



Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation Comments on the NPWS Porcupine Shelf and Southern Canyons SAC Justification Document

05/11/2024

1. Summary

The following document outlines the KFO's comments on *the NPWS' Porcupine Shelf and Southern Canyons SAC Justification Document* provided to the KFO on the 10 October 2024 by the secretariat of the Designated Areas Appeals Advisory Board (DAAAB).

From our perspective, NPWS has failed to provide any evidence to support the delineation of the proposed SACs. The document is largely a repeat of the limited information contained in the original *Notices of Intention to Designation* and a literature review of deep-sea reefs, which has been copied directly from the *NPWS Irish Wildlife Manual 152: Reef Habitat in Irish Offshore Waters – A Synthesis of Current Knowledge*.

The only new information in the document is the statement that, according to the European Commission, Ireland does not currently have sufficient designations of *Reef* habitat to meet the EU requirements. The current proposed designations appear to be an attempt to meet the arbitrary threshold required regardless of the quality and availability of supporting evidence. This does not seem an appropriate justification for the delineation of the proposed SACs and contrary to specified criteria for such designations as described in Annex III of the Habitats Directive.

2. Introduction

The introduction to the document appears to indicate that the designation of the two Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) was made in response to a call from the European Commission (COM) to increase the designations of *Reef* habitat in Irish waters. The COM indicated that national lists of SACs that contained less than 20% of the total national resource were considered insufficient. In 2009, it was noted that Ireland had insufficient levels of designation for several marine habitats and species, including for *Reefs*. In 2016, Ireland was instructed by the European Commission to conduct further research to identify further offshore reefs for designation as SACs. As a result, the SeaRover programme was developed.

The document does not provide estimates of the total *Reef* habitat in Ireland, nor the percentage already included in SACs prior to the proposed designations. It also does not provide wider European or global estimates, which are required to assess the value of the site for conservation of *Reefs*. This information is legally required as part of the designation process according to Annex III Stage 1 of the Habitats Directive.

3. Porcupine Shelf SAC

The text on the Porcupine Shelf SAC provides a brief overview of the site. It is unclear where the figure of 65,000 km², which is suggested as the area of the proposed SAC is derived. Measurement of the proposed area using GIS indicates an area of c. 14,718 km² as detailed in the KFO report. For comparison, the island of Ireland is 84,421 km², indicating that the figure provided by NPWS is incorrect. The remainder of the text appears to be identical to the text included in the original *Notice of Intention to Designate*. The text does not include any evidence to support the delineation of the

proposed SACs. The text does also not refer to the additional data referred to by NPWS in the rejection letter sent to the KFO on the 12 February 2024.

4. Southern Canyons SAC

The text on Southern Canyons SAC also appears to be near identical to the text included in the original *Notice of Intention to Designate*. As with the proposed Porcupine Shelf SAC there appears to be an error in the calculation of the area of the proposed Southern Canyons SAC. It is described as approximately 24,000 km² but, as detailed in the KFO report, measurement of the proposed area using GIS indicates an area of c. 14,448 km². The text does also not refer to the additional data referred to by NPWS in the rejection letter sent to the KFO on the 12 February 2024. Whilst referring to the thalwegs (lowest point in a valley) of the undersea canyons, the text states that the SAC boundaries have been designed to encompass this unique habitat, which is exceptional in a European context. This is the only stated reason for the delineations of either of the SACs in the entire document. However, it is important to note that thalwegs are merely a bathymetric feature in soft sediment (muddy slope) and cannot be considered *Reef* habitat.

5. Remaining text pages 7-22

Following the two sections on the proposed SACs there are sixteen pages of general text about deep-sea reefs and about the species that may be found associated with this type of habitat. There are few specific references to the proposed SACs and no further justification for their delineation is provided. The text appears to be a literature review. A simple web search revealed that the text is copied directly from the *NPWS Irish Wildlife Manual 152: Reef Habitat in Irish Offshore Waters – A Synthesis of Current Knowledge*, which was published on the NPWS website in September 2024. It is not clear why NPWS copied sixteen pages of this report into their justification document as the information is largely irrelevant.

6. Conclusion

Similar to the report's introduction, the conclusions are focussed largely on meeting targets set by the EU and not on the actual evidence to support the designations. It is increasingly clear to the KFO that the sizing and delineation of the proposed SACs is not based on scientific evidence but on the desire to reach an arbitrary threshold set by the EU.