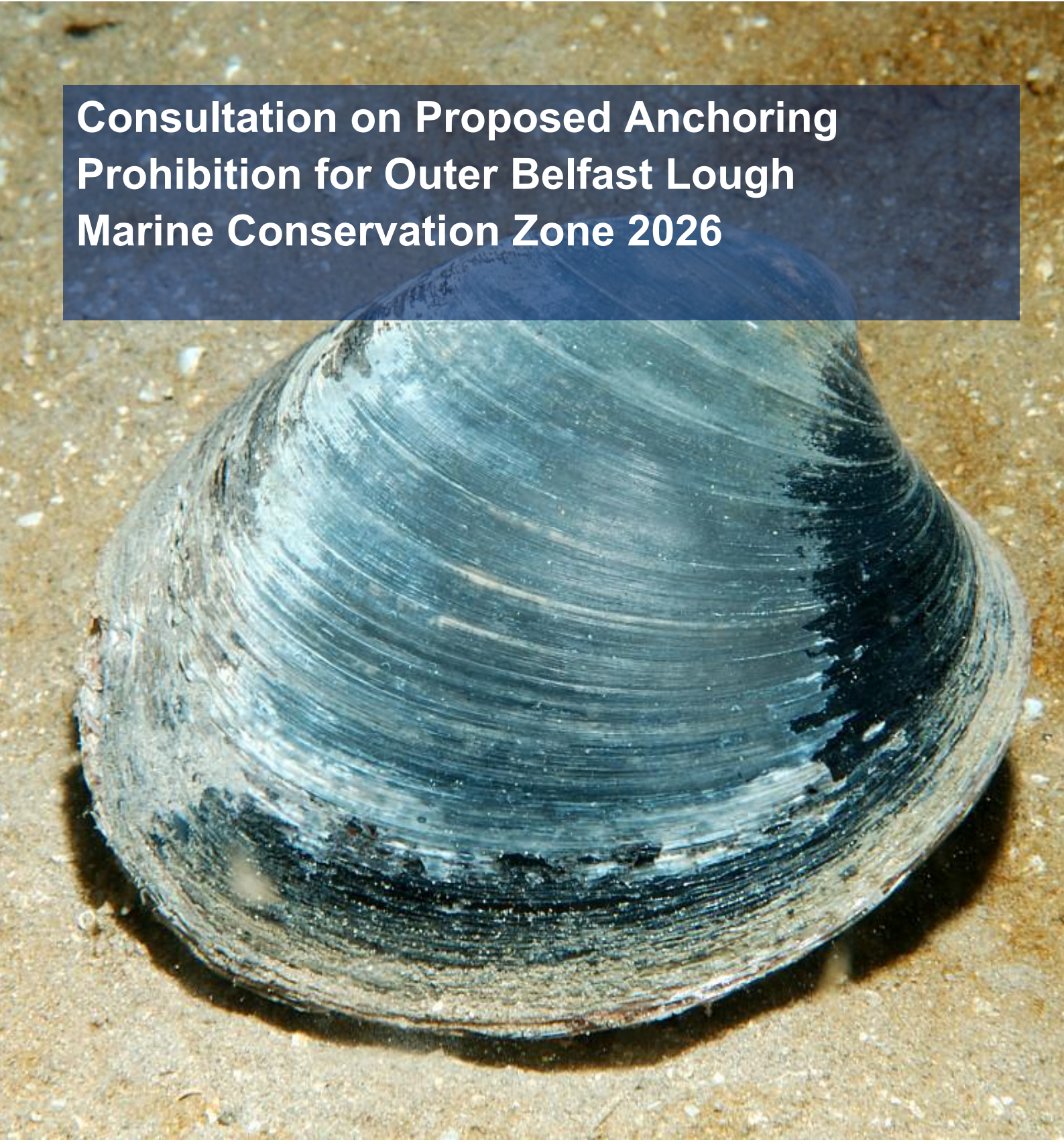
Consultation on Proposed Anchoring Prohibition for Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone 2026



Department of
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Contents

How to Respond **1**

Introduction **2**

Background **4**

Designation 4

Current Management 4

Why is Further Management Necessary? **5**

Furthering the Conservation Objectives of the MCZ **5**

Additional Benefits of Further Management in the MCZ 6

Proposed Management **6**

Consultation Questions **7**

Annex 1 ..... **8**

Glossary **9**

How to Respond

A list of the questions that the Department would welcome your response to are set out on page 7. You are invited to respond to this consultation online by completing the Citizen Space response template which can be accessed using the link below. Please supplement your response with any relevant supporting information, evidence and/or analysis.

Use this link to respond to the consultation questions.

If you are unable to complete the survey online, please contact the team by email: MarinePolicyTeam@daera-ni.gov.uk or call 028 9056 9424.

Front cover image credit: DAERA – Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*) on Subtidal sand.

Introduction

Marine Protected Areas are clearly defined geographic areas of the marine environment, designated for the purpose of protecting and restoring biodiversity.

Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) was designated under the **Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013** ('the Act') and DAERA (the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – 'the Department') is responsible for its management, monitoring and reporting progress against achieving its conservation objectives.

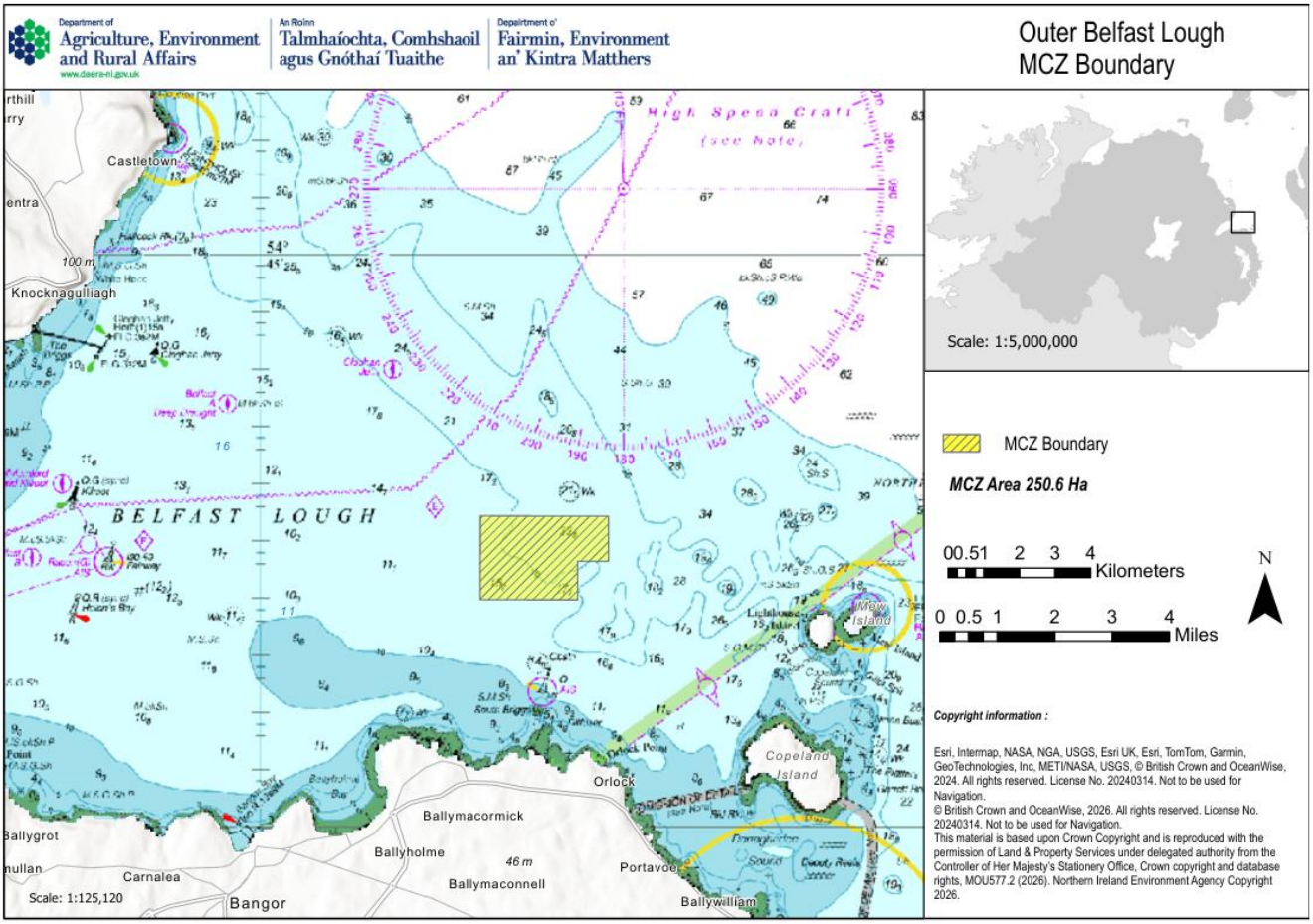


Figure 1: Location of the boundary of Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone (see Annex 1 for site coordinates).

The Outer Belfast Lough MCZ Condition Assessment Report 2025 ('the condition assessment report') is the most recent progress update for this site and is based on data gathered from surveys carried out between 2019 and 2025. This consultation document summarises its evidence; the full report can be read here.

The condition assessment report states that the designated features of the MCZ ('Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*)' and 'Subtidal (sublittoral) sand') remain in unfavourable condition and highlights that they are vulnerable to the effects of anchoring, primarily from commercial shipping.

The condition assessment report details evidence of large commercial ships frequently anchoring within the MCZ while waiting to enter Belfast Harbour. These are typically oil tankers and bulk carriers, 140-190m in length, with a gross tonnage of 12,000-25,000T. The majority of these are foreign flagged vessels (non-UK vessels) reflecting the international nature of maritime transport.

The Department considers that the impacts of anchoring are hindering the MCZ from achieving its conservation objectives. In such cases the Department has a legal duty under section 22 of the Act to work towards furthering the conservation objectives of an MCZ. Anchoring is currently unmanaged in Outer Belfast Lough; the Department proposes to act by making a byelaw that prohibits vessels from anchoring throughout the MCZ. Anchoring outside of the MCZ will be unaffected by the proposed byelaw. This is consistent with the Principles of Management as described in the Department's **Marine Protected Areas Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore region (2025-2030).** The MPA Strategy can be read here.

The proposal does not alter the boundary, features or conservation objectives of Outer Belfast Lough MCZ. The purpose of the proposed byelaw is to manage an identified pressure on the designated features within the existing protected area.

This consultation is intended to notify stakeholders of DAERA's proposal to make the byelaw and to gather views on how they may be affected by it to inform the final decision on the making of the proposed byelaw.

Background

Designation

Outer Belfast Lough MCZ was designated in 2016 using powers granted by the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013. The Designation Order can be read here.

Table 1: Outer Belfast Lough MCZ designated features and conservation objectives.

Protected Features	Conservation Objectives
Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*)	Recover to Favourable Condition
Subtidal (sublittoral) sand	Recover to Favourable Condition

Ocean quahog is a large, slow growing bivalve shellfish that can live up to 400 years if left undisturbed. It filters nutrients from the water and is an important food source to many species of fish including cod.

Subtidal sand provides a supportive habitat to many important species including Ocean quahog. Disturbance affecting this habitat can have a detrimental impact on dependent species and biodiversity throughout the MCZ.

Upon designation it became an offence under Section 33 of the Act for a person to damage Ocean quahog or Subtidal sand within the protected area.

At the time of designation, both features were assessed to be in unfavourable condition. The main pressure that contributed to this classification was seabed disturbance caused by activities such as fishing (dredging) and commercial anchoring. The **Conservation Objectives and Potential Management Options** document for the MCZ identifies pressures on the MCZ including anchoring and recommends the introduction of management measures. The full document was produced at the time of designation and can be read here.

Current Management

In 2023, the Department introduced **The Marine Protected Areas (Prohibited Methods of Fishing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022**. The regulations prohibited the use of bottom contacting fishing gear throughout the MCZ, removing a significant pressure on its features.

Why is Further Management Necessary?

The condition assessment report discusses the impacts of pressures, including anchoring, on the MCZ and the designated features' sensitivities to them (pp 21-26). The condition assessment report also presents evidence of the effects of anchoring in the MCZ (pp 44-46).

In summary, the Department has analysed the Automatic Identification System (AIS) data from vessels anchoring in Outer Belfast Lough between 2017 and 2021. During that period there were, on average, 14 incidents of anchoring within the MCZ boundaries per year, with vessels staying at anchor between 1 and 7 days. High-definition sonar images of the seabed taken in June and again in November 2023 (**Figure *2*** in Annex) detected both penetration and abrasion of the seabed as a result of anchoring. They reveal that such anchor scouring can remain visible for several months following the initial disturbance. The Department estimates that around 30% of the MCZ has been affected in this manner during the studied period.

The Department considers that such continued disturbance of the seabed is hindering the recovery of the designated species and achievement of the conservation objectives. Further management, therefore, through the prohibition of anchoring is appropriate to mitigate this physical pressure on the seabed.

Furthering the Conservation Objectives of the MCZ

The Department acknowledges that recovery of Ocean quahog may not be immediately evident. Ocean quahog grows slowly and there is no guarantee that juveniles will settle within the MCZ. Successful management of the MCZ may result in an increase in population outside of the MCZ boundary. It is also likely that improvement in the condition of Subtidal sand may occur sooner than that of Ocean quahog and that this can be taken as an indication that the MCZ is progressing towards its conservation objectives.

Evidence from Kaiser et al (2006), referenced in the condition assessment report, highlights that species in soft sediments, such as Ocean quahog, should recover once the pressure from fishing has been removed. It did not consider the effects of anchoring specifically. Anchoring has been shown to create similar pressures on features as fishing, however in the

absence of conclusive evidence, the Department is applying the precautionary principle. In this case, delaying action for the purpose of further evidence gathering risks deterioration in condition of the features, contrary to the conservation objectives for the MCZ. This is consistent with the Principles of Management as set out in the MPA Strategy. Further information on the precautionary principle can be found here .

Additional Benefits of Further Management in the MCZ

The Department has committed in its MPA Strategy to "**develop policy on management approaches for MPAs, including the potential role of HPMAs**" (highly protected marine areas).

The Department has been monitoring Outer Belfast Lough MCZ since 2015. The prohibition of anchoring in the area will result in an area of the seabed where all known physical pressures have been removed. Through continued monitoring, the Department will be able to observe the area as it responds to such a management approach and determine any wider benefits that result.

Evidence gained from the site's monitoring will inform future decisions regarding the potential role HPMAs may play in the Northern Ireland marine area.

Proposed Management

Outer Belfast Lough MCZ is situated within the internal waters of the United Kingdom that are adjacent to Northern Ireland. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United Kingdom, as the coastal state, has sovereignty over its internal waters and may regulate navigation within them. Foreign flagged vessels (non-UK vessels) must comply with all regulations of the coastal state when in internal waters. The Department may exercise the powers conferred by the Act for the purpose of protecting the Northern Ireland inshore region, which includes the internal waters.

The proposed byelaw will be made under section 26 of the Act to prohibit anchoring throughout the MCZ and prohibit a vessel from entering the MCZ unless its anchor is fully stowed and secured.

Failure to comply with the byelaw constitutes an offence contrary to section 32 of the Act.

Exceptions to offences under section 32 and 33 of the Act are detailed in section 34. The exceptions relating to the safety of any vessel and any activity done for the purpose of saving life will be particularly relevant. This byelaw will not affect a vessel's right to a safe haven when in distress or under *force majeure*.

The proposed byelaw will make provision for the Department to issue permits, authorising anchoring in the MCZ where necessary for scientific, conservation or other purposes relating to section 22 of the Act.

All vessels will be subject to the prohibitions, and the Department has the authority to enforce this byelaw on UK and non-UK vessels.

When the proposed byelaw has been confirmed, the boundary of the MCZ will be marked on the relevant Admiralty chart as a "no – anchoring" zone.

Consultation Questions

1. **Do you support the prohibition of anchoring in Outer Belfast Lough MCZ?**

2. **Is there a reason as to why a vessel must anchor in Outer Belfast Lough MCZ?**

3. **Will you be impacted by this byelaw?**

4. **Do you consider that you, or any group you represent, will be impacted by this proposed byelaw from an equality perspective? If so, please provide details.**

5. **Do you have any further comments or evidence you can provide related to the proposed prohibitions?**

Annex 1

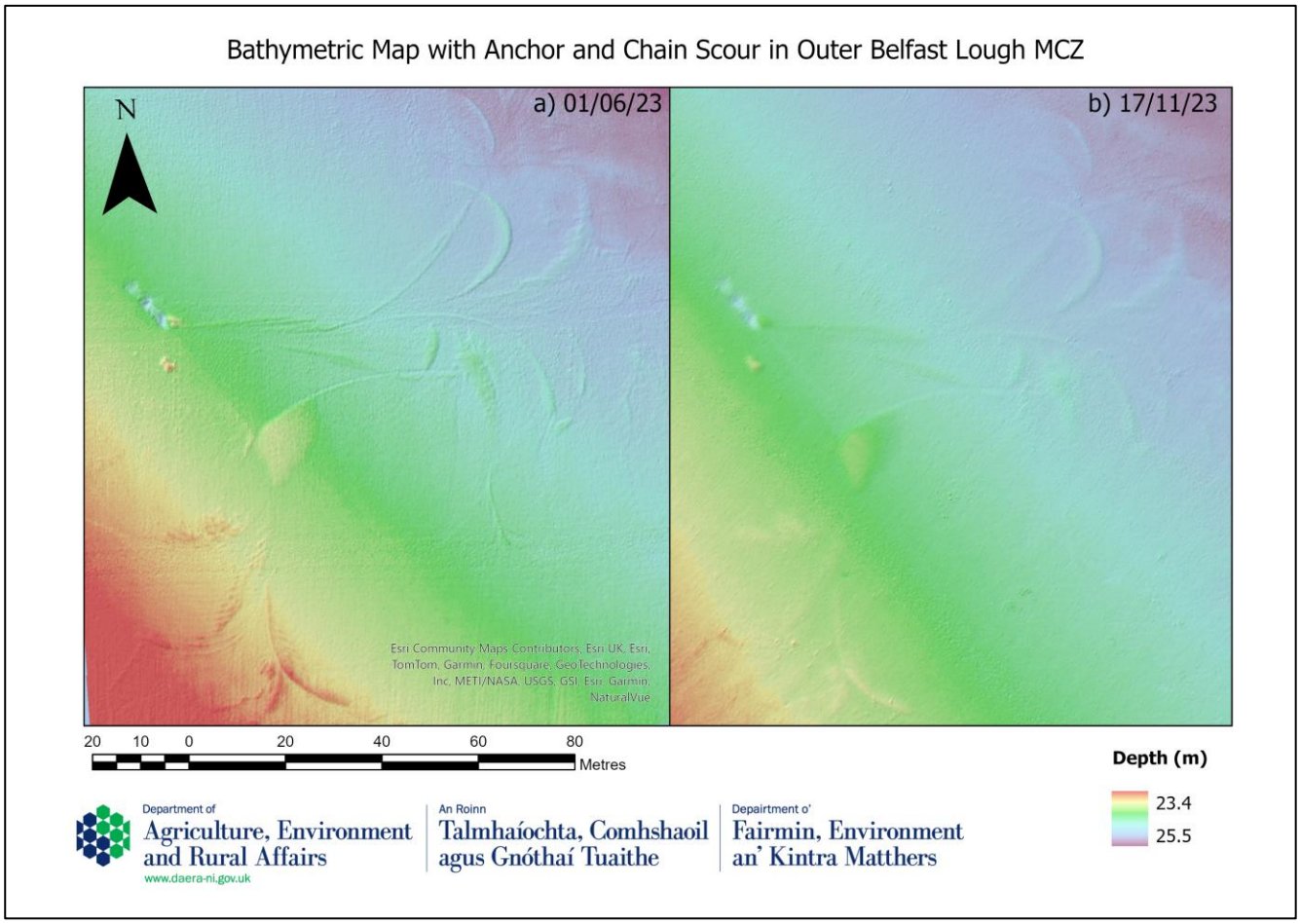


Figure 2*:* Comparison sonar images of an anchor scour within Outer Belfast Lough MCZ, taken 5 months apart.

Table 2: Outer Belfast Lough MCZ coordinate points, starting in the north-western corner and moving in a clockwise direction.

Point	N	W
A	54° 42.711'	5° 36.670'
B	54° 42.707'	5° 34.734'
C	54° 42.315'	5° 34.733'
D	54° 42.316'	5° 35.203'
E	54° 41.978'	5° 35.203'
F	54° 41.979'	5° 36.672'

Glossary

Conservation objectives – set out the broad ecological aims of a site. They specify the overall target for the species and/or habitat types for which a site is designated, in order for it to contribute to maintaining or reaching favourable conservation status/ condition of the habitats and species concerned, at the national, the biogeographical or the European level.

Designated Feature – term used to describe the habitat/ species/ geological/ geomorphological/ large-scale feature which is designated within the site.

HPMA – Highly Protected Marine Area.

Internal waters – as defined in UNCLOS Article 8, internal waters are those waters on the landward side of a State's territorial sea. The State has full sovereignty over its internal waters.

MPA – Marine Protected Area. Describes a geographic area of the marine environment which has been designated for specific conservation objectives in relation to the features present, in accordance with the Marine Act, the Ramsar Convention, the Habitats Regulations and the Environment Order.

MCZ – Marine Conservation Zone. Designated under the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013.

Pressure – mechanisms through which an activity has an effect on a feature.

Seabed penetration and abrasion – Penetration and/or disturbance of the substrate below the surface of the seabed, including abrasion, has been defined as: "The disturbance of sediments where there is limited or no loss of substrate from the system. This pressure is associated with activities such as anchoring, taking of sediment/geological cores, cone penetration tests, cable burial (ploughing or jetting), propeller wash from vessels, certain fishing activities, e.g. scallop dredging, beam trawling… Abrasion relates to the damage of the seabed surface layers (typically up to 50cm depth). Activities associated with abrasion can cover relatively large spatial areas…".

For further information:

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