



**The Northern Ireland Marine Taskforce (NIMTF) is a coalition of non-government environmental organisations – it includes RSPB, Ulster Wildlife, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, WWF Northern Ireland, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, and Northern Ireland Environment Link. The NIMTF has the support of approximately 100,000 local people. We are working towards healthy, productive and resilient seas for Northern Ireland.**

**Northern Ireland Marine Task Force response to: [Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland: 10 Year Plan](#)**

Submitted: 12th January 2024

NIMTF thanks the Department for Economy for the opportunity to comment on their Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland for the next 10 years. It is crucial that alongside tourism expansion within Northern Ireland, there is an increasing appreciation of the role a well protected, thriving and sustainably managed marine environment can play in attracting visitors to this country.

NIMTF welcome the inclusion of previous policies connected to the marine environments for nature, climate and skill development such as the Draft Marine Plan for NI<sup>1</sup>, The Path to Net Zero Energy<sup>2</sup>, Valuing Nature - A Biodiversity Strategy for NI to 2020<sup>3</sup>, the Draft Green Growth Strategy for NI<sup>4</sup>, Unlocking NI's Outdoor Assets<sup>5</sup>, Skills Strategy for NI<sup>6</sup> and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022<sup>7</sup>. We are pleased to see that some of the outcomes from these pieces of legislation have been incorporated into the targets and outcomes of this draft strategy.

It is also positive to see reference to natural landscapes within this strategy, however NIMTF would advocate for greater ambition and presence of the marine environment, both in terms of its sustainable use regarding increased tourism and the need to profile our seas as a valued tourism asset. The marine environment provides us with multiple services and nature based solutions, from erosion prevention, waste-water treatment to cultural services such as tourism, recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits. It is therefore imperative that our seas remain in a healthy condition to tackle the twin nature and climate crisis and to support a thriving society, providing multiple recreational and wellbeing benefits for NI citizens and those visiting our shores. To reflect this, NIMTF have highlighted below some key points that should be incorporated into this strategy including; ambitious targets that will allow Northern Ireland to lead the way in reaping the societal benefits of the marine environment, whilst protecting our local seascapes and highlighting the shared marine space that will also support future tourism interests.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Marine%20Plan%20for%20NI%20final%2016%2004%2018.PDF>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Energy-Strategy-for-Northern-Ireland-path-to-net-zero.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Final%20Report%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20Biodiversity%20Strategy%20to%202020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Green%20Growth\\_Brochure%20V8.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Green%20Growth_Brochure%20V8.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tourismni.com/globalassets/business-development/event-industry-support/upcoming-events/2022/unlocking-the-outdoors/ppp/outdoor-experience-merged2.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Strategy-for-Northern-Ireland-Skills-for-a-10x-economy.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/31/contents/enacted>

<sup>8</sup> Exploring the transformative potential of citizen science in marine governance processes. McAteer, B. (Author). Jul 2022. Queen's University Belfast.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/shore-ni-learning-platform>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.seadeepni.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.seasearch.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mcsuk.org/what-you-can-do/join-a-beach-clean/>

Within the key strategic themes “Sustainability” (Theme 3) and “Attractive” (Theme 4) the marine environment can be incorporated to develop components of this strategy. We welcome that a cross-departmental approach with DAERA and other departments is being taken, yet there is still further work that could be spearheaded by the department of economy. When considering the metrics that are being used for these themes, there is no mention of the benefits of including or utilising Northern Ireland’s biodiversity. We are facing a twin nature and climate crisis and whilst we welcome the target of “*Greenhouse gas emissions 48% lower than baseline*”, there are no outcomes which are truly nature-focused. To address this we would welcome the inclusion of the following:

### Sustainability (Theme 3)

There is real potential to ignite a passion for our seas amongst members of the public and tourists by providing interactive, readily accessible opportunities and resources that facilitate knowledge building and support marine conservation. NIMTF would strongly encourage the involvement of citizens in citizen science projects, providing an opportunity to teach participants more about NI coastline’s and the marine species and habitats that live within our local seas. The role of citizen science in developing governmental policy has been highlighted through the work of Ben McAteer (2022)<sup>8</sup> and shows that programmes and projects can be an exceptional tool in gaining an understanding and comprehension of our local biodiversity, whilst also encouraging members of the public to get involved and build connections with the sea.

NIMTF members Ulster Wildlife have historical experience involving the public within citizen science based projects such as Shore NI<sup>9</sup> and Sea Deep<sup>10</sup> that focuses predominantly on increasing the public’s understanding of rocky shore assemblages and NI elasmobranchs. Currently operating UK & Irish citizen science projects include Marine Conservation Society’s (MCS) Seasearch<sup>11</sup> and Beach Cleans<sup>12</sup>; Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful’s (KNIB) Adopt A Spot<sup>13</sup>; marine mammal surveys through Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG)<sup>14</sup>; Citizen Sea’s Sea The Need<sup>15</sup>; Cuttlefish Conservation Initiative’s Project Sepia focusing on cuttlefish sightings<sup>16</sup>. Building on these projects could result in resources such as intertidal species and eggcase hunt signage present on our coastline, enabling not only local public, but wider tourists to learn about the marine diversity of our shores and contribute to data collection that will support wider conservation needs.

13 <https://www.keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.org/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=20>

14 <https://iwdg.ie/volunteers/>

15 <https://citizensea.org/>

16 <https://www.cuttlefishconservation.com/projects>

17 <https://nimtf.files.wordpress.com/2023/10/nimtf-response-carbon-budgets-targets-and-emissions-for-ni-consultation.pdf>

18 [Developing\\_UK\\_Seagrass\\_Carbon\\_Code\\_Summary\\_2023](https://www.naturebasedsolutionsinitiative.org/Developing_UK_Seagrass_Carbon_Code_Summary_2023) (naturebasedsolutionsinitiative.org)

19 [wwt-blue-carbon-route-map-2023.pdf](https://www.wwt-blue-carbon-route-map-2023.pdf)

20 [Blue Carbon Habitat Restoration in Northern Ireland - A Feasibility Study.pdf](https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/news/native-oyster-nursery-aims-save-species-extinction) (ulsterwildlife.org)

21 <https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/news/new-glenarm-nursery-set-release-800-million-oyster-larvae-boost-biodiversity-and-clean-local>

22  
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<https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/news/oyster-nursery-installed-belfast-harbour-help-improve-water-quality-and-boost-marine-life#:~:text=Belfast%20Harbour%2C%20in%20partnership%20with,quality%20and%20boost%20marine%20biodiversity.>

24 MANACA Report, 2023

25 <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-06-09/two-dolphins-make-lough-home-hundreds-of-miles-off-scottish-coast>

26 <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-09-06/whats-bringing-large-pod-of-dolphins-to-strangford-lough>

27 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-environment>

28 <http://www.rathlincommunity.org/page/heritage>

29 <https://www.marconheritage.com/portfolio-item/the-gobbins/>

30 <https://www.rspb.org.uk/days-out/reserves/rathlin-island>

31 <https://www.ireland.com/en-gb/magazine/built-heritage/the-gobbins/#:~:text=The%20cliffs%20at%20The%20Gobbins,to%20time%2C%20a%20peregrine%20falcon.>

32 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2022.pdf>

- On page 45 of the strategy, in relation to reducing carbon emissions and tackling climate change, it states:

*“Outdoor and nature-based attractions will play an important part in communicating a sustainable approach to visitors.”*

NIMTF welcomes the inclusion of outputs that prioritise the exploration of energy generation through renewable technologies to support the objectives within the NI Climate Act<sup>7</sup>. NIMTF have provided amendments to the recent consultation around tackling carbon emissions for NI<sup>17</sup> in relation to blue-carbon habitats in tackling the twin nature and climate crisis, where many of these habitats are found across Northern Ireland. Blue carbon habitats are habitats and species that contribute to carbon sequestration, the removal of carbon dioxide from the ocean, as this is a carbon sink from the atmosphere. Habitats and species that can deliver this include *kelp*, *seagrass*<sup>18</sup>, *saltmarsh*<sup>19</sup> and *native oyster reefs*<sup>20</sup>.

In order to meet the above stated task, it is important that the draft tourism strategy focuses on nature-based solutions that can be enjoyed by the public such as Ulster Wildlife’s native oyster nurseries at Bangor<sup>21</sup>, Glenarm<sup>22</sup> and recently Belfast Harbour<sup>23</sup>. A number of MPAs across Northern Ireland contain blue carbon habitats and species. We are currently waiting on the release of consultations from DAERA in the form of a Blue Carbon Action Plan and an MPA Strategy Review. These policies will provide guidance and management for the maintenance, creation and restoration of blue carbon habitats within the current MPA Network. This should build on the work that was done through NI’s Marine and Natural Capital Project (MANACA)<sup>24</sup>, which highlights the natural capital values given to blue carbon habitats in their role in carbon sequestration.

#### Attraction (Theme 4)

The seas around NI are home to a spectacle of incredible wildlife, from huge 10 metre long basking sharks, to swimming crabs and multi-coloured sea slugs. Even small interactions with marine animals, such as the presence of dolphins within Strangford Lough throughout the summer of 2023 has proven to draw crowds<sup>25, 26</sup>. However, there is still a perception that our local seas are dark and lifeless. There is therefore a real opportunity through this strategy to highlight the incredible wildlife wonders in NI’s seas and coastline<sup>27</sup>, whilst also raising awareness of biodiversity decline and the need to restore our marine environment. Linking the marine environment and our existing MPA network not only to tourism opportunities, but also to the ecosystem benefits it provides, such as providing mental health services, are one of many attributes that can be derived from this strategy considering the marine environment in more detail. These would also fit into the key focuses around the whole strategy that are highlighted below:

- Sustainability for the environment
- Benefiting communities
- Landscape, culture and heritage
- Increasing the value of tourism by 50% - 70% compared to 2019

<sup>33</sup> <https://rathlin360.com/life-raft/life-raft-objectives/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.wisescheme.org/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://nimtf.files.wordpress.com/2022/08/nimtf-response-management-measures-on-the-use-of-fast-craft-and-personal-watercraft-pwc-in-marine-protected-areas.docx-1.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.sharktrust.org/pages/faqs/category/angling-project>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.sharktrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=05617547-5bbe-4a26-845a-2c25747293c6>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.sharktrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f234c075-1bc5-433c-8037-84f6e6564e5a>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.sharktrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1fbeb6df-ad3d-45f9-b65c-5ed7f0cc02e8>

- On page 38, the Draft Tourism Strategy states:

*“With ever changing market demand for tourism product and experiences it is vital that the tourism industry remains innovative and a destination that champions its warm welcome, authentic stories, natural landscapes, and cultural assets.”*

It is therefore very important that we are highlighting the role of natural landscapes, including our coastal and marine seascapes as we move forward, especially as the majority of these are tied to culture and heritage for Northern Ireland - such as Rathlin Island<sup>28</sup> and The Gobbins<sup>29</sup>. Rathlin is the largest inhabited island in NI, steeped in culture and history but is also home to NI’s largest seabird colony; supporting many species such as puffins, guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, fulmars, as well as corncrakes<sup>30</sup>. The Gobbins meanwhile is the home to some fascinating geology, showcasing the basalt coastline of sedimentary rocks relating to the Triassic and Jurassic periods, bringing individuals interested in archaeology and fossil-hunting to this area. Similar to Rathlin, the Gobbins is host to Northern Ireland’s only mainland colony of puffins - but also home to kittiwakes, shags, guillemots, razorbills and the occasional peregrine falcon<sup>31</sup>; with sea tours available to look for marine mammals and seals. Northern Ireland’s natural landscape has been referred to within the document as a *“hidden gem”*, with the services provided by the natural environment present within the base section of the pyramid for services.

Culture and history are strongly intertwined with the marine environment and from the recent Environmental Statistics Report (2022)<sup>32</sup> it shows that 82% of the public across NI are fairly or very concerned with environmental impacts; of which climate change was second (26%) and loss of biodiversity fifth (9%). This shows a growing need for ocean literacy for the public to better understand the connection between climate change and the loss of our fantastic marine biodiversity. By combining the deep-rooted culture and historic connections communities have with our ocean, alongside the nature-based solutions and citizen science projects previously highlighted, then we can improve and maintain our marine biodiversity, whilst making our local seas more appealing to tourists and other visitors to our shores.

- On page 54 of the draft strategy, it states:

*“Research, insights and data analytics have allowed the sector to develop products aligned to market needs including digitisation and using new technologies to attract tourists, maturity of VR and IR and sector diversification, providing new and innovative experiences and activities for visitors and local communities alike.”*

One drawback of connecting people to our fascinating marine environment is its lack of accessibility. Due to costs and the challenging environment for many the sea is out of sight and therefore out of mind, with the true potential to engage tourists and NI citizens in our oceans often lost. Being able to connect with the marine environment, especially across our existing network of MPAs could be supported through the inclusion of digital technology such as VR would present a unique experience that allows visitors to grasp the unique marine life that we have in our local shores. This would allow visitors to immerse themselves in a *“multi-sensory experience to heightened connection and emotional engagement with the landscape, particularly the coast.”* Access to our seas further increases the potential of encouraging visitors to *“like being active in the outdoors or exploring the countryside; from the freedom of the outdoors whether through land or water-based activities to immersive attractions.”* Whether this comes through visitors accessing nearby sites via diving, or through the potential inclusion of VR to make our marine habitats more accessible; there is vast potential for inclusion of the marine environment moving forward.

## Sustainable marine tourism

Whilst it is important to platform the marine environment in future NI tourism strategies, it is vital all engagement is undertaken in a sustainable manner. It is of the utmost importance that we continue to protect our natural landscapes, species, and habitats, whilst balancing a potential increased strain from visitors around our coasts and at sea. This includes but is not limited to:

- Preventing an increase in litter and pollution around our coasts. Increased visitors have the potential to result in increased litter in important and protected sites throughout coastal areas. NIMTF members KNIB and MCS have worked previously to develop resources that engage people with this issue. As this strategy strives to increase tourism potential it also has a responsibility to support similar work that aims to minimise the impacts from likely visitor associated rubbish and litter.
- Invasive species control. For many local species in NI, the spread of invasive species is a high threat. For example, invasive species such as rats are a great risk to our local seabird species on island sites, preying on their young and reducing the rate of population recovery. RSPB's LIFE Raft project<sup>33</sup> is currently working to eradicate invasive rats and ferrets from Rathlin Island. If successful, this will have a positive impact for seabirds and result in the recovery of some of NI's most vulnerable species. However, it is now vital that the risk of invasive species spread is prevented going forward. Visitors to islands such as Rathlin have the potential to spread invasive species further, for example rats hidden in ferry passenger goods, carry ons and luggage. With increased visitors to Rathlin Island, the community and LIFE Raft partners such as RSPB must be supported through the roll out of robust biosecurity measures at sites such as the ferry terminal at Ballycastle. This and the role the Department of Economy could play in supporting this work should be considered within this strategy.
- There is training available for wildlife tour operator vessels to minimise disturbance to marine wildlife such as cetaceans, called WiSe Training<sup>34</sup>. This strategy should acknowledge and ensure any promoted wildlife tour vessels are WiSe certified. Increasing tourism in coastal areas may also result in increased fast craft usage (jet skis etc). It is vital any tourism that promotes the use of such activities is in line with DAERA's upcoming consultation on management measures on the use of fast craft and personal watercraft (PWC) in marine protected areas; which NIMTF have advocated for in our response<sup>35</sup>.
- Increased tourism may result in an increase in recreational angling for elasmobranch species in NI waters. All recreational angling users should be encouraged to follow the guidance set out by Shark Trust<sup>36</sup> when encountering elasmobranchs to ensure proper welfare of species is maintained through best practice for handling sharks<sup>37</sup>, skates and rays<sup>38</sup>; and for responsible shark, skate and ray angling<sup>39</sup>. An upcoming Elasmobranch Strategy will further develop best practice across Northern Ireland.

## Conclusions

Overall, NIMTF would advocate for this strategy to acknowledge the potential NI's marine environment has to support future tourism, highlighting in greater detail the inclusion and importance of the role that our seas can play in drawing visitors to our shores. The Northern Ireland marine environment is becoming increasingly busy, with many shared recreational and business related marine users, an MPA Network and a draft marine plan which will enable sustainable developments for Northern Ireland. However if undertaken in a sustainable manner which supports marine recovery, Northern Ireland has the opportunity to lead the way in tourism that showcases the amazing diversity of natural habitats and species found around our shores.

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