignment projects in Suffolk and Essex. Seagrass restoration activity expanded through Wilder Humber trials, supported by reports of increasing seagrass coverage in parts of the region, alongside other projects such as the Transforming the Thames restoration trials. The session highlighted emerging tools and frameworks that will shape future delivery, including Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) guidance for managed realignment, development of the Saltmarsh Code, national coastal erosion and flood-risk mapping updates, and Adaptive Delivery Plans for protected sites affected by climate change. Partnership initiatives remained a major theme, with the Restoring Meadows, Marsh and Reef Initiative (ReMeMaRe) advancing restoration pipelines and feasibility studies, the Lincolnshire Coronation Coast National Nature Reserve (NNR) developing landscape-scale management, and continued progress on the East Coast Flyway World Heritage nomination. The overall message was one of growing restoration ambition, better evidence and planning tools, and increasing collaboration to support climate adaptation and habitat recovery.

Key themes and trends

Habitat restoration delivery: Skeffling to Outstrays managed realignment was completed, while further managed realignment schemes progressed through planning and development.

Growing seagrass and restoration innovation: Seagrass transplant trials were undertaken and ambitions expanded for larger-scale restoration. Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediment (BUDS) remains an opportunity with limited uptake in the EASTME region.

Tools and frameworks: BNG guidance, the Saltmarsh Code, and improved erosion and flood-risk mapping provide important tools for future habitat creation and adaptation planning.

Climate adaptation focus: Natural England is developing Adaptive Delivery Plans to help protected sites respond to climate pressures and regulatory challenges.

Strong partnership working: ReMeMaRe, the Coronation Coast National NNR and the East Coast Flyway World Heritage bid demonstrate increasing regional collaboration and strategic ambition.

Priority actions

Accelerate habitat restoration and adaptation: Build on managed realignment, seagrass restoration and climate adaptation planning using the latest guidance, mapping tools and emerging funding mechanisms.

Strengthen regional collaboration: Maintain momentum through ReMeMaRe, Coronation Coast and World Heritage partnerships to support coordinated delivery and long-term habitat recovery.

7 Marine and Coastal Birds

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Dave O'Hara, RSPB

Contributing Organisations: ABPmer, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk reviewed the importance and condition of marine and coastal bird populations across the EASTME region in 2024. The region supports the UK's largest mainland seabird colony at Flamborough and Filey, major wintering and passage waterbird populations around the Humber and The Wash, and nationally important coastal breeding bird populations. Key pressures include climate change, fishing and bycatch, marine development, disturbance, pollution and highly pathogenic avian influenza. Seabird trends: kittiwakes have declined substantially at UK scale, while the Flamborough gannet colony is increasing following the avian influenza outbreak. Productivity among previously infected gannets were similar to the wider population. Beach nesting protection projects have supported little terns and ringed plovers breeding success, demonstrating the value of managing disturbance and predation. Important Sandwich tern and redshank populations were also highlighted. For migratory waterbirds, regular monitoring and undisturbed feeding and roosting areas remain critical, with managed realignment offering opportunities. The presentation emphasised coordinated conservation across protected sites, fisheries, development, beach management and the East Coast Flyway initiative.

Key themes and trends

Exceptional regional importance: The coast supports nesting seabird and beach nesting bird populations, including the UK's largest mainland seabird colony at Flamborough and Filey and internationally important migratory waterbird areas.

Multiple interacting pressures: Climate change is the overarching concern, alongside fishing and bycatch, wind farms and coastal development, disturbance, pollution and avian influenza. Effective statutory protection depends on practical management with other users.

Contrasting seabird signals: Kittiwakes have declined by more than 40% at UK scale over 25 years. The 2024 gannet count reached 15,794 occupied sites, 21.6% above 2022, following the bird-flu impact.

Importance of management measures: Little tern and ringed plover outcomes reflected concerted management efforts. Disturbance and predation remain central issues, while community participation strengthens beach-nesting bird conservation.

Habitat and food remain critical: Sandeel availability, undisturbed roosts and feeding areas, managed realignment, saltmarshes and links to farmland underpin seabird, breeding wader and migratory waterbird populations.

Priority actions

Protect food and breeding sites: Maintain support for sandeel fishery closure and strengthen disturbance, predation and beach-protection measures at priority colonies and roosts.

Coordinate monitoring and planning: Sustain seabird productivity and Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitoring, and integrate bird needs into fisheries, marine development, realignment and protected-site management.

8 Marine Mammals - Cetaceans and Seals

COP speaker and presentation

Speakers: Simone Evans, Sea Watch Foundation (cetaceans)

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk reviewed cetacean monitoring and 2024 sightings in East England, drawing on a long-running observer network, standardised effort-based watches, casual records, the Sea Watcher app and online reporting. Fifteen cetacean species have been recorded in the region, with harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, white beaked dolphin and minke whale regarded as regular. Harbour porpoise remained the most frequently observed species and was recorded in every month, with peaks in February-March and July; sightings exceeded 2022 and 2023 but remained below 2021. Bottlenose dolphins were also recorded year-round, peaking in July and November, with a major increase reflecting continued southward range extension from east Scotland confirmed through photo identification. White beaked dolphins and minke whales remained uncommon in shallow coastal waters, while common dolphin and humpback whale reports are becoming more frequent in the North Sea. Key pressures include contaminants, underwater noise and bycatch risk. The central evidence gap is limited year round, effort based coverage south of Flamborough Head, making expanded monitoring the principal priority.

Key themes and trends

Long-term citizen-science network: Around 6,000 observers contribute standardised and casual sightings nationally through 35 regional groups, supported by the Sea Watcher app, website reporting and map based environmental and activity layers.

Harbour porpoise remains dominant: The species occurred year-round in 2024, peaking in February-March and July. Sightings were higher than in 2022 and 2023, but lower than in 2021.

Bottlenose dolphin range expansion: Sightings increased sharply and peaked in July and November. Photo-identification confirmed links to the east coast Scotland population and continued southward extension.

Other species increasing or seasonal: White beaked dolphins and minke whales were mainly summer records. Common dolphin sightings increased in 2024, while common dolphin and humpback whale reports are increasingly frequent in the North Sea.

Pressure and coverage gaps: Contaminants and underwater noise are leading pressures. Gillnet bycatch risk has declined locally but remains important further south, year round effort based monitoring south of Flamborough Head is a priority.

Priority actions

Expand year-round monitoring: Increase standardised, effort-based watches south of Flamborough Head and use consistent app and website reporting to improve seasonal and long-term evidence.

Target research: Continue photo identification and extend effort based monitoring.

COP speaker and presentation

Speakers: Izzy Langley, Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) (seals)

Contributing Organisations: British Divers Marine Life Rescue, Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP), Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust, RSPCA, SMRU

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The presentation reviewed seal populations, welfare issues and research findings across the EASTME region during 2024. Southeast England remains a nationally important area for both harbour and grey seals, supporting substantial proportions of UK populations. Harbour seals experienced a decline of around 25% between 2018 and 2019 with no clear evidence of recovery, while grey seal populations have generally expanded. In 2024, some colonies showed indications of reduced grey seal pup production, including notable reductions at Donna Nook (~25%) and Horsey (~10%), although area wide surveys are required to confirm whether these represent genuine regional declines. An unusual mortality event affecting grey seals in North Yorkshire, involving animals with respiratory pathology, was also highlighted. Rehabilitation centres admitted 272 seals during 2024, with orphaned animals being the most common admissions and most surviving seals successfully released. Research updates found no evidence that major dietary changes or poor body condition explain harbour seal declines, while ongoing work is examining disease exposure, environmental pressures, interspecific competition and grey seal predation. Continued monitoring, rehabilitation and investigation remain priorities.

Key themes and trends

Population trends: Harbour seals remain below previous levels, with no clear recovery since the 2018–2019 decline, while grey seal populations and pup production have generally increased.

Possible grey seal decline signals: Donna Nook and Horsey recorded lower pup production in 2024, requiring wider surveys to determine regional significance.

Welfare and strandings: Seal rescue callouts continued to rise overall, entanglements remain a concern, and rehabilitation centres successfully released most admitted animals.

Research findings: Diet studies found no major prey collapse linked to harbour seal declines; animal health assessments found no evidence of poor body condition.

Emerging risks: Marine heatwaves, disease exposure, grey seal predation on harbour seals and growing human pressures remain important areas for investigation.

Priority actions

Confirm population drivers: Continue region wide surveys and health research to determine the causes of harbour seal decline and assess whether reductions in grey seal pup production are genuine.

Strengthen prevention and monitoring: Maintain rehabilitation, reduce entanglement risks, and improve long-term monitoring of disease, predation and environmental pressures.

9 Marine Planning

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Mark Maguire, Marine Management Organisation (MMO)

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

Marine plans manage increasingly busy seas so that development and use occur in the right place, at the right time and in a sustainable way. The East Marine Plan, the first English marine plan, was published in 2014 and covers the inshore and offshore areas from Flamborough Head to Felixstowe. It is being replaced to reflect new legislation and government priorities, build on improvements in newer plans, enable more spatial planning, and address competing demands while supporting clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas. The current 2014 plan remains in force until the replacement is published. The programme has moved from identifying issues and gathering evidence into vision, objectives and options development. Stakeholder evidence will inform reasonable policy alternatives, which will be tested through a Sustainability Appraisal using a natural capital approach, alongside a Habitats Regulations Assessment and Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) assessment. The talk set out indicative milestones through consultation, drafting, public consultation and eventual adoption, noting that timings may change.

Key themes and trends

Growing pressure and co-existence: Marine space supports overlapping uses, including recreation, ports, shipping, harbours and protected areas. Planning is intended to optimise coexistence and support sustainable development.

Integrated planning and licensing: Terrestrial and marine responsibilities overlap in the intertidal area, so some projects may need both planning permission and a marine licence. Land based proposals affecting the marine area must also have regard to marine policies.

Evidence-led replacement plan: The East Marine Plan Evidence Report published in April 2025 collated more than 2,000 issues, including more than 1,400 challenges, and 1,596 quality assured evidence items to inform objectives, options and policy.

Sustainability and natural capital: Each East Marine Plan option will be assessed through the Sustainability Appraisal. The inclusion of natural capital evidence is intended to strengthen marine decision-making.

Indicative delivery pathway: The presentation scheduled vision and options work for summer 2025, policy drafting for autumn 2025, public consultation for summer 2026 and adoption for summer 2027, all subject to change.

Priority actions

Engage with plan development: Review consultation material and provide evidence on regional issues, impacts and opportunities through the published participation channels.

Apply and monitor current policy: Continue using the 2014 East Marine Plan until replacement, and track updates through the marine planning newsletter and Statement of Public Participation.

10 Marine Protected Areas

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Jennifer, Natural England

Contributing Organisations: Cefas, Eastern IFCA, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, MMO, Natural England, North Sea Wildlife Trusts, The Wash and North Norfolk Marine Partnership, WDC

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk reviewed progress, evidence gaps and emerging priorities for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the East Marine region. MPAs protect important species and habitats under varied legislation, but effective management depends on stronger monitoring and evidence. Work in 2024/25 covered Cromer Shoal chalk-bed impacts, offshore and inshore site monitoring, *Sabellaria* reef mapping, shellfish and seabird studies, water quality, seabed surveys and cetacean protection. In The Wash, research is improving estimates of shellfish available to overwintering birds and exploring possible links between cockle growth, mortality and environmental factors, although evidence remains preliminary. Condition assessments showed mixed outcomes and exposed major data limitations for some sites. Fisheries management is advancing through controls for high risk interactions, further assessments of uncertain interactions, adaptive risk management and improved vessel activity data. Alongside pressure management, active restoration is expanding through Wilder Humber and feasibility work at Blakeney Harbour. However, persistent challenges include limited monitoring data, climate change, water quality, fisheries impacts, offshore industry pressures, restoration choices, underwater noise and bycatch.

Key themes and trends

Monitoring and evidence: A broad 2024/25 programme is filling gaps on Cromer Shoal chalk beds, *Sabellaria* reefs, shellfish, seabirds, seals, water quality and seabed condition, but some assessments still lack sufficient recent data.

The Wash ecosystem links: Cockle mortality may have multiple causes. Collaborative work is improving shellfish growth and mortality estimates for bird food advice and investigating environmental correlations, without yet establishing causation.

Fisheries risk management: Controls for red risk interactions are in place or awaiting sign off, while assessments continue for less certain interactions. Potting impacts on Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ are being examined through adaptive risk management.

Recovery alongside protection: Wilder Humber is trialling restoration of seagrass, native oyster and saltmarsh. Blakeney Harbour coastal restoration feasibility work is testing whether and where active restoration has the best prospect of success.

Priority actions

Close priority evidence gaps: Coordinate and sustain monitoring where condition assessments are constrained, focusing on fisheries effects, shellfish and bird links, water quality, offshore pressures and cetacean threats.

Turn evidence into adaptive action: Use new survey and iVMS evidence to refine MPA management, while sharing lessons from Wilder Humber and Blakeney to guide effective restoration.

11 Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris

COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Alisdair Naulls, The Rivers Trust

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk positioned rivers as a frontline for tackling marine plastic pollution because much marine plastic is carried into the ocean through freshwater systems. While discarded fishing gear remains a visible coastal and marine issue, the speaker emphasised that everyday inland plastic use and waste are directly connected to marine impacts. Large scale clean up at sea alone cannot match the scale of accumulated debris, so action is needed upstream across river catchments. The Catchment Based Approach provides a bottom up network of 106 partnerships across England, connecting public, private and civil society organisations. The Rivers Trust also links 65 member Trusts across the UK and Ireland. Through litter picks, plastic surveys and community initiatives, local groups can remove waste, record the types and sources of plastics found, and build social capital. The central message was practical and participatory: marine professionals and communities should contribute their skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to local Rivers Trust activity, complementing beach cleans with action where rivers carry pollution towards the sea.

Key themes and trends

Rivers connect land and sea: The talk framed freshwater catchments as an upstream intervention point for marine plastics, linking household and inland waste directly with downstream marine impacts.

Prevention before ocean clean-up: Images of offshore collection illustrated the scale and variety of debris. The message was to reduce and intercept plastic before it reaches the ocean, rather than relying chiefly on removal at sea.

Catchment-scale collaboration: The Catchment Based Approach brings together 106 partnerships across England, connecting public, private and civil-society organisations through a bottom-up model.

Community data and action: Litter picks and plastic surveys can both remove waste and record what is found. Local events provide practical routes for involvement across catchments.

Social capital and shared skills: The speaker encouraged participants to offer professional skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to a local Rivers Trust, strengthening community connections while supporting healthier rivers and marine spaces.

Priority actions

Act upstream: Connect with a local Rivers Trust or catchment partnership and contribute to litter removal, plastic recording or other relevant community activity.

Apply specialist skills: Use marine, data and engagement expertise to strengthen local projects and link catchment evidence and action more closely with marine-plastic objectives.

12 Energy in the Marine Environment

COP speaker and presentation

Speakers: Jon Rees, Cefas

Contributing Organisations: Cefas, JNCC, Marine Management Organisation, WDC

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

The talk reviewed energy sector activity and environmental pressures in the East Marine Plan area. Evidence on under 12 metre fishing activity and sensitivity to offshore wind is improving understanding of coexistence and supporting environmental statements and development consent orders. Underwater noise management in the Southern North Sea Special Area of Conservation (SAC) includes a noise tracker, thresholds and coordination of noisy activities to protect harbour porpoise. JNCC advice covers offshore wind, interconnectors, oil and gas decommissioning, designated sites and cumulative effects. Eight aerial surveys for Natural England's Poseidon project established a baseline for seabirds and marine megafauna, recording species distribution, behaviour and survey conditions. Floating offshore wind raises unresolved questions around noise, entanglement and barrier effects, while noise limits, compensation and the Marine Recovery Fund remain important areas of focus. Looking ahead, increasing renewables, cables and landing site pressure, scour protection assessment, oil and gas decommissioning and continuing infrastructure decisions will add overlapping pressures. The talk also highlighted opportunities to embed Marine Net Gain around offshore wind development.

Key themes and trends

Coexistence evidence: High resolution, fisher led mapping shows nuanced overlap between under 12 metre fishing and offshore wind and provides evidence for consent processes.

Noise and marine mammals: Noise tracking, thresholds and industry coordination are central to reducing impacts in the Southern North Sea SAC. Floating wind also raises entanglement and barrier effect questions.

Cumulative environmental pressure: Advice must consider projects alone and in combination across offshore wind, interconnectors, aggregate activity, oil and gas infrastructure and protected sites.

Baseline monitoring: Eight Poseidon aerial surveys characterised seabirds and marine megafauna, alongside behaviour, flight and environmental conditions, creating a reference dataset for the central North Sea.

Infrastructure expansion and recovery: Renewables, cables, landing sites, scour protection and decommissioning will increase pressure, while the Marine Recovery Fund and Marine Net Gain offer recovery opportunities.

Priority actions

Coordinate evidence and assessment: Combine fisheries mapping, ecological surveys, noise data and cumulative impact advice in planning, consent and review of marine energy projects.

Design development for recovery: Apply noise safeguards and address entanglement, barrier and cable pressures while embedding credible Marine Net Gain and wider recovery opportunities.

13 Closing talk

Speaker

Speaker: Mike Elliot

[Link to talk](#)

Summary

In the closing keynote, Professor Mike Elliott reflected on current challenges in marine, coastal and estuarine management, drawing on experience from numerous European research projects and international collaborations. The central message was that marine science must move beyond collecting data to understanding how information is translated into knowledge, decision-making and practical management outcomes. Delegates were encouraged to consider not only how data are gathered and quality assured, but also how they are used, shared and incorporated into official evidence systems.

The presentation argued that there is one fundamental goal for marine management: maintaining ecological structure and functioning while enabling ecosystems to provide services and societal benefits. To achieve this, management must recognise the links between natural systems, human activities, pressures, ecosystem change and governance responses.

A major theme was the growing need to address cumulative pressures rather than assessing individual activities in isolation. Mike highlighted ecosystem based management, social ecological systems, biodiversity valuation, marine planning and risk based approaches as key tools for tackling complex marine challenges. Several Horizon Europe projects were presented as examples of how research is developing practical toolboxes, decision support systems and governance frameworks to support marine management and policy implementation.

The talk concluded that the marine sector already possesses many powerful tools, methods and knowledge resources. The priority is to apply them effectively, strengthen the science-policy interface, build capacity, and ensure that research ultimately delivers improvements in marine governance, conservation and sustainable management.

14 Abbreviations/Acronyms

BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
BUDS	Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediment
CEFAS	Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science
COP	Community of Practice
EAST	East of England marine region
EASTME	East of England Marine Ecosystem
eDNA	Environmental DNA
IECS	International Council for the Exploration of the Sea
iVMS	In-Vehicle Monitoring System
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservation Committee
MCZ	Marine Conservation Zone
MMO	Marine Management Organisation
mNCEA	Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme
MPA	Marine Protected Area
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNR	National Nature Reserve
ReMeMaRe	Restoring Meadows, Marsh and Reef Initiative
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SMRU	Sea Mammal Research Unit
UK	United Kingdom
WDC	Whale and Dolphin Conservation
WeBS	Wetland Bird Surveys

Cardinal points/directions are used unless otherwise stated.

SI units are used unless otherwise stated.

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