

# An ocean of opportunities

Government policy needs to embrace the role of blue carbon in confronting climate change

BY SALLY-ANN HART MP

One of the greatest threats facing the planet, particularly coastal areas and communities, is the worsening rate of climate change. As a UK Member of Parliament of a coastal community – beautiful Hastings and Rye on the UK’s south coast – I am only too aware of the potential threat that climate change has on the preservation and protection of coastal communities.

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for the Ocean, I also understand and recognise first-hand the invaluable and vital role that the ocean plays for biodiversity and habitat, climate and environment, energy, sustainability and people’s wellbeing. The ocean not only mitigates and combats some of the greatest dangers of climate change, by storing and holding carbon for thousands of years, but it also has a significant part to play in advanced marine technological research and sustainable development.

The power of the ocean in combating climate change cannot

be understated, and I was delighted that the APPG for the Ocean’s first inquiry examined the role of ocean-based solutions and blue carbon in tackling climate change. Our inquiry report, *The Ocean: Turning the Tide on Climate Change*, was published towards the end of 2022 and called for the UK government to prioritise and facilitate investment in blue carbon and ocean-based solutions.

I am pleased that the UK has ambitious net zero targets and is advocating for the 30by30 target, to meaningfully protect at least 30% of the UK and overseas territory waters by 2030. Yet, I believe that there is more that can be done to ensure that the UK is a world leader in ocean protection, preservation and management. The ocean is one of our greatest environmental assets, and if we do not preserve and protect it, we run the risk of increasingly devastating climate change consequences.

## Ocean importance

Although the ocean is a significant player in mitigating climate change, its role is usually viewed as passive,

rather than active. It occupies more than 70% of the planet’s surface area, produces around 50% of the oxygen we breathe and it is estimated that the ocean has absorbed 25–30% of all carbon dioxide emissions caused by human activity, making it the largest carbon sink in the world. However, despite this, the power of the ocean is often overlooked, and discussions around climate change and carbon stores usually refer to land-based solutions, such as forests and trees. While we cannot deny the importance of land-based solutions, and the devastating impact of destruction of these solutions, such as deforestation, it is vital to also recognise the significant role of the ocean, and blue carbon solutions.

Only by holistically taking advantage of the potential benefits of all decarbonisation methods, including those presented by the ocean and blue carbon, can climate change and its negative consequences be truly tackled.

Part of the reason why blue carbon solutions are overlooked is due to the lack of understanding, research and data on the ocean,

particularly the deep ocean. There is a scarcity of evidence and scientific understanding of the ocean and blue carbon habitats, compared with other forms of decarbonisation, and it is vital that this knowledge gap is bridged. This is partially due to a lack of long-term funding, but also due to a lack of government attention and support, especially towards the more complex and less understood types of blue carbon habitats, such as ocean-based carbon dioxide removal approaches.

The APPG’s inquiry report therefore called on the government to implement a number of key recommendations. These included restoring the UK’s blue carbon habitats, such as salt marsh and seagrass, adopting a code of conduct, prioritising funding into ocean-based carbon dioxide removal approaches, and include blue carbon habitat mapping in the UK’s Exclusive Economic Zone. Additionally, the APPG has called on the government to create a Minister for the Ocean role, to fill the ministerial gap as no one is exclusively and directly responsible for all ocean issues.

## Taking action

Since the publication of this report last year, I am delighted to see that the government has echoed a number of our key recommendations in its Environmental Improvement

Plan 2023. Specifically, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs highlighted the need to protect habitats from bottom-towed fishing gears and made a commitment to fill the evidence gaps that hinder the inclusion of salt marsh and seagrass habitats into the UK greenhouse gas emissions inventory. These directly echo the APPG’s recommendations, and we’re pleased to see that the UK government is recognising the significant potential of the ocean in the overall decarbonisation agenda. However, more progress can be made.

In July, the first three marine areas in England received the highest level of protection and became Highly Protected Marine Areas. This was another of the APPG’s key recommendations and ensures that some of the most precious marine species and blue carbon habitats are protected. This kind of protection will ultimately support our ambitions by enabling more effective blue

carbon storage and sequestration and preservation of biodiversity. This is a significant step forward in ocean policy and marine conservation, and I am encouraged to see the UK government engage with the APPG and our report’s recommendations and advance with such progressive and sustainable actions. These

policies, which were laid out in the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 (but fully actioned in July), also show where the future of ocean policy is heading under this government, which encompasses a

holistic and long-term vision of ocean preservation and decarbonisation targets.

This year’s World Ocean’s Day theme, on 8 June, was ‘Planet Ocean: tides are changing’. And in both public perception and in UK parliament, the tides are indeed changing. Across parliament there is greater understanding and knowledge of the significant benefits that the ocean offers, and I hope to see this reflected in public consciousness and support for ocean protection.

These changes in government policy reflect this greater understanding and changing tides, and I look forward to working with the APPG for the Ocean, the UK government and ocean stakeholders to ensure that blue carbon habitats are restored and ocean-based solutions are funded. To protect coastal communities, restore marine ecosystems, combat climate change and to meet the UK’s net zero targets, the answer can be found in the bottom of the ocean. Nature is the most cost-effective solution in combating climate change as well as providing added value. We must unleash her power. ■

**Sally-Ann Hart is the Conservative Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye, and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ocean.**



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Allonby Bay in the Irish Sea was one of the first areas to be designated as a Highly Protected Marine Area



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