# Ocean optimism grows as Plymouth leads UK marine recovery and conservation



For four decades, I have dedicated my career to marine ecology, primarily based in Plymouth, Devon—a global epicentre for marine research and education. Reflecting on the evolution of our understanding of ocean life, I’ve identified key insights that could inspire greater connection to our marine environments.

The first lesson highlights the necessity of starting with the basics. In the 1970s, the band America captured a common perception when they described the ocean as a “desert with its life underground.” During a 2014 survey on UK public perceptions, we uncovered a startling truth: many people believe that vibrant or intriguing marine organisms are only found in exotic locations, neglecting the rich biodiversity present in UK waters. This lack of awareness underscores the need to bridge the gap between our deep-sea discoveries and public understanding, especially given the success of documentaries like Blue Planet. While such productions elevate global awareness, they can inadvertently reinforce the notion that local waters lack excitement.

To cultivate a meaningful relationship with the ocean, deep connections must be inspired. Research highlights the remarkable restorative effects of proximity to marine environments, not requiring activities as demanding as diving. Simple acts like building sandcastles or rockpooling can open up a world of curious marine life for many, establishing powerful connections. Initiatives by organisations such as Plymouth’s Ocean Conservation Trust are vital in this respect, enabling young individuals to experience the ocean for the first time. Plans to transform Plymouth Sound into the UK’s first national marine park exemplify this vision—an opportunity for locals to interact with their marine surroundings actively and intimately, cultivating stewardship and enthusiasm for conservation efforts.

The narrative of ocean recovery is hopeful, and the lesson here is to take the pressure off. Fewer untouched regions remain in our oceans, but evidence shows that if given the chance, marine ecosystems can recuperate remarkably. Good management practices, exemplified by the ban on towed fishing gear in Lyme Bay, have led to significant resurgences of local species, including the return of bluefin tuna. Research has shown a dramatic increase in species diversity within the stained waters of Lyme Bay since securing its status as a Marine Protected Area in 2008—demonstrating a four-fold rise in reef biodiversity and improvements in ecosystem resilience.

However, it's essential to recognise that while addressing plastic pollution is critical, it can become a superficial distraction. The decade-long focus on this issue has risked overshadowing more complex challenges like industrial overfishing. Promising developments such as the UK’s ban on sandeel fishing represent strides toward genuinely impactful conservation measures. Such decisions benefit entire ecosystems, as seen in Lyme Bay, where sustainable practices allow local fishers and communities to thrive alongside marine recovery efforts.

Amid these pressing environmental issues, it’s crucial to foster an attitude of ocean optimism. With rising eco-anxiety deeply rooted in the experiences of younger generations, there's a tendency to feel despondent about the future. Yet, the vital role of our oceans in absorbing carbon and producing oxygen cannot be overstated; without them, life as we know it would not exist. Amidst the climate crisis, illuminating inspiring narratives of recovery—such as the thriving habitats emerging from past damage—offers both hope and a blueprint for future restoration. It is essential to share these success stories widely, fostering a vision for a healthier, more vibrant marine world that can motivate decisive action towards sustainability.

By nurturing a profound relationship with our oceans and actively engaging in their conservation, we can ensure that marine ecosystems thrive for generations to come.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://theconversation.com/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career-250162> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.lymebayreserve.co.uk/science/reserve-recovery.php> - This page details the recovery of Lyme Bay's marine ecosystem following the implementation of a marine protected area (MPA) in 2008. Research by the University of Plymouth has shown significant improvements, including a four-fold increase in reef species diversity, a doubling of scallop landings, and a seven-fold increase in the abundance of protected pink sea fans. The MPA has also enhanced the resilience of the reef ecosystem, allowing it to recover more rapidly after disturbances like extreme storms.
3. <https://www.lymebayreserve.co.uk/about/road-to-recovery.php> - Celebrating a decade since the designation of the Lyme Bay MPA, this page highlights the collaborative efforts between fishermen, conservationists, scientists, and regulators. The 'Lyme Bay: The Road to Recovery' documentary showcases how these stakeholders worked together to address challenges and implement a voluntary code of conduct. The MPA has led to a 22% increase in pink sea fans and a threefold greater abundance of bottom-living species compared to areas outside the reserve.
4. <https://www.bluemarinefoundation.com/projects/lyme-bay/> - The Blue Marine Foundation's Lyme Bay project demonstrates the successful coexistence of sustainable fishing and conservation. By collaborating with local fishers, conservationists, researchers, and regulators, the project has protected over 200 square kilometers of the English Channel from dredging and trawling. Research indicates a 95% increase in reef species and a 400% increase in fish abundance within the reserve, while also making the seabed more resilient to storms.
5. <https://www.marshwoodvale.com/fishing/2018/07/the-lyme-bay-marine-reserve-a-story-of-success/> - This article discusses the success of the Lyme Bay Marine Reserve in protecting nationally significant marine species like ross corals and pink sea fans. The ban on trawling and scallop dredging has led to rapid increases in lobsters, crabs, cuttlefish, sole, and plaice populations. However, by 2012, the use of static gear such as pots and nets had increased to unsustainable levels, prompting the establishment of a multi-stakeholder working group to develop a voluntary code of conduct.
6. <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/gees-research/283/> - This study examines public perceptions of the UK marine environment, highlighting that gender and experience influence views on marine health. Issues like litter are considered indicators of poor health, and ecological concepts such as habitat integrity and biodiversity are rated as important. The findings suggest that perceptions vary across the population, impacting methods to engage society in marine conservation. The study reinforces previous research on public perceptions of UK seas and identifies opportunities for building positive connections between society and the sea.
7. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27393214/> - This research evaluates public awareness and attitudes towards marine protection in the United Kingdom through nationwide surveys conducted in 2005, 2010, and 2015. Respondents consistently perceived sea health as poor and declining, with a strong desire for marine conservation. In 2015, over three-quarters of respondents considered dredging and trawling inappropriate in protected areas, indicating a need for better alignment between conservation efforts and public expectations.