



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

What have oil drilling, gravel-dredging, offshore wind farms, fishing and marine wildlife got in common? They're all part of the Marine Bill – due to replace a bewildering array of 36 different laws governing the seas around the UK – and there are no prizes for guessing which is likely to be bottom of the pile.

We've barely dipped our toes in the water of marine conservation in this country. It's hard to believe just how poorly our seas are protected. Less than 1 per cent has any kind of official protection. And a paltry 3.3km² around Lundy Island – a wonderful, wildlife-rich lump of granite in the Bristol Channel – is the only area with full protection. That's it. If the same figures applied to conservation on land, we'd be protecting an area less than twice the size of Kew Gardens and nothing else in the whole of the UK.

Recent research suggests between 20 and 40 per cent of our seas should have full protection if we are to properly conserve the marine ecosystem and its biodiversity. But when the Government White Paper is released in mid-March, making firm proposals for the bill, it will almost certainly fail to commit to full protection anywhere in the country.

What it should do is designate areas of the sea where all damaging activities are prohibited

– so-called Highly Protected Marine Reserves. These have been around for ages elsewhere in the world. New Zealand paved the way a quarter of a century ago and many other countries have followed suit. There's no question that they work. One example after another proves that wildlife can bounce back once all the pressures have been removed – just look at the phenomenal increase in the size and abundance of lobsters around Lundy, despite the modest proportions of its protected area. And, ultimately, Highly Protected Marine Reserves 'prop up' the wider marine ecosystem.

But if total protection for key areas isn't spelled out in the legislation, it just won't happen. And then we'll have squandered this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to manage our seas responsibly.

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