

## **Marine Ecosystems Research Programme briefing to Defra on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2016 in London**

Implementation of policy should be based on robust evidence, but often little or no information flows between scientists and policy makers. As a consequence, scientific results generated within programmes such as the Marine Ecosystems Research Programme (MERP) may not be used to inform decision-making to the extent that they could be. Neither do policy makers get opportunities to discuss how research may be more clearly directed towards issues that may influence policies.

To formulate and design MERP science in such a way that its outputs can feed into high-priority decision-making current and planned MERP work is aligned with key policy questions, compiled by stakeholders and the consortium in 2015. MERP addresses a range of policy questions under the following research priorities: (1) The state of food webs (or their components) in relation to specified targets; (2) The effects of natural and anthropogenic change on the state of marine food webs and the services they provide; and (3) The likely future states of marine food webs and ecosystem service provision under scenarios reflecting management actions in UK waters.

A briefing was organised in London, at which a group of MERP scientists met with Defra policy customers to highlight existing and planned policy-relevant MERP outputs. The purpose of the briefing was to give policy-makers a flavour of what is being done within the programme and, based on policy needs, what could be done in the future.

Tangible outputs from ongoing MERP activity that policy-makers can use in specific policy contexts were presented and discussed, including:

- Compilation of UK marine data from plankton to large predators (University of Sheffield)
- Understanding trophic cascades in marine food webs and their role in determining environmental status (Queen Mary University of London)
- Modelling the whole ecosystem impacts of fishing (University of Strathclyde)
- Mapping seabird hotspots and predation pressure in UK coastal waters (Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, CEH)
- Modelling the effects of displacement from offshore wind farms on seabird populations (Centre for Ecology and Hydrology)
- Understanding distributions of top predators in space and time (University of Bangor/SeaWatch Foundation)
- The usefulness of operational indicators of GES for ecosystem services assessments (Plymouth Marine Laboratory)

The examples of work involved scientists across disciplines and engaged Defra staff across policy areas. The consortium received positive feedback from Defra and there was great interest in what the MERP has been achieving and intends to achieve. Policy customers confirmed that the policy questions prioritised by the MERP are appropriate and largely cover their evidence needs. In particular, the briefing identified opportunities for the MERP consortium to provide scientific advice proactively to policy-makers. Both Defra and the MERP consortium are keen to maintain the initial momentum generated by this briefing, and in addition to following up contacts from the briefing it was agreed that a further briefing in approximately 6 months would be a sensible next step.