

UK GUIDANCE ON DEFINING BOUNDARIES FOR MARINE SACs FOR ANNEX I HABITAT SITES FULLY DETACHED FROM THE COAST

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In light of representations made to JNCC's "Consultation on the first seven possible offshore Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)" (JNCC, 2008a), and from the Consultation on three offshore possible SACs (JNCC, 2011), the 2004 JNCC guidance on defining site boundaries for SACs away from the coast (JNCC, 2004) along with the 2008 additions (JNCC, 2008b), have been updated accordingly.

1 Introduction

Previous UK guidance on defining SAC boundaries states that "as a general principle, site boundaries have been drawn closely around the qualifying habitat types ... for which the sites have been selected, taking into account the need to ensure that the site operates as a functional whole for the conservation of the habitat type ... and to maintain sensible management units". Further, "the seaward boundaries of the sites have been drawn as straight lines, to ensure ease of identification on charts and at sea" (Brown *et al.* 1997, McLeod *et al.* 2002). The guidance presented below is an expansion of previous guidance on defining boundaries for marine SACs, specifically for sites which are not connected to the coastline, and which may be in deep water (200m to more than 1000m).

2 Guidance

Actual site boundaries will be determined on a site specific basis, following the general guidance set out below.

- 2.1. The habitat area of interest will be identified and mapped. In many cases in waters away from the coast, this will involve some form of modelling, such as use of seabed geological data (interpolated from seismic tracks and samples), interpreted sidescan sonar, acoustic and/or bathymetric data.
- 2.2. The minimum area necessary in order to ensure the essential level of protection for the Annex I habitat of interest will be defined. More complex site shapes drawn more tightly around the feature of interest are favoured over simple square/rectangular boundaries, (to reduce the area of 'non-interest-feature' included within the site boundary), but this should not be to the detriment of the structural and functional integrity of the interest feature. Boundaries should still in conjunction be as simple as possible using a minimum number of straight lines and vertices. Contrary to previous JNCC boundary guidance (JNCC, 2004) site boundary co-ordinates do not have to be defined by whole degrees and minutes. It is recommended that site boundary coordinates be provided in degrees, minutes, seconds.
- 2.3. Where habitat of interest occurs in a number of separate 'pieces' with 'non-interest-feature' habitat between, the preference is to include all 'pieces' within a site boundary to enable effective conservation of the feature of the site and to maintain its ecological function. However, where small, isolated instances of habitat occur at some distance from the main location of the habitat, these may be excluded from the site if their inclusion would result in large areas of 'non-interest-feature' being included within the site boundary;
- 2.4. The area defined under 2 above may then be extended if necessary in the following circumstances:

- i) To ensure an essential level of protection from potentially damaging activities at the site, taking into account water depth at the site and possible location of mobile gear on the seabed in relation to location of a vessel at the sea surface. Activities which are location specific, always subject to prior consent and have clear reliable methods of enforcement are already controlled under existing procedures such as licensing of these activities. Mobile activities which may affect seabed habitats, such as fishing and anchoring, are not subject to prior consent procedures and therefore need special consideration. The length of warp used by boats when trawling is largely determined by water depth. The following table gives the appropriate distance beyond the seabed extent of the habitat by which the site boundary at the sea surface may be extended according to the maximum actual water depth of the feature in question (based on generalised trawl warp lengths, SERAD 2001):

Water depth	Ratio warp length:depth	Approx. length of trawl warp	Boundary extension to be added to the habitat area of interest
Shallow waters (≤ 25 m)	4:1	100 m at 25 m depth	4 x actual depth
Continental shelf (25-200 m)	3:1	600 m at 200 m depth	3 x actual depth
Deep waters (200 to over 1000 m)	2:1	2000 m at 1000 m depth	2 x actual depth

In the case of highly variable depths across a site (> 100 m depth difference), multiple regional maximum depths may be applied. Note that the site margin is incorporated as a minimum measure to reduce the likelihood of habitat damage from demersal fishing. However, these boundaries are SAC boundaries, not management boundaries. Ultimately Competent Authorities are responsible for considering which management actions might need to be taken under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations (GB: 1994 (as amended in 2007); NI: 1995) and the Offshore Marine Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations to reduce the risk of damage to the features associated with human activities, whether within or outside the site boundary. As a consequence, future management measure may have different boundaries to the SAC site boundary.

- ii) Where there are indirect impacts from re-suspended sediment, produced from gear activity, settling out over the habitat, in which case boundaries should be adjusted according to the sensitivity of the habitat in question, along with the local hydrographic conditions.
- iii) Where the conservation objectives are seeking restoration of a habitat area extent, in which case an appropriate area to support this should be incorporated into the boundary requirements, according to likely restoration outcomes.
- iv) Should information become available during review of the site, which indicates that the feature has increased in extent, a revision of the boundary may be required to include the new habitat and afford it the appropriate protection. Such information can come from future assessments of feature condition.
- v) For mobile habitats (for example, sandbanks), to ensure the minimum area necessary to allow conservation of the structure and functions of the habitat. Such extension will be determined on scientific understanding of the structure and functions of the habitat.

References

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