

Making more just marine trade-off decisions in England

Policy Briefing: Resilience of Coastal Communities (ROCC) Project

England's seas are among the most intensely used worldwide, requiring complex trade-offs among sectors, stakeholders, and marine ecosystems. Based on interviews and a workshop with marine managers, this policy briefing examines how trade-offs are navigated in England's marine decision-making processes and recommends ways to improve their equity and effectiveness.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Some trade-offs are invisible to decision-makers

- Social impacts and thus trade-offs are underrepresented due to data gaps and biases in consultation processes
- Trade-offs among identified impacts are addressed implicitly rather than through systematic and transparent assessment.

2. Decision-makers lack approaches to navigate trade-offs

- Environmental legislation provides clear mandates for decision-makers while principles for determining the acceptability of social trade-offs are vague.
- There are limited tools to explicitly support trade-off decision-making.

3. Meaningful stakeholder participation is challenging

- Consultations do not reach all stakeholders and favour those that are well-resourced.
- Power for deliberating and deciding trade-offs remains centralised.
- Final decisions on trade-offs can be opaque, even when processes are technically transparent.

4. Cumulative trade-offs are unaddressed

- Piecemeal, sector-by-sector approaches mean trade-offs can have unacceptable cumulative effects on vulnerable social groups, which can go unrecognised.

5. Lack of social compensation in marine context

- While environmental compensation mechanisms exist, there are a lack of formalised mechanisms for compensating social losses for displacement and livelihood impacts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct systematic trade-off analysis. Invest in social evidence and evaluate the full range of environmental, social and cumulative trade-offs of marine decisions and development.

2. Establish thresholds for unacceptable trade-offs that define environmental boundaries and social foundations that should not be breached.

3. Facilitate stakeholder deliberation of trade-offs and make final decisions transparent. Address access barriers and use participatory tools to empower stakeholders to weigh up costs and benefits and propose compromises. Explain the reasoning for final trade-off decisions.

4. Investigate formal mechanisms for social compensation. Rather than relying on voluntary measures, develop compensation for direct and indirect effects of lost marine access and livelihood opportunities.

5. Reform marine planning. Move beyond policy objectives to guide others' decisions towards spatial and non-spatial planning that considers diverse trade-offs, cumulative effects and stakeholder vulnerabilities.