# How Plymouth’s marine research hub is reshaping UK ocean conservation thinking



Having dedicated four decades to marine ecology, I reflect on my experience since 1992 in Plymouth, Devon—a city recognised as a pivotal hub for coastal marine research and education. Throughout this journey, my understanding of our oceans has evolved significantly, leading me to distil this knowledge into five essential lessons for inspiring connection to the sea.

### Start with the Basics

In the 1970s, the band America aptly remarked, “The ocean is a desert with its life underground, and the perfect disguise above.” This sentiment resonates as many still perceive the grey-blue surface of the ocean as featureless. A survey conducted in 2014 revealed a staggering insight into public perception: many individuals, when stepping outside marine circles, believed that only colourful and exotic creatures inhabited UK waters—an assumption that highlights a profound ignorance about our local seas. This disparity between reality and perception underscores the importance of awareness. While documentaries like *Blue Planet* have elevated the profile of marine life globally, they may inadvertently lead some to believe that fascinating aquatic ecosystems exist only in distant locales.

### Inspire Deep Connection

Engagement with the ocean is not limited to diving or major expeditions. Research indicates a remarkable restorative quality associated with simply being near the water—activities like building sandcastles or rockpooling can engender a profound connection to marine environments. Indeed, initiatives led by organisations such as Plymouth’s Ocean Conservation Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust aim to introduce young individuals to the coastline, sometimes for the very first time. Furthermore, for those unable to access the sea physically, innovative solutions like virtual reality can bridge this gap.

Recently, Plymouth Sound was transformed into the UK’s first national marine park, an initiative that embodies the goal of fostering connection to the ocean. This model of marine engagement has the potential to be replicated elsewhere, creating new avenues for public involvement in marine conservation efforts.

### Take the Pressure Off

The ocean has a remarkable ability to recover if given space and time. Evidence from conservation efforts, illustrated vividly in David Attenborough’s recent narrative, shows that when the most harmful human activities—particularly destructive fishing practices—are removed, marine ecosystems can re-establish themselves. The return of species like bluefin tuna and humpback whales to UK waters is a testament to more responsible management of fishing practices. For instance, following a ban on damaging towed fishing gear in Lyme Bay, the region witnessed a resurgence in its cold water reefs—a positive indicator of the ecosystem’s resilience when left undisturbed.

However, the UK still lacks sufficient protected areas where all harmful activities are fully restricted. Some habitats require active assistance, such as the restoration of seagrass beds, crucial for marine biodiversity. The recent UK ban on sandeel fishing offers a ray of hope, protecting food sources for seabirds and signalling progress towards more sustainable practices in marine management.

### Plastic is a Distraction

While addressing plastic pollution is undeniably important, a singular focus on this issue has the potential to distract from pressing challenges like overfishing and habitat destruction. Many stakeholders, from businesses to governments, have gravitated towards the plastic crisis as a visible, immediate issue. However, practices such as industrial trawling and dredging continue unchecked even within designated marine protected areas, highlighting a critical contradiction in current conservation efforts. Notably, the successful ban on sandeel fishing reflects a growing recognition of the need to tackle broader environmental concerns—yet the persistence of damaging fishing methods reveals that much work remains.

Proposing a ban on all towed fishing gear within three miles of the coast could mark a significant step towards safeguarding sensitive marine habitats while simultaneously benefiting local economies reliant on fisheries.

### Add a Dose of Ocean Optimism

Eco-anxiety, particularly prevalent among younger generations grappling with climate change, is increasingly common. The prospect of a profoundly altered planet can be daunting. Yet, it is essential to foster a sense of hope and optimism about the oceans. Healthy oceans are pivotal to life on Earth; without them, our atmosphere would become uninhabitable.

Celebrating stories of marine recovery—whether it be thriving coastal ecosystems or rebounding whale populations—can inspire action and engagement. By showcasing successful conservation efforts and the potential for positive change, we can motivate others to invest in our shared marine future.

In conclusion, the journey toward a more profound connection with, and understanding of, our oceans is essential. By emphasising education, conservation, and fostering optimism, we can inspire a new generation to cherish and protect these invaluable ecosystems.

### 📌 Reference Map

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/), [[4]](https://oceanconservationtrust.org/ocean-experiences/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park-2/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/), [[2]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4210304/), [[5]](https://oceanconservationtrust.org/project/national-marine-park/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://news.sky.com/story/plymouth-set-to-be-the-home-of-uks-first-national-marine-park-11808533), [[6]](https://www.marineresearchplymouth.ac.uk/plymouth)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/), [[7]](https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/news/plymouth-create-first-national-marine-park), [[4]](https://oceanconservationtrust.org/ocean-experiences/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park-2/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/), [[3]](https://news.sky.com/story/plymouth-set-to-be-the-home-of-uks-first-national-marine-park-11808533)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/), [[2]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4210304/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/science/five-ways-to-inspire-ocean-connection-reflections-from-my-40-year-marine-ecology-career/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4210304/> - A 2014 pan-European survey involving 10,106 participants from 10 nations examined public awareness and concerns about marine environmental impacts. The study found that pollution and overfishing were top priorities for policy development, with a strong association between the level of concern and informedness. Trust in information sources varied, being highest for academics and scholarly publications, and lowest for government or industry scientists. The findings highlight the public's perception of the immediacy of marine anthropogenic impacts, including ocean pollution, overfishing, and ocean acidification.
3. <https://news.sky.com/story/plymouth-set-to-be-the-home-of-uks-first-national-marine-park-11808533> - In September 2019, Plymouth Sound was designated as the UK's first National Marine Park, aiming to protect over 1,000 species of marine life and support the local economy. The initiative received support from city leaders, marine experts, and various partners. Lewis Pugh, UN Patron of the Oceans, expressed hope that Plymouth would lead the way in ocean protection, setting a standard for National Marine Parks in Britain and globally. The park seeks to balance conservation with existing industries like fishing and military ports.
4. <https://oceanconservationtrust.org/ocean-experiences/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park-2/plymouth-sound-national-marine-park/> - The Ocean Conservation Trust has been instrumental in promoting Plymouth Sound as the UK's first National Marine Park. Through education, research, and engagement, they aim to forge a new relationship between the city and the sea. Their efforts include seagrass restoration, protection work, and educational programmes. Plymouth Sound is recognised for its rich marine biodiversity, including over 1,000 species of fish and other marine life, and its historical significance in maritime heritage.
5. <https://oceanconservationtrust.org/project/national-marine-park/> - The Ocean Conservation Trust, in partnership with the National Marine Aquarium, plays a key role in the development of Plymouth Sound as the UK's first National Marine Park. Their conservation work focuses on engaging people with the ocean through education and engagement programmes, as well as seagrass restoration within the Sound. The park aims to connect people with the ocean, promote marine conservation, and support the local economy through sustainable practices.
6. <https://www.marineresearchplymouth.ac.uk/plymouth> - Plymouth is renowned for its marine and maritime research, innovation, trade, education, and leisure. The city's rich heritage and natural assets, including Plymouth Sound, have led to its designation as the UK's first National Marine Park. This status aims to forge a new relationship between the city and the sea, promoting conservation, education, and sustainable economic development.
7. <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/news/plymouth-create-first-national-marine-park> - In September 2019, Plymouth announced the creation of the UK's first National Marine Park in Plymouth Sound. The initiative aims to protect over 1,000 species of marine life and boost the local economy. Supported by city leaders, marine experts, and various partners, the park seeks to balance conservation with existing industries like fishing and military ports, and to showcase Plymouth's rich maritime heritage.