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Seal Haul-Out Consultation
Scottish Government
Marine Planning and Policy
Area 1-A South
Victoria Quay
Edinburgh
EH6 6QQ

Dear Sir or Madam

CONSULTATION ON SEAL HAUL-OUT SITES

I refer to the above consultation and your invitation to submit comments on the list of potential seal haul-out sites at national, regional and local levels. The consultation was considered by the Comhairle's Sustainable Development Committee on 1 June 2011 and the following paragraphs reflect the views of the Comhairle. A response to the specific questions is provided in the accompanying Respondent Information form.

The consultation paper identifies a total of 23 seal haul-out sites in the Western Isles area, 20 of which are for common (harbour) seals and three are for grey seals. In addition the existing SACs for grey seals are being considered for designation. These are the Monach Islands and North Rona. The potential common seal and grey seal haul-out sites cover 2.3% and 0.3% of the Western Isles Seal Management Area's low water coast respectively.

Fishing, aquaculture, and environmental tourism are key industries for the islands and greatly contribute to the economy of the Western Isles providing employment for many people living in the islands. However, it is not clear from the consultation document if restrictions will be placed on activities in the vicinity of designated haul-out sites.

Clarification has since been sought from Marine Scotland on the implications of the proposed designation on existing activities and the range the designation will extend to into the sea around haul-out sites. A response received from Marine Scotland on 10 May 2011 states that:

"In most cases the designation of haul-out sites should not impact on current practice in relation to existing activities – i.e. fishing, aquaculture or environmental tourism except in the unlikely event that this represents a direct threat of harassment to such seal haul-outs". In addition, "The focus of the designation is on the haul-outs themselves and is unlikely to extend to any significant extent into the surrounding sea."

It is therefore considered unlikely that the proposed designation will have any detrimental impact on existing activities in the vicinity of seal haul-outs as the focus is on protecting the rocks and skerries used by the seals to haul-out. The Comhairle would not support restrictions on existing activities in the vicinity of haul-out sites.

Marine Scotland should raise awareness of best practice for minimising disturbance to seal haul-out sites for example using the existing *Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code – A Guide to Best Practice for Watching Marine Wildlife*
<http://www.marinecode.org/documents/Guide-web.pdf>.

Once consideration has been taken of all the comments submitted on the consultation, the Comhairle would appreciate a written explanation of how its comments have been taken into account.

Yours sincerely



Anne MacLellan
Biodiversity Officer
Development Department

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

General questions

Question 1: Do you consider that the overall number of seal haul out sites proposed at national/regional/local level represent a reasonable balance between seal conservation and other sustainable activities around the Scottish coastline?

The Comhairle is of the view that the sites proposed at a regional and local level provide a reasonable selection of haul-out sites. However, the lack of information or data in regard to the implications on economic activity within the consultation document is of concern and has led the Comhairle to seek clarification on these issues from Marine Scotland. Given the challenging prospects for the economy in the Outer Hebrides at present, the Comhairle would not be supportive of any measure that would hamper economic potential. The email response from Marine Scotland received on the 10 May 2011 states that “In most cases the designation of haul-out sites should not impact on current practice in relation to existing activities – i.e. fishing, aquaculture or environmental tourism except in the unlikely event that this represents a direct threat of harassment to such seal haul-outs.” In addition, “the focus of the designation is on the haul-outs themselves and is unlikely to extend to any significant extent into the surrounding sea.”

The Comhairle would not support restrictions on existing activities in the vicinity of haul-out sites and would recommend that Marine Scotland raise awareness of best practice for minimising disturbance to seal haul-out sites for example using the existing Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code – A Guide to Best Practice for Watching Marine Wildlife <http://www.marinecode.org/documents/Guide-web.pdf>.

Question 2: Do you consider that additional sites should be included at national/regional/local level and, if so, why, how many additional sites and which sites?

No

Question 3: Do you consider that fewer sites should be included at national/regional/local level and, if so, why, how many fewer sites and which sites?

It is recommended that the number of sites be strictly limited to those specifically required to provide adequate coverage.

Question 4: Do you agree that existing Special Areas of Conservation for seals should be added to the list of seal haul out sites being considered for possible designation?

The two existing SACs at the Monach Islands and North Rona are recognised as important areas for grey seals and it makes sense to have

these sites added to the sites being considered for possible designation.

Question 5: Do you consider that particular national or regional level activities might represent a potential risk of harassment to seals on haul out sites in general?

No

Question 6: Do you consider that particular local activities might represent a potential risk of harassment to seals on particular haul out sites included on the list?

No

Question 7: Do you have any views on whether the boundaries of particular haul out sites included on the list might be revised ?

No

Equality assessment

The Scottish Government must ensure that any policies that it implements do not unduly discriminate against persons defined by age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, race and religion and belief. We would welcome your views on whether you believe that any of the propositions set out in this consultation paper will unduly impact on any of these groups mentioned.

No comment