

Environmental Audit Committee: Sustainable Seas- Summary

House of Commons - Committee Summary



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Environmental Audit Committee

Sustainable Seas

5 November 2018

Witnesses:

- Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- Rt Hon Claire Perry MP, Minister of State for Energy and Clean Growth, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Overview

The committee examined the UK's international contribution to sustainability in the oceans and heard how cross-departmental co-operation was helping the Government develop more cohesive policy.

Blue Belt Programme

The chair, Mary Creagh (Lab, Wakefield) opened by asking Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for his comments on evidence that the FCO was blocking the designation of the South Sandwich Islands (SSI) as an area to be aligned with international standards for Marine Protection Areas (MPAs). Ahmad replied that the Government would be coming out with a decision on the South Sandwich Islands "very shortly" but that they should be "very proud of the Blue Belt programme", claiming the Government had achieved over 3 million square kilometres of its designated target. He stated that the funding of £20 million by 2020 was protected and they were working with the Overseas Territories (OT) to deliver "ground-breaking" MPAs. He said that he could not confirm what level of funding there would be after 2020 but agreed with the chair on the need for sustainable funding. He explained that the FOC was working across Government departments to create sustainable OT economies, citing the Department for International Development's (DFID) infrastructure support projects.

Management Plans

In reply to the chair, Ahmad said that it was "not the case" that territories such as St Helena did not have management plans and the FOC had deployed specialist to help support those management plans.

The chair said the committee had heard expert testimony that there was not enough monitoring of MPAs in OT despite the availability of satellite technology and asked why this was the case. Ahmad challenged this by stating that CIFAS, who managed the MPAs for the

Government, worked with the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) to support the OT in this regard. He told the committee that key territories covered by satellite technology included the Ascension Islands, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). He added that the Government had also deployed the Darwin Plus programme to help marine projects across all 14 OTs.

Commercial Fishing in the South Sandwich Islands

James Gray (Con, North Wiltshire) pointed out that there had been no commercial fishing in the SSI in the past 25 years and wondered what would be the purpose of "conceding to the NGOs' demands to ban it" and asked if this ban would include the scientific research teams which were licensed to do three fishing trips per year in those waters. Ahmad replied that the current MPA designations gave "a clear priority to nature conservation" and said he understood concerns about a total ban needed "proper consideration". He told the committee that the current MPA ensured that research could be carried out, which was "very valuable", but reiterated that he did not want to "pre-empt any decision the Foreign Secretary may make in this regard".

Zac Goldsmith (Con, Richmond Park) asked Ahmad to confirm that "not a single NGO" was asking for a ban on the research fishing trips. Ahmad replied that he understood "various representations" had been made "including a total designation" but that his understanding was that the NGOs were not aiming to prevent such research taking place in the SSI.

UN High Seas Treaty

Goldsmith asked how the UK Government was galvanising support for a legally-binding agreement in the negotiations of the UN High Seas Treaty. Ahmad replied that the UK had shown commitment in various ways, such as launching additional funding for the Commonwealth Marine Economies (CME) programme across 17 small island states.

Goldsmith said the committee had heard testimony of the need for a new body with oversight of the high seas, particularly in relation to deep-sea mining and asked Rt Hon Claire Perry MP, Minister of State for Energy and Clean Growth, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), if the Government would support this position in negotiations. Perry replied that Government policy was "developing quite rapidly" and that BEIS had taken the lead to coordinate across Government to evaluate the economic potential and the "base line for the scientific environmental impact".

MPA Designation

Goldsmith stated that the FCO and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had announced an ambition to designate a third of the world's oceans as MPAs by 2030 and asked Ahmad what level of support could be expected from the UK Government for enforcement in those areas. Ahmad replied that the 24 per cent of this target had already been achieved and the Government were "committed totally" to the target of 30 per cent by 2030.

Goldsmith said there had been reports from the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) that suggested that negotiations with other countries had stalled in relation to new MPAs and asked what plans the Government had to ensure Norway,

Russia and China in particular committed to this expansion. Ahmad replied that the Government were continuing "at all levels" "to implore upon them to subscribe to this particular target" as "inaction was not an option".

Weddell Sea

Gray asked whether it was right that Norway, Russia and China had "blocked the designation of the Weddell Sea as an MPA" at recent CCAMLR negotiations. Ahmad explained that the FCO had been a "long-standing advocate for MPAs to be introduced in Antarctica" but that they "needed the agreement of all concerned" and they would continue to lobby in that respect.

The chair wondered if witnesses were "not a little surprised" that Norway were trying to disrupt conservation efforts in Antarctica and asked Ahmad what diplomatic resource he was putting in to overcome those barriers. He assured the committee that he would be raising the issue with the foreign minister of Norway and said that they were working closely with Norway on various initiatives. The chair asked if it was "simply a commercial fishing issue for Norway". Ahmad agreed that that was one issue, especially in the general context of fishing policy post-Brexit.

New Oceans Strategy

Rt Hon Robert Goodwill (Con, Scarborough and Whitby) asked Ahmad why the New Oceans strategy did not include MPAs, the Blue Belt programme or the 30 per cent MPA target. Ahmad replied that the strategy was "still to be issued" and that although the FCO held "the pen as a coordinator", seven departments were involved. He reiterated his assurance on the 30 per cent target which "would be reflected in the strategy" and added that it was "his earnest hope" that this would be out "by the end of the year". When pressed by Goodwill, he said that the FCO's commitment to the Blue Belt initiative in the OT would also be included in the strategy.

Goodwill wondered if there were problems coordinating so many departments but Ahmad reassured the committee that there had been "a real commitment across all departments" to the New Oceans strategy.

Perry said she had seen "an accelerating focus on the oceans" and that it had been "unprecedentedly easy" to put together a joint departmental funding bid for plastics innovation to offer at the Commonwealth summit.

Deep-Sea Mining

Mr Philip Dunne (Con, Ludlow) said that the committee had evidence from the International Seabed Authority (ISA) of richer deposits of minerals under the sea than are available on land from conventional extraction. He also alluded to evidence from Greenpeace of substantial quantities available from recycling things like mobile phones and asked if the Government saw the necessity of deep-sea mining. Perry replied that there were reports that deep-sea mining could be worth up to £40 billion to the UK economy over the next 30 years but that there was "an unknown environmental impact", which meant that BEIS coordination was "vital" for developing "better regulations" within the UK's 200-mile nautical area.

Dunne said it seemed inconsistent that the Government would be asked to provide regulations for deep-sea mining in the knowledge that there was "no intent" to undertake it within the UK's nautical area. Perry explained that the UK, which had licences for deep-sea mining in the Pacific Ocean, would aim to have domestic regulatory policy in place by 2019 which could then be extended internationally.

Goodwill pointed out that the UK had already been extracting aggregates within its territorial waters which had "not been an environmental success". Perry agreed that there was an argument that the UK had "to do better to regulate in this particular area" and have "a joined-up approach".

Dunne asked how the Government was going to "keep ahead of the contractors" when the technology was still developing. Perry replied that the UK was one of the leaders in polar marine exploration, aided by £200 million of Government funding, which meant they were doing work the contractors were not doing. She said that the recent IPPC report had illustrated the level of UK scientific contribution focusing on the impact of oceans and coastal communities. She explained that BEIS was working closely with the UK science base to understand what was needed to carry out this work as well as with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) to understand whether a formal research bid was needed to support work in this area.

Ahmad said that the FCO was working closely with ISA to build on the issue of expertise and to focus discussion on how to regulate jurisdictions beyond national boundaries. In reply to Dunne, Perry said that if the UK could establish the "gold standard" of environmental principles it could have a very important leadership role and stressed that there was "a really important economic opportunity as well". Ahmed argued that it was important to set out the framework for the deep-sea mining industry while it was small. In reply to the chair, Perry said that the UK had sponsored two successful applications for UK Seabed Resources Ltd at the ISA since 2013.

Plastics

Geraint Davies (Lab (Co-op), Swansea West) stated that under the Green Growth Strategy, the Government had aimed to have zero avoidable plastic by 2050 yet the UN had said that by then there would be as much plastic as fish in the sea and asked whether the Chancellor should have done much more to provide fiscal incentives to solve this massive problem. Perry replied that the UK was seen internationally "as leading the charge on plastics" but would like to see more "working at the source of the problem", primarily Africa and Asia. Davies argued that Government had to have higher ambitions at home, such as taxing single-use plastics. Perry rejected that idea and insisted the UK Government was being "held up as a first-mover in this space". She cited the example of a recycling company close to her constituency of Swindon which the Government had sponsored to develop a unit the size of a shipping container that turned any form of plastic into feedstock, reducing the need for fossil fuels. She argued that it was important to make decisions that did not have unintended consequences and were good for the long term. Davies asked if she would "at least accept" that plastic manufacturers should pay for the recycling, 90 per cent of which is currently paid by the council tax payer. She agreed that there was much more companies could do but that "ultimately" consumers had a choice and had become "a nation of single-use plastic consumers".

Davies asked Ahmad what the Government was doing to support international schemes. Ahmad replied that the Government had launched the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance which now had 20 participating members, supported with £66.4 million of funding to boost global research and help small island states.

Stockholm Convention

Davies asked what the Government was doing to ensure the Stockholm Convention was complied with and cited the example of harmful PCBs. Ahmad replied that the Government was committed to removing all PCBs by 2025 and had also pledged to reduce the persistent organic pollutants (POPs) by 2030. The chair asked him to clarify how they were going to get rid of them. Ahmad said he would write to the committee to clarify.

Hinkley Point

In reply to Davies, Perry said she would write to the committee on any work being done in BEIS on concerns of possible radioactive pollutants in the tons of mud being removed from Hinkley Point to South Wales.

Climate Change

Kerry McCarthy (Lab, Bristol East) asked if Perry had been disappointed that there had been nothing in the Budget about climate change. She disagreed and pointed out there had been an increase in the Industrial Strategy Challenge Funds which would be used in projects like the industrial de-carbonisation of clusters, that the carbon floor price had been frozen and that Business Energy Efficiency funding had also been increased.

McCarthy raised the IPCC's warning that action had to be taken within the next 12 years and that the UK was not on track to reduce carbon emissions by 2050. Perry argued that the UK was 90 per cent of where it needed to be against 1990 levels and was "confident" we would get there, although she agreed they did have to do "more". McCarthy voiced worries based on witnesses that there was "an astonishing level of ignorance" in DEFRA about the carbon footprint of agriculture. Perry said she thought it was "front and centre" of policymaking at DEFRA.

McCarthy said that the Committee on Climate Change had criticised the Clean Growth Strategy for lacking detail and said that it would only have "a modest impact" on emissions. Perry replied that they were continuing to put details into all of the policies and said she would write to the committee with the list.

Sustainable Fisheries

Ryan stated that the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) did not want decision-making to be in the hands of the certifier alone and asked Perry if she agreed. Perry replied that "personally" anything that supported "transparency and quality" would have her "full support" but that she did not feel qualified to comment. Ryan commented that it was "worrying" that there was "a lack of joined-up working".

Ryan asked Ahmad what the Government was doing to ensure certification schemes run by the MSC and the International Fishmeal and Fish Oil Organisation (IFFOO) were compliant

with the objectives of the MPAs. Ahmad agreed with Perry that it was an area where DEFRA were leading. He explained that they were consulting with the WWF and over 40 other organisations in developing the New Oceans Strategy.

Ryan stated that she did "not think it was OK" for the witnesses to ask her to "ask DEFRA" for information which also impinged on the policy area of BEIS and FOC even if DEFRA were "taking the lead" on them. Ahmad agreed that she was right to raise that and said that he accepted the principle of "joined-up thinking" and took her comments "on board". Ryan pointed out that the MSC had been required to make changes to its review following criticisms from NGOs and argued that it was something BEIS and FOC should look at.

Brexit

In conclusion, the chair asked whether the UK would stay in the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) after Brexit. Perry replied that "it would depend on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations" but that the ETS was "the best scheme out there".

You can view the session on Parliament TV [here](#).