

| What? | How? | Why? | Where? |
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| Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) | Designated under the European Habitats Directive using only scientific evidence. | To protect rare and vulnerable animals, plants and habitats with increased protection and management. | 81 around the UK already with marine components |
| Special Protection Areas (SPAs) | Designated under the European Birds Directive using only scientific evidence. | To help protect and manage areas which are important for rare and vulnerable birds because they use them for breeding, feeding, wintering or migration | 73 around the UK with marine components. |
| Natura 2000 Network | Designated under the European Habitats Directive. | All European SACs and SPAs combined together to form an ecologically coherent network i.e. they work together to provide more benefits than an individual area could on its own. | The network of Natura 2000 sites is spread throughout Europe, from Finland in the north to the Canary Islands in the south. |
| Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)/ Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) | Set up under national legislation; SSSIs under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and ASSIs under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) 1985. | To protect the best examples of the UK's plants, animals or geological features. | Primarily land based but some sites extend below the low water mark. SSSIs occur in England, Wales and Scotland; ASSIs exist in Northern Ireland only. |
| Ramsar Sites | Designated under the Convention of Wetlands of International Importance, agreed in Ramsar, Iran, | To protect wetlands defined as 'areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, | International. In May 2000 there were 1027 worldwide, 157 of which were in the UK. As well as covering |

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| | in 1971. | permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed 6 metres' | areas of wet land they may also incorporate coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than 6m at low tide lying within the wetland. |
| Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs)/Scottish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)/Possible Northern Irish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) | New designation introduced through the UK Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010. Uses scientific and socio-economic evidence. | To protect nationally important marine wildlife, habitats, geology & geomorphology. Sites will be selected to protect a wide range of marine wildlife, not just those that are rare or protected. | Can be designated anywhere in English, Scottish and Welsh inshore & offshore waters. Northern Ireland are anticipated to follow suit for their territorial waters. |