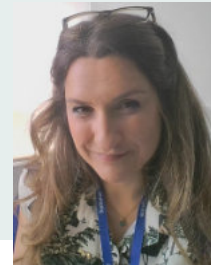


UK marine economy:

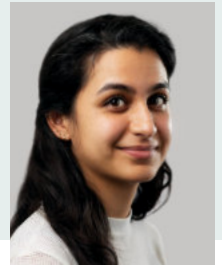
Where environmental recovery can meet economic ambition



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Can economic development really go hand in hand with environmental enhancement?

For too long, economic growth and environmental protection have been treated as competing priorities. In practice, this has often resulted in activities and investment that have not been sustainable – contributing to environmental degradation and missed opportunities for long-term economic growth.

A different future is possible. By recognising the marine environment as a productive asset that underpins economic activity and livelihoods, we can better manage, maintain and restore it – ensuring it continues to deliver benefits for both people and the economy.

A healthy marine environment supports thriving communities

A healthy marine environment is the foundation on which coastal communities depend. When its condition declines, the impacts are felt directly in local economies, infrastructure and wellbeing.

The UK Office for National Statistics estimates that marine and coastal habitats delivered approximately £3 billion in annual value in 2022 with recreation and health benefits accounting for a significant share. These natural capital accounts demonstrate that the links between environmental condition and economic value are already measurable and significant.

Declining fish stocks undermine livelihoods. The loss of habitats such as saltmarsh reduces natural flood protection, increasing risks to homes and infrastructure. Biodiversity loss weakens the marine environment's ability to

deliver essential services, from carbon storage and climate regulation to water quality and tourism.

As an island nation, these impacts are felt early and acutely. But the reverse is also true: investment in environmental recovery can strengthen economies, from a local to national scale.

Evidence shows that marine restoration can generate substantial employment. For example, coastal restoration projects have been shown to create significantly more jobs per pound invested than traditional extractive sectors. In the UK, emerging work on seagrass restoration and habitat recovery is beginning to demonstrate similar potential – supporting jobs, skills and new career pathways across coastal communities.

A growing and increasingly complex marine economy

For a maritime nation like the UK, the challenge of utilising our marine environment sustainably is not abstract. Our economy is fundamentally connected to the ocean.

The UK's unique geography – at the boundary of the Atlantic Ocean and European shelf seas – creates highly productive and diverse marine ecosystems. These same conditions underpin major industries, including fisheries, offshore renewable energy, subsea cables, shipping and coastal tourism.

At the same time, the marine economy is expanding rapidly. Growth is being driven by the energy transition, increasing global trade, demand for digital

connectivity and pressure on food systems. Activities are moving further offshore, becoming more technologically complex, and increasingly overlapping in space.

This means we are no longer managing isolated sectors, but a crowded, interconnected system.

Marine systems do not respect administrative boundaries. Water, sediments and species move across large distances. Pressures accumulate and interact over time. What appears manageable at the scale of a single project can have very different consequences when combined with other activities.

Ecosystems can also reach tipping points, where change becomes rapid and sometimes irreversible. Recovery, if it occurs, may take decades.

This is further complicated by shifting environmental baselines driven by climate change and human activity. Sustainable growth, therefore, cannot be managed project by project – it requires a system-level perspective.

Science must underpin decision-making

Marine science is essential to navigating this complexity. It provides the evidence needed to understand ecological limits, cumulative pressures and long-term system responses.

It enables better decisions about where and how development should occur, how risks can be avoided or mitigated, and how environmental outcomes can be measured over time.

Natural Capital approach requires interdisciplinary information

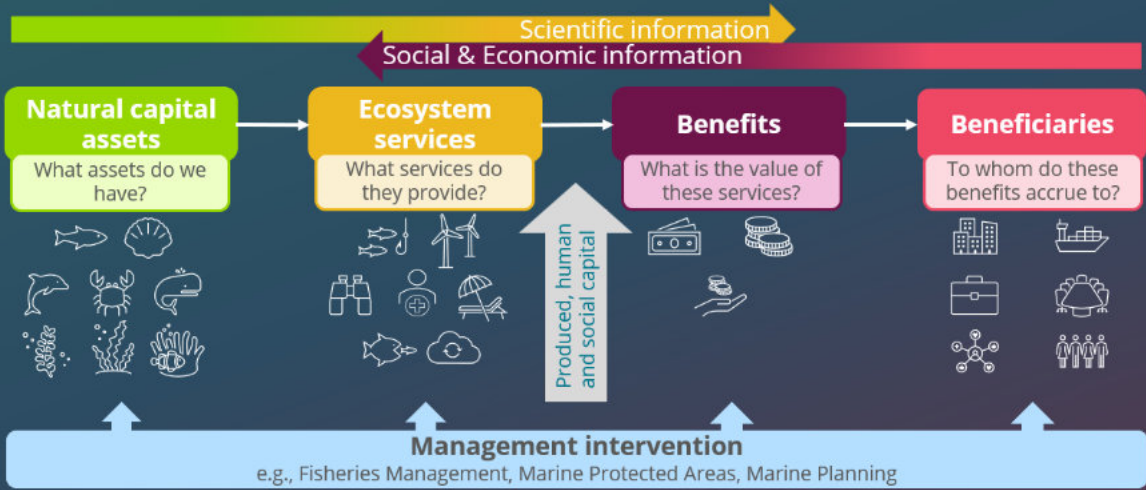


Figure 1.
The Natural Capital
Logic Chain

Image supplied courtesy
of etfec

Robust evidence helps distinguish genuine environmental improvement from symbolic protection. It avoids overconfidence in unproven solutions and ensures decisions are based on current conditions rather than outdated assumptions.

If economic development and environmental enhancement are to go hand in hand, science cannot be an afterthought – it must be the foundation.

From minimising harm to delivering environmental enhancement

Achieving this requires a shift in mindset. Environmental enhancement must mean more than reducing harm. The ambition must be for measurable improvements in biodiversity, ecosystem function and resilience.

If development is going to expand – and it will – the key question is not only where we build, but how.

Nature-inclusive design should be embedded from the outset. With the right evidence, infrastructure can support ecological function rather than degrade it. This requires site-specific understanding of species, habitats and ecosystem dynamics, as well as planning that accounts for future environmental change.

Offsetting and compensation can play a role – but only if they are scientifically rigorous. They must be:

- additional,
- ecologically equivalent (or better),
- secured for the long term, and

- used only after avoidance and minimisation.
- Done well, they can support restoration at scale – such as seagrass, saltmarsh and oyster reef recovery. Done poorly, they risk trading certain loss today for uncertain gains tomorrow.
- Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are also essential – but designation alone is not enough. Protection must focus on areas of high ecological value, be effectively enforced, and sit within broader marine spatial planning. MPAs cannot address cumulative pressures such as climate change or pollution in isolation.

Aligning policy, finance and long-term planning

The UK is well positioned to lead in this space – but this requires clear policy direction.

To ensure the sustainable use of the marine environment public and private finance will be essential, supported by strong regulatory frameworks and emerging mechanisms such as nature markets. A natural capital approach (illustrated in Figure 1) provides a way to structure these decisions – linking environmental assets to the services, benefits and economic outcomes they support.

The HM Treasury Green Book already embeds this thinking, encouraging consistent valuation of environmental impacts across decision-making.

A UK-focused Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy, aligned with marine spatial planning, could provide the long-term certainty needed to unlock investment

and coordinate action. This should focus on the UK’s marine environment and complement, rather than duplicate, existing international programmes.

Recent government commitments to regional growth, skills and investment provide a strong foundation. A sustainable marine economy can deliver high-quality, locally rooted jobs – from marine science and restoration to offshore energy and coastal resilience.

A resilient marine economy for the future

If we are serious about aligning economic growth with environmental recovery, several principles must guide us:

- Avoidance of negative environmental impacts must come first
- Cumulative pressures must have clear limits
- Enhancement must be measured in ecological outcomes
- Compensation must be strategic, additional and long-term
- Protected areas must be effective and connected
- Monitoring must operate over decades, not short project cycles

The risk is not that we fail to act but that we mistake incremental mitigation for genuine recovery.

The marine environment is not an obstacle to growth. It is the foundation of a resilient and regenerative economy. With the right science, policy and investment, the UK can demonstrate how environmental recovery and economic ambition can be achieved together.