

## **MCS se Monthly meeting – February 2010**

The February meeting of the Marine Conservation Society South East local group at the Holland Club in Imperial College London was host to two liaison officers Amy Pryor and Kate Mills from the Balanced Seas Project.

The Balanced Seas Project is one of four similar regional projects and is the local face of the controlling bodies Defra/Natural England/Joint Nature Conservancy Council covering the South East of England. The purpose of the projects is to meet with as many stakeholders/interested parties to discuss and propose the areas within their region that should be put forward for some level of protection.

The Balanced Seas Project has a very limited time-span to conduct its stakeholder meetings as the final recommendations will need to be submitted by 2011 with the final decision being made in 2012 to meet the government's pledge of that date. The time scale albeit very short may have the benefit of focusing peoples minds on the task in hand but concern was raised during the meeting that the initial stakeholder input had no scientific basis as it was predominantly social and economic parties that were being met. The meeting was advised that following the stakeholder meetings and final submission of areas for protection this would then be passed to the scientific community for consideration in the forming of a comprehensive and cohesive set of marine protected areas around the coastline of England. Scotland and Wales are to have their own projects where they will establish the areas along their coastline requiring protection.

2010 is to be the year when they will meet with as many interested parties as possible and collate data ready for initial recommendations. This will entail the mapping of marine activities both commercial and social within the area including sailing, sport fishing, water sports both on and in the water. From this map they hope to set out areas that have significant interest to certain stakeholders. A lot of this information will be collated from local stakeholder group meetings before being submitted to the regional groups. It was felt at the meeting that for MCS to have an influence they would need to have a representative on the Regional group for each region. As most of the information/discussion at the local group level will be based on the leisure and economic use of the sea and coastline it is unlikely to have any serious scientific input. The regional groups should be in a position to ensure that areas put forward have some positive scientific reason for their protection. Questions were raised about the ability of large business organisations being able to over-ride small local conservancy groups but the meeting was advised that the Government is committed to this process and will not allow any one group to over-ride the needs of another. As this is the first time that this process has been carried out it was felt by a number present that the proof of the pudding would be in the eating. This may be something that will require vigilance to ensure the good aims of the Government and the Balanced Seas Project are not deflected. The South West regional group have been mapping their area for a number of years but no details were available for discussion at this meeting. The data collected is to be put on a website that will be accessible by all parties and provide data links as required. All present agreed that there was clearly a lack of data available but assurances were given that this is a developing system of protected areas and will be able to alter to meet additional needs as they occur. The education and involvement of all parties and the general public will be another way forward to try and achieve the aim of sustainable, clean and healthy marine environment for all.

2011 will be finalising this information with the scientific input and 2012 the final decision.