

## East Marine Ecosystems

Reporting Annual Change in the  
East Region & Building Social Capital



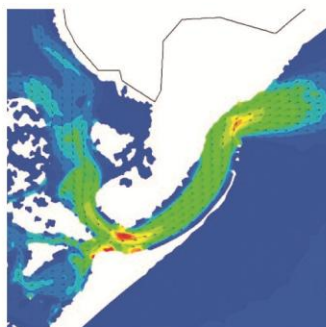
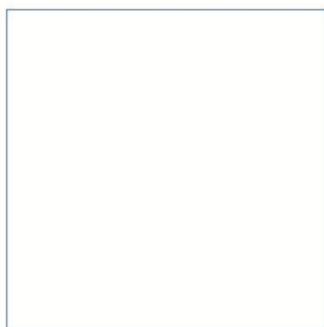
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# Yorkshire Wildlife Trust on behalf of the EASTME Forum

## EASTME

Annual Report 2025-26

September 2026



Innovative Thinking - Sustainable Solutions

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# **EASTME**

Annual Report 2025-26

September 2026



Credit: Kat Sanders

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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 third EASTME Conference was held on 21 May 2026 at the University of Lincoln, bringing together 107 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 2025-26 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. 2026 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                  |
| 6. Marine Mammals – Cetaceans              |
| 7. Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish           |
| 8. Marine Planning                         |
| 9. Marine Protected Areas                  |
| 10. Water Quality                          |
| 11. Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris    |
| 12. Energy in the Marine Environment       |

The third EASTME Conference was held on 21 May 2026 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 2025 and provides a summary of the COP talks from the 2026 conference, alongside introductory talks. Links to where the 2026 PowerPoint presentations can be viewed [online](#)<sup>1</sup>, and recordings of each talk are provided in each presentation in Sections 3 to 14. A summary of the 2026 conference is provided in Table 2.

<sup>1</sup> <https://eastme.co.uk/archive/>

**Table 2. Summary of the 2026 EASTME conference**

| Date and Venue                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The 2026 East Marine Ecosystems Conference was held on 21 May 2026 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                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 107 people                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Organisations Represented                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Delegates represented 43 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

### Programme

- 09:15 *Doors open, refreshments and registration*
- 10:00** **Welcome to the conference** – Eve Leegwater, Senior Advisor - Estuaries and Coasts, Environment Agency
- 10:05** **Keynote speaker** - East Coast Flyway UNESCO World Heritage Status bid, Michael Copleston, England Director, RSPB

*Chair for the day: Paul Learoyd, Chief Executive, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust*

### Session 1

- 10:25** **Oceanography** - Ben Whitcombe, University of Hull
- 10:40** **Seabed and Seashore** – Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions
- 10:55** **Coastal and Estuarine Habitats** - Laura Steuart, Natural England
- 11:10** **Water Quality and Plankton** - Rodney Forster, University of Hull
- 11:25** **Q&A**
- 11:50 *First break: sandwiches and refreshments*

### Session 2

- 12:40** **Marine and Coastal Birds** – Natalie Le Brun, RSPB
- 12:55** **Marine Mammals: Seals & cetaceans** – Debbie Russell, University of St Andrews
- 13:10** **Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish** – Andy Richardson, University of Hull
- 13:25** **Marine Planning** – Poppy Philipps, Marine Management Organisation (MMO)
- 13:40** **Q&A**
- 14:05 *Second break: biscuits and refreshments*

### Session 3

- 14:35** **Marine Protected Areas** – Ellie Falconer, Marine Management Organisation (MMO)
- 14:50** **Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris** – William Fitter, Eastern & Southern Plastics Coalition
- 15:05** **Energy in the Marine Environment** - Evangeline Wilby, MMO & Ben Green, National Grid
- 15:20** **Q&A**
- 15:50 - 16:00 **Closing remarks** – Paul Learoyd, Chair of the Humber Nature Partnership

### 3 Introductory talks

#### Welcome

Speaker: Eve Leegwater, Environment Agency

[Link to talk](#)

#### Summary

Eve Leegwater from the Environment Agency opened the third EASTME conference by welcoming delegates and highlighting the growing success of the initiative. Drawing on more than 20 years of marine sector experience, she reflected on the broad range of marine work undertaken within the Environment Agency, including marine infrastructure, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), climate change and coastal management.

A key focus of the introduction was the Environment Agency's Restoring Meadows, Marsh and Reef (ReMeMaRe) programme. Eve described the programme's achievements over eight years, including development of restoration tools and mapping, restoration guidance, the launch of the Marine Enhancement Directory (MEnD<sup>2</sup>), and the creation of a strong pipeline of restoration projects. She noted that around £50 million of potential restoration investments are now identified should future funding become available.

Eve also highlighted the Environment Agency Championing Coastal Coordination (3Cs) fund, which helps local communities collaborate to enhance coastal ecosystems, and its role in supporting regional marine ecosystem partnerships such as EASTME. She noted that similar regional initiatives are expanding across England, with activity in the north west and plans emerging for a south east marine ecosystem network.

A central message of the talk was that EASTME is intended to be more than a forum for presenting annual environmental data. Instead, it aims to build a collaborative community that brings together academia, government, non-government organisations (NGOs), industry and other stakeholders to share ownership of challenges and opportunities facing the marine environment. Eve emphasised that EASTME is community driven and encouraged participants to actively contribute, ask questions and help shape both the conference and the wider network to ensure it remains relevant, useful and impactful.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mend.eco/>

**Keynote – East Coast Flyway UNESCO World Heritage Status bid**

Speaker: Michael Copleston, RSPB

[Link to slides](#)

**Summary**

Michael Copleston, England Director of the RSPB, presented the progress made since 2022 to recognise England's east coast wetlands as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Natural World Heritage Site through the proposed East Coast Flyway World Heritage Site bid.

Drawing on local habitat restoration experience in the UK and international coastal restoration work, Michael illustrated how large scale, science led habitat creation can transform landscapes and support biodiversity. He advocated that the east coast represents a globally significant example of coastal adaptation and nature conservation, demonstrating how dynamic coastal environments can be restored and managed while benefiting wildlife and communities.

A central theme was the importance of the east coast of England within the East Atlantic Flyway, one of the world's major migratory bird routes. The region supports over one million waterbirds annually, holds internationally important populations of around 30 species, and serves as a critical stopover and wintering area for globally significant numbers of species such as red knot, dark bellied brent goose, pink footed goose and black tailed godwit.

The presentation highlighted the successful acceptance of a tentative World Heritage listing with UNESCO and the growing partnership supporting further assessment work involving conservation bodies, local authorities, government agencies and other stakeholders.

Michael concluded that the East Coast Flyway has strong potential for World Heritage recognition because of the exceptional importance for migratory birds and its role as a global exemplar of coastal adaptation. He encouraged wider participation in the initiative, emphasising the opportunity to build pride, investment, conservation outcomes and international recognition for the region.

## 4 Oceanography

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Ben Whitcombe, University of Hull.

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk explained how oceanography uses physical, chemical and biological observations to understand past and current ocean conditions and anticipate future change. Monitoring can reveal anomalies, support weather prediction, assess human impacts and indicate changes in habitats, species, fisheries, tourism, energy and defence. In the EASTME region, colder Atlantic water enters the North Sea and moves southwards along the east coast, while warmer Channel water moves north. Between the two, and with variable deep and shallow areas, creating contrasting stratified and mixed environments are created. Presented 2025 evidence showed the whole region was warmer than the long-term average (based on a dataset between 1993-2026: mean seas surface temperature (SST) using the OSTIA product from the UK Met Office), with a prolonged warm period from March to October. September patterns differed spatially: northern waters were around 0.50°C warmer than average, while southern waters were around 0.50°C cooler. Offshore EASTME waters were more turbid than average, although turbidity around the Thames and Humber was lower following summer drought conditions. Coastal observations also demonstrated strong chlorophyll, sediment and visibility differences between offshore and nearshore waters. Despite several named storms and high offshore wind and wave episodes, 2025 was calmer overall, with lower coastal wind speeds and wave heights. The talk concluded that more *in situ* offshore monitoring is needed.

### Key themes and trends

**Oceanography supports decisions:** Monitoring ocean condition helps to identify anomalies, anticipate change and inform conservation, fisheries, tourism, energy, defence and habitat management.

**Distinct water regimes:** Cooler Atlantic and warmer Channel inflows, together with seasonal stratification and southern mixing, create contrasting environments and potential species distributions.

**Warmer 2025 conditions:** The region was warmer than the long term average, with sustained warmth from March to October and contrasting September anomalies between northern and southern waters.

**Variable turbidity:** Offshore waters were more turbid overall, while the Thames and Humber were less turbid. Coastal compared to offshore sampling showed marked differences in chlorophyll, sediment and visibility.

**Storms within a calmer year:** Named storms caused offshore wind and wave peaks, especially in autumn, but overall coastal wind speed and wave height were lower than average.

### Priority actions

**Expand offshore monitoring:** Increase *in situ* offshore observations of temperature, turbidity, wind and wave conditions to address the current coastal bias in monitoring.

**Use evidence for planning:** Apply spatial and seasonal oceanographic evidence when assessing habitat change, fisheries, conservation needs and offshore infrastructure impacts.

## 5 Seabed and Seashore

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Ian Wilson, Benthic Solutions

Contributing Organisations: Benthic Solutions, Eastern IFCA, Seasearch, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed seabed and seashore observations for 2025 and early 2026. No major seabed incidents were reported, although localised coastal washouts followed strong easterly and northeasterly winds. Shoresearch and citizen-science work provided much of the available evidence with 12 surveys across four Yorkshire sites and 195 species recorded. Intensive Filey strandline surveys produced more consistent biodiversity and higher abundance records (e.g. bryozoans and jellyfish). Notable observations included mass crystal jellyfish (October 2025) and cuttlefish bone strandings (January-March 2025). Invasive species detected include wireweed (*Sargassum muticum*) and Atlantic Jack-Knife Clam (*Ensis Leeii*) on the Yorkshire coast. At Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ), surveys compared open and closed potting areas, while Seasearch reported increased damage around closure corridors and continuing concern over reef recession. eDNA monitoring recorded substantially more biodiversity than traditional taxonomy at north Norfolk sites. The principal constraint remains sporadic, delayed and poorly shared monitoring data, with most evidence supplied to the Community of Practice (CoP) from volunteers and NGOs rather than regulators.

### Key themes and trends

**Citizen science is essential:** Shoresearch and intensive strandline surveys generated most current observations, including verified biodiversity, abundance, stranding and invasive species records.

**Species patterns are shifting:** Two invasive species were first reported (wireweed (*Sargassum muticum*) and Atlantic Jack-Knife Clam (*Ensis Leeii*). Climate observation changes include Tompot blennies (*parablennius gattorugine*) which have slowly increased and an absence of spider crabs (*Maja bracydactyla*) which showed a previous boom which could be linked to migration.

**Ongoing investigation at Cromer Shoal Chalk Reef MCZ:** Monitoring comparing potting closures, while Seasearch reported damage corridors, trial design concerns and continued recession of the reef front.

**eDNA monitoring can expand detection:** At north Norfolk monitoring sites, eDNA monitoring identified much greater richness than traditional benthic taxonomy and supported multi-purpose environmental surveillance.

**Reporting remains fragmented:** Surveys are sporadic, repeat coverage is limited, commercial release of data is delayed, and regulator engagement and communication were reported as very limited.

### Priority actions

**Create regular shared monitoring:** Establish quality controlled, repeat monitoring sites using eDNA and conventional methods, with outputs suitable for regional and national use.

**Improve evidence release and protection:** Encourage regulators and commercial operators to publish timely summaries of new findings and long-term change, and strengthen collaboration around chalk reef management.

## 6 Coastal & Estuarine Habitats

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Laura Steuart, Natural England

Contributing Organisations: ABPmer, Environment Agency, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Zoological Society London (ZSL)

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk presented coastal and estuarine habitat recovery activity across the EASTME region. Beneficial use of dredged sediment at Blackwater Estuary created and replenished 6.7 ha of sand and shingle, while continued work at Levington Lagoon is strengthening saltmarsh resilience and connectivity. The Benacre and Kessingland Flood Management Project will create more than 80 ha of intertidal habitat and freshwater habitat alongside new flood infrastructure. At Northey Island, redundant barges filled with dredged material are being developed as a resilient bird island and saltmarsh protection features. Landscape scale programmes are progressing across the Wash, Humber, Blakeney Harbour and Thames. Wilder Humber reported seagrass trials, 2 ha of seed-based planting, a 92.7% transplant success rate and 280,000 native oysters returned to the estuary. Other work restored functionally linked land and expanded community engagement. New Countryside Stewardship guidance supports coastal habitat creation and management, while Natural England's Earned Autonomy pilots aim to simplify restoration processes. Saltmarsh Code documentation, risk tools and carbon calculations were also updated ahead of pilot development.

### Key themes and trends

**Sediment as a recovery resource:** Dredged material is being used to rebuild beaches, retain sediment, protect saltmarsh, support nesting birds and strengthen flood resilience.

**Landscape-scale adaptation:** Managed realignment and multi habitat projects such as the Lincolnshire Wash Landscape Recovery project, Blackney Harbour Multi-Habitat Restoration Project and Transforming the Thames connect saltmarsh, freshwater wetlands, seagrass, shellfish and functionally linked land while responding to climate and flood risk.

**Restoration is scaling:** Wilder Humber trials and large oyster deployment are generating evidence for wider seagrass, oyster, dune and saltmarsh recovery.

**Partnerships enable delivery:** Projects across the Wash, Humber, Blakeney and Thames combine stakeholder planning, community engagement, knowledge exchange, funding and strategic evidence.

**Policy tools are evolving:** Stewardship guidance, Earned Autonomy pilots and Saltmarsh Code updates aim to unlock funding, simplify delivery and improve confidence in restoration outcomes.

### Priority actions

**Scale proven habitat approaches:** Use monitoring from sediment reuse, seagrass, oyster and managed-realignment projects to guide replication and target restoration in suitable locations.

**Remove delivery barriers:** Strengthen partnerships, funding and knowledge exchange while progressing streamlined regulation, stewardship routes and robust Saltmarsh Code piloting.

## 7 Water Quality and Plankton

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Rodney Forster, University of Hull

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk assessed EASTME water quality using long-term Environment Agency coastal records, satellite information and higher-frequency plankton monitoring. Offshore coverage remains sparse, particularly in the northern and Dogger Bank areas. In 2025, prolonged drought reduced River Trent flow and freshwater input, contributing to high coastal salinity across the region. Nitrate was low, phosphate continued its long-term decline, and the nitrogen to phosphorus ratio increased. This changing balance may influence phytoplankton composition, although the ecological consequences remain uncertain. Phytoplankton biomass was broadly average in 2025, with the usual inshore chlorophyll peak in May and no exceptional summer bloom. Weekly Cromer Pier sampling and complementary zooplankton work are building detailed records of species occurrence and seasonal patterns. The presentation also reviewed the 10 March 2025 North Sea tanker collision as a near miss in which larger ecological impacts were avoided. The response demonstrated the importance of rapid coordination, internal and cross organisational communication, local site knowledge, sampling equipment, survey vessels and citizen science capacity.

### Key themes and trends

**Monitoring gaps offshore:** Long coastal time series support trend analysis, but offshore data are sparse and confidence in pelagic habitat assessment remains low. **Drought altered salinity:** Six months of low river flow reduced freshwater input and made 2025 a high salinity year across coastal stations.

**Nutrients are changing:** Nitrate was low, phosphate continued a decadal decline and the increasing nitrogen to phosphorus ratio may affect phytoplankton composition.

**Biomass was broadly typical:** The spring chlorophyll peak occurred in May and 2025 biomass was around average, while longer-term inshore chlorophyll may be declining.

**Incident readiness matters:** The tanker collision highlighted the need for coordinated communication, rapid sampling, site expertise, vessels, equipment and community resilience.

### Priority actions

**Close evidence gaps:** Expand sustained offshore nutrient, salinity and plankton monitoring and add analysis of contaminants such as heavy metals and PCBs.

**Maintain response readiness:** Agree communications and sampling arrangements, keep equipment and clean bottles accessible, and retain vessel, site and citizen science capability for incidents.

## 8 Marine and Coastal Birds

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Natalie Le Brun, RSPB

Contributing Organisations: British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed the status of marine and coastal birds in the EASTME region, which supports internationally important breeding, wintering, passage and beach nesting populations. In 2026, the region held nearly 60% of the UK breeding little tern population. Long term evidence indicates declining little tern abundance. Results varied markedly by site in 2025; Flamborough and Filey kittiwake productivity was below its previous 10-year mean, whereas Lowestoft performed better. Beacon Lagoons recorded its best little tern season since the early 1970s, and east Norfolk and north Norfolk also achieved strong productivity. North Suffolk's little tern colony largely failed following predation and photographer disturbance. Razorbill and guillemot productivity was low, while gannets continued recovery from the 2022 avian influenza impact. Key pressures include food availability, bycatch, coastal habitat loss, recreation, predation, avian influenza and limited spatial protection. Monitoring, community engagement, volunteers and wardens remain essential to conservation delivery.

### Key themes and trends

**Regional significance:** The East Coast SPA network supports nationally and internationally important seabirds, waders, wildfowl and beach-nesting birds.

**Mixed breeding outcomes:** Strong little tern results at Beacon Lagoons and Norfolk contrasted with near colony failure in North Suffolk and low kittiwake productivity at Flamborough and Filey.

**Long-term concern:** Little tern abundance has declined, and productivity has rarely reached the level needed to increase the population; kittiwake productivity also shows weakness.

**Multiple interacting pressures:** Food supply, trawling and bycatch, coastal change, disturbance, predation and avian influenza affect species and sites differently.

**People underpin protection:** Skilled monitoring, stakeholder collaboration, communications, wardening and substantial volunteer effort support evidence collection and reduce disturbance.

### Priority actions

**Strengthen evidence and delivery:** Increase funding, skilled survey coverage and review of monitoring methods, while maintaining staff, volunteer coordination and effective wardening.

**Protect food and habitat:** Support offshore foraging-area policy and create or enhance coastal habitat through coastal adaptation and shoreline management planning.

## 9 Marine Mammals

### COP speaker and presentation: seals

Speakers: Debbie Russel, University of St Andrews

Contributing Organisations: British Divers Marine Life Rescue, Friends of Horsey Seals, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Natural England, Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU), University of St Andrews, ZSL

[Link to slides](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed grey and harbour seal evidence for southeast England. Since the grey seal pup decline in the previous year, ground surveys indicated that Donna Nook production was higher than in 2024 but remained below that of 2023, Horsey returned to just above 2023 levels, and Orfordness continued to increase. Results from the latest management unit aerial survey, including Blakeney, were still being processed. In contrast to grey seal pup production, there was no indication of harbour seal population recovery. Natural England assessed the harbour seal feature of The Wash and North Norfolk Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC) as 'unfavourable declining', with failures covering population, recruitment, food, pathogens and contaminants. Monitoring and investigation will continue in 2026. British Divers Marine Life Rescue reports increased from 2024 in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, with a small decrease in Suffolk. Suggested reasons included beach disturbance, greater public awareness, population growth, storms and marine debris entanglement.

### Key themes and trends

**Grey seal production stabilised:** The apparent 2024 drop did not continue: Donna Nook improved, Horsey returned above 2023 levels and Orfordness continued to grow.

**Rescue reports increased:** Callouts rose in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, with disturbance, awareness, population growth, storms and entanglement identified as likely contributors.

**Grey seals dominate callout reports:** Grey seals made up 72.2% of reports, common seals 23.3%, and unidentified seals 4.6%.

**Harbour seals remain a concern:** There was no evidence of population recovery, and The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC feature was assessed as 'unfavourable declining'.

**Evidence development continues:** Aerial-survey images are being processed, with continued monitoring and research planned on harbour seal recovery and grey seal predation.

### Priority actions

**Prioritise harbour seal recovery evidence:** Continue population monitoring and investigate the failed condition attributes, including recruitment, food availability, pathogens and contaminants.

**Reduce avoidable pup pressures:** Use rescue-report evidence and public awareness to address beach disturbance and marine-debris entanglement while supporting timely intervention where needed.

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

### COP speaker and presentation: cetaceans

Speakers: Simone Evans, Sightings Officer, Sea Watch Foundation

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed cetacean status and trends in eastern England using sightings, effort based watches, citizen science, ferry surveys, photo identification and acoustic monitoring. Fifteen species occur in the region, with harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, white-beaked dolphin and minke whale considered regular. In 2025, harbour porpoise sightings fell close to the lowest level in five years, although animals were recorded in every month. Bottlenose dolphins continued their southward range expansion from east Scotland, were present year-round and showed a marked winter peak. No white-beaked dolphins were reported, while minke whales were recorded nearly year round and humpback whale sightings continued a wider upward trend. Sixteen welfare related incidents were reported, 33.3% fewer than in 2024, but this does not indicate fewer cetaceans. Research programmes are developing abundance baselines, passive acoustic evidence and national risk mapping. Local bycatch risk has declined, leaving underwater noise and contaminants as key pressures. Major evidence gaps remain south of Flamborough Head and during winter.

### Key themes and trends

**Species patterns are shifting:** Harbour porpoise sightings fell, bottlenose dolphins expanded south and appeared year round, and minke whales were recorded through much of the year.

**Winter evidence is increasingly important:** The 2025 bottlenose dolphin peak was concentrated in winter, when visual survey conditions are more limited and acoustic monitoring is valuable.

**Monitoring is diversifying:** Land watches, apps, photo identification, hydrophones, ferry surveys, environmental layers and risk models are being combined to strengthen understanding.

**Incidents require careful interpretation:** Sixteen incidents were reported, one third fewer than in 2024; the reduction reflects fewer welfare concerns, not necessarily fewer animals.

**Key pressures remain:** Reduced local gillnetting has lowered bycatch risk, while underwater noise and contaminants remain the principal concerns highlighted for the region.

### Priority actions

**Close spatial and seasonal gaps:** Establish year round, effort based monitoring south of Flamborough Head and use passive acoustics to strengthen winter coverage.

**Use integrated evidence to understand distribution:** Combine sightings, acoustic data and environmental and activity layers to assess shifting distributions and target action on noise and contaminants.

## 10 Fish, Fisheries and Shellfish

### COP speaker and presentation

Speakers: Andy Richardson, University of Hull

Contributing Organisations: Eastern IFCA, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, University of Hull

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed fish, fisheries and shellfish in the EASTME region, emphasising a complex interaction between biodiversity, commercial and recreational activity, conservation and people. Commercial fisheries span ICES areas 4b and 4c, the Humber and Wash estuaries. Landings data require caution because catch location, overseas vessels, landings elsewhere, unreported hand collection and recreational catches can distort patterns. Key pressures include warming seas and species shifts, competition for space, regulatory uncertainty, disease, pollution and international events. Recent developments include tailored MPA gear restrictions, phased growth in lobster minimum conservation reference size, fisheries management plans and major evidence gaps for southern North Sea non-quota species. Cockle and mussel stocks were described as doing fairly well, although cockle mortality continues. A Pacific oyster herpesvirus outbreak at the Port of Grimsby resulted in shellfish movement restrictions in the Humber Estuary. Research also suggests static gear (potting) bait inputs may alter local food webs and influence crab and lobster distribution.

### Key themes and trends

**Shellfish dominate landings:** Regional UK vessel port data are strongly influenced by static gear shellfish fisheries, with large lobster and mollusc landings at particular ports.

**Data need careful interpretation:** Port landings do not identify catch location and may omit recreational catches, hand collection and catch landed outside the region.

**Management is changing:** MPA fisheries management is being implemented, lobster minimum conservation reference size increases have a phased implementation, and Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) are advancing.

**Ecological and disease pressures:** Warming seas species shifts, oyster disease has triggered containment, and bait use may modify local food webs and commercial species distribution.

### Priority actions

**Close priority evidence gaps:** Build collaboration with commercial and recreational fishers to improve spatial catch, stock, non-quota species and ecological impact evidence.

**Coordinate adaptive management:** Use regional evidence to align MPA measures, FMPs, disease controls and habitat protection while reducing regulatory uncertainty for stakeholders.

# 11 Marine Planning

## COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Poppy Phillips, Marine Management Organisation (MMO)

[Link to talk](#)

## Summary

The talk updated stakeholders on replacement of the East Marine Plan, which guides sustainable and coordinated use of increasingly busy marine space from Flamborough Head to Felixstowe and offshore to international boundaries. The current plan, adopted in 2014, remains effective until the replacement is adopted. During the past 12 months, work progressed through evidence gathering, development of the vision and objectives, options appraisal, two policy drafting rounds, compatibility testing and sustainability and strategic environmental assessments. This has been supported by online and in person engagement. Three plan options were considered: a baseline aligned with newer plans, stronger focus on East Plan priorities, and more spatial and temporal prescription. No single preferred option emerged, so policy development combines these approaches, using greater spatial detail where evidence allows. Around 33 new policies are being developed, with updated/enhanced policy topics such as renewables, cables and climate change and new topic areas including hydrogen, environmental compensation, decommissioning, ecosystem health, sustainable alternative fuels, industrial clusters and nuclear. Next steps include continued drafting and assessment, statutory consultation, implementation sessions and indicator development to monitor progress.

## Key themes and trends

**Evidence led update of the marine plan:** Issues, evidence, objectives, policy drafting and assessments are being developed together, with stakeholder engagement informing policy refinement.

**Combined options approach:** No single preferred option emerged; the plan starts from a baseline, incorporates east and national priorities, and adds spatial prescription where data support it.

**Wider policy coverage:** New or strengthened policy addresses renewables, cables, ports, aquaculture, fishing, climate change, hydrogen, compensation, decommissioning and ecosystem health.

**Monitoring will be built in:** Process, outcome and context monitoring will use annual surveys, indicators and tools such as Explore Marine Plans to evaluate use and effects.

**Delivery pathway is defined:** Drafting, assessments, consultation, amendment and adoption are sequenced, while the current East Marine Plan remains in force until replacement.

## Priority actions

**Provide usable evidence:** Share relevant organisational data for fisheries, underwater noise, aggregates and other policy areas to strengthen drafting, spatial detail and indicators.

**Prepare for consultation and implementation:** Review the draft plan when published, submit evidence based feedback and plan how new and amended policies will be applied and monitored.

## 12 Marine Protected Areas

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: Ellie Falconer, MMO

Contributing Organisations: Eastern IFCA, Humber Nature Partnership, MMO, Natural England, WDC, Yorkshire Marine Nature Partnership

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed MPA management across the East region. MMO Stage 3 measures cover 42 English offshore MPAs, including new prohibitions on bottom towed gear, traps, and bottom set nets and lines. Stage 4 work focuses on highly mobile species (harbour porpoise and marine birds). Six potential management measures for the Southern North Sea (SNS) SAC (harbour porpoise) have been discussed with fishers and stakeholders. Feedback is being reviewed and management options updated. Marine non-licensable activities are also being assessed across 98 MPAs, with current work at Cromer Shoal MCZ on anchorage and The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC on anchorage over *Saballaria* reef and seal disturbance. Further regional issues and priorities include recreational pressure at Flamborough Head, a Protected Sites Strategy (PSS) for Holderness Inshore MCZ and a Humber pressure risk register and marine biosecurity plan. Updates from Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) on noise pollution includes proposed noise limits and the Running Quiet Seas Please campaign. Condition assessments identified declining shelduck, pintail, and harbour seal features, reinforcing the need for further research and recovery action.

### Key themes and trends

**Expanded fisheries controls:** Stage 3 management measures for bottom towed gear and targeted prohibitions for traps, nets and lines.

**SNS SAC management options:** Evidence indicates gillnet bycatch may require management; engagement has tested six potential options, with decisions still pending.

**Coastal MPA impacts:** Pressures include anchoring, wildlife tours, seal watching, trampling, and other visitor activities.

**Evidence is growing:** Assessments, seabed mapping, ROV surveys, vessel tracking, gear trials, and disturbance studies are informing management.

**Feature declines require action:** Shelduck, pintail, and harbour seals were assessed as unfavourable declining, while reasons for some trends remain uncertain.

### Priority actions

**Progress targeted pressure management:** Use engagement and available evidence to address bycatch, underwater noise, anchoring, recreational disturbance, and damaging fishing interactions.

**Strengthen monitoring and recovery:** Complete site and fisheries assessments, close priority data gaps, and investigate drivers of declining bird and harbour seal features.

## 13 Plastic Pollution and Marine Debris

### COP speaker and presentation

Speaker: William Fitter, Eastern & Southern Plastics Coalition (ESPC)

Contributing Organisations: ESPC partnership members

[Link to talk](#)

### Summary

The talk reviewed the Eastern and Southern Plastics Coalition's work to prevent and remove marine debris and create sustainable end of life routes. A range of organisations submit data on beach cleans and evidence shows plastics remain the dominant litter material. In 2025, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust 'Waves of Waste' initiative ran 51 beach clean events and removed 376 bags of litter. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) Beachwatch data for the EASTME region found 753 kg of litter was removed through 98 surveys involving 1,274 volunteers; 83% was plastic or polystyrene and 11% was linked to fishing and aquaculture. The coalition's Marine Debris recycling project provides free collection of end of life fishing gear at Lowestoft, Southwold and Kings Lynn. Across these areas during 2025, 5,304 kg was recycled and 3,296 kg sent to landfill. Recycling routes now exist for selected nets, rope, rigid plastics and pots, and Kings Lynn also trialled gear swaps. Challenges observed through the project include contamination, difficult material combinations, manual preparation, seasonal timing and weather.

### Key themes and trends

**Numerous beach clean events:** Project examples include Waves of Waste in which 376 bags of waste were removed, and the MCS Beachwatch project in which 83% of collected waste was plastic or polystyrene, with packets, caps, cord and containers among common items.

**Volunteer monitoring is substantial:** Regional beach cleans and litter surveys mobilise many volunteers, but differing collection frameworks make datasets difficult to combine.

**Source control supports fishers:** Free end of life gear events provide a practical disposal route intended to reduce abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear.

**Recycling performance of fishing gear is growing:** During 2025, 5,304 kg of gear was recycled, with Kings Lynn achieving the highest quantity. A fisherman swap scheme was also established.

**Processing remains difficult:** Contamination, mixed polymers, monofilament preparation, pot dismantling, event timing and severe weather reduce efficiency and participation.

### Priority actions

**Scale viable gear recovery:** Deliver the planned 2026 event and expand accessible end of life and reuse routes with fishers, ports, councils and recyclers.

**Improve consistency and recyclability:** Align litter recording approaches where possible and address contamination, sorting, preparation and hard to recycle pot and net components.

## 14 Energy in the Marine Environment

### COP speaker

Speakers: Evangeline Wilby, MMO and Ben Green, National Grid

Contributing Organisations: MMO, National Grid, Orsted, Offshore Wind Industry Council (OWIC), WDC,

### Summary

The talk reviewed energy developments and environmental management across the EASTME region. Offshore wind capacity continues to expand through commissioned, operating, construction, consented and planned projects. Policy and evidence activity in 2025 included the Marine Recovery Fund (MRF), Marine Net Gain assessment framework report, updated Fishing Liaison with Offshore Wind and Wet Renewables Group (FLOWW) guidance, a report on post consent monitoring standardisation and the publication of Marine Noise Policy by Defra. The MMO are supporting the Developer Coordination Forum to track noisy activity across industry such as piling. Defra is piloting an offshore wind piling noise limit through the Piloting of Offshore Wind Environment Mitigation (POWEM) project. The Marine Noise Registry has also been updated. Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) produced an anthropogenic noise report which includes actionable recommendations. The National Grid Great Grid Upgrade is progressing through new High-Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) links and landfall infrastructure, while carbon capture and storage (CCS) projects are advancing through the East Coast Cluster, Northern Endurance Partnership and Viking CCS. Hornsea 3 offshore wind farm construction is under way, with first power planned for early 2027. Wilder Humber, a project between Orsted, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, supports large-scale restoration of seagrass, native oysters and saltmarsh. Future considerations include decommissioning, oil and gas planning and noise-limit pilots.

### Key themes and trends

**Energy infrastructure is expanding:** Offshore wind, grid links and CCS projects are progressing across operational, construction, consent and planning stages.

**Noise management is developing:** Coordination, policy, monitoring, research and proposed piling noise limits aim to reduce impacts on harbour porpoise and other noise-sensitive species.

**Standardised monitoring is being considered:** Recommended post consent standards across six environmental receptors aim to make data clearer, comparable and more useful for decisions.

**The Great Grid Upgrade:** New HVDC cables, converter stations and landfalls are central to the Great Grid Upgrade in the region.

**Energy developers can support restoration:** Wilder Humber project combines seagrass, native oyster and saltmarsh restoration with measurable biodiversity and carbon benefits.

### Priority actions

**Future considerations:** decommissioning (cross government working group), oil and gas (North Sea Future Plan) and noise limits.

**Plan infrastructure with recovery:** Integrate grid, offshore wind, CCS and decommissioning decisions with marine restoration, biodiversity and carbon-sequestration opportunities.

\* **Note:** Based solely on the presentation slides (a power cut ceased video recording).

## 15 Abbreviations/Acronyms

|          |                                                                  |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ABP      | Associated British Ports                                         |
| CCS      | Carbon Capture and Storage                                       |
| COP      | Community of Practice                                            |
| EAST     | East of England marine region                                    |
| EASTME   | East of England Marine Ecosystem                                 |
| eDNA     | East of England Marine Ecosystem                                 |
| FLOWW    | Fishing Liaison with Offshore Wind and Wet Renewables Group      |
| FMPs     | Fisheries Management Plans                                       |
| HVDC     | High-Voltage Direct Current                                      |
| ICES     | International Council for the Exploration of the Sea             |
| MCS      | Marine Conservation Society                                      |
| MCZ      | Marine Conservation Zone                                         |
| MEnd     | Marine Environmental Directory                                   |
| MMO      | Marine Management Organisation                                   |
| mNCEA    | Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme        |
| MPA      | Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme        |
| MRF      | Marine Recovery Zone                                             |
| NGOs     | Non-Governmental Organisation                                    |
| PCBs     | Polychlorinated biphenyl                                         |
| POWEM    | Piloting of Offshore Wind Environment Mitigation                 |
| PSS      | Protect Sites Strategy                                           |
| ReMeMaRe | Restoring Meadows, Marsh and Reef Programme                      |
| ROV      | Remote Operated Vehicle                                          |
| RSPB     | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds                        |
| SAC      | Special Area of Conservation                                     |
| SNS      | Southern North Sea                                               |
| SPA      | Special Protection Area                                          |
| UK       | United Kingdom                                                   |
| UNESCO   | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| WDC      | Whale and Dolphin Conservation                                   |

Cardinal points/directions are used unless otherwise stated.

SI units are used unless otherwise stated.

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