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Britain's seas should be national parks

This year's International Day for Biological Diversity is dedicated to marine life. We must care for our oceans as we do our land

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One of the areas identified as a protected area is Lyme Bay, off the coast of Lyme Regis. Photograph: Alamy

As a nation famed for its seafaring, it is surprising Britain has paid so little attention to the health and protection of its seas. Up until fairly recently, our waters have been an open environment where fishermen can hunt their catch with few restrictions beyond the odd offshore structures, such as oil rigs or military areas. As a result much of our seabed is now composed of sediment, flat and uninteresting, when 200 years ago there was a dynamic environment of oysters, mussel beds and reefs – something we British would now associate with tropical seas.

We need to start a debate about how we can meet the needs of the maritime industries, conservation and food production in a way that supports a healthy and biodiverse sea. This requires a change in attitudes from all sides: the British need to start thinking about their seas the same way they think about the countryside. The first steps have been taken – 22 May is International Day for Biological Diversity and this year the day is dedicated to raising awareness and calling for practical action to support marine biodiversity around the world. In Britain the government is responding to this by looking at how it could implement marine conservation zones.

Across Britain we have a network of protected areas that generally have passionate support and interest from the public including national parks and sites of special scientific interest. We should take the same view with our coastal seas by providing the equivalent of these national parks, providing a network of truly protected marine areas of which we can be proud and where damaging activity is restricted, but at the same time accept that there will be some non-protected areas dedicated to food production. A strong need to fish the stocks sustainably will remain, but we would need to accept as a society that economic methods for fishing can cause some damage to the seabed in these areas. As for agriculture, this is the price we pay to produce food and, like farmers, fishing communities will have the responsibility to minimise their impact as much as possible.

One of the areas identified by the government is Lyme Bay, a 200 square kilometre site off the coast of Lyme Regis, where you can find some of Britain's remaining diverse reefs. With managed and restricted activity governed by law, and supported by local fisherman and the public, there is the potential that further reefs might recover in other newly protected areas around the UK such as the coast of south Devon, the Isle of Wight and large parts of the North Sea.

Restricted access will foster the growth of species with limited roaming such as crabs, lobsters, sea horses, turbot, sole and rays. But the question for us now is how we adequately protect these areas without damaging our fishing industry.

A positive way forward could be for small fisherman to become the primary stewards of the coastal sea in much the same way that farmers are responsible for managing around 75% of Britain's land. In the US there are a number of communities that have rekindled their historic links with their local fishing fleets – particularly the smaller boats using sustainable, static gear. These Community Supported Fisheries (CSFs) have proved very successful, with an injection of funds from local people directly to the fishermen in return for immediate access to their seasonal catch. Transport costs are minimised and the fishermen get a larger return for each fish sold.

This approach would also help reconnect the public to its fishing industry, in much the same ways as the "freedom food" movement has done with meat. In Britain we generally just eat three types of fish: salmon that is farmed, cod that is endangered and tuna that is imported. By appreciating and supporting British fisherman in the same way we do British farmers, we could support the creation of a healthier, beautiful biodiverse sea as well as expanding our culinary horizons.

We need to think and treat the invaluable seas surrounding our island with as much as care and attention as we do land within Britain. We need to make a brave leap if we are to have healthy seas, sustainable fish populations and a sustainable fishing industry.

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