
https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2019-04-10/an-english-city-starts-a-movement-for-the-uks-first-national-marine-park

**THE CITY OF PLYMOUTH,** on England's southwestern lip, has been a prominent port since as far back as 700 B.C., and would serve two millennia later as the launching point for expeditions in search of the Northwest Passage. It is believed that, in 1588, Sir Francis Drake played a game of bowls by the sea, as he waited for the Spanish Armada to descend upon the city. The Pilgrims, of course, sailed out of Plymouth on the Mayflower and named their landing place in the New World accordingly. To this day, Plymouth is the site of the largest naval base in Western Europe.

On the cusp of the English Channel, France and the rest of Europe, the city is "the crucible of maritime history in England," says Kaja Curry, who manages marine affairs for the Plymouth City Council.

Plymouth is, in short, a natural choice for the United Kingdom's first national marine park. Proposed in 2017, the project has the backing of the City Council, which is currently reviewing the results of a public consultation completed in late February. Though a more detailed proposal will need to take shape before the national government agrees to designate the blue space, the city hopes to launch the park by mid-2020, as it commemorates the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' departure.

The park is the latest illustration of a movement some call "blue urbanism," an effort focused on stitching blue spaces more effectively into the cultural fabric of coastal cities. The idea – put to work in places like New York, Baltimore, and London – is gathering momentum as the world's urban population rises, and as many coastal cities confront increasingly volatile waters. While Plymouth's park proposal has broad support, its architects have many specifics to iron out within the short time frame they've put forth, and some are concerned that the project prioritizes branding over science.

In a recent paper published in the journal Marine Policy, researchers from the University of Plymouth encouraged other coastal cities to follow Plymouth's lead. Already, they warn, nearly 70 percent of the world's megacities are coastal, and the United Nations estimates that 68 percent of the global population will be living in cities by 2050. And so, the stakes are rising with the seas. According to National Geographic, average sea levels have risen by more than 8 inches since 1880, including roughly 3 inches in the last 25 years alone. Intense floods are leading to waves of mass displacement and migration, and even a metropolis like Miami could be partly underwater by 2100.

Experts realize that initiatives like marine parks won't themselves stop the seas from rising. What they're after is a broader paradigm shift: If city dwellers begin to value the marine environment more deeply, perhaps they will become more sensitive to – and organized against – the factors that threaten it.

To the extent that they have embraced natural spaces, cities have historically looked inland, content to burden their waterfronts with commercial waste. It's no accident that Central Park, for example, was placed "as far away from the water as you could get," says Timothy Beatley, a professor of sustainable development and urban planning at the University of Virginia, and author of the book "Blue Urbanism: Exploring Connections Between Cities and Oceans."

"Most people will see the ocean," says Simon Pittman, a Marine Ecologist at the University of Plymouth and proponent of the park, as a "flat blue expanse and have absolutely no idea that there could be a coral reef underneath, and lots of really fascinating marine life a stone's throw from the beach."

That's why Pittman insists that Plymouth's park not entail any new regulations or restrictions, which could make the seascape seem even less inviting and accessible. Curry, the City Council member, puts it bluntly: Designating the national park is "more about branding," she says, than it is about imposing new practices.

This focus on branding has, so far, taken precedence over discussions of what the park will ultimately look like, what kinds of activities and programs it will offer and what its boundaries will be. Pittman mentions a possible "beach school" where children could learn about the marine environment, comparable to the Forest School model popular throughout the U.K., which immerses participants in woodland environments.

Pittman's colleague Martin Attrill, also of the University of Plymouth – and a longtime advocate of rebranding Britain's blue spaces as national parks – envisions new water sports facilities, as well as a fleet of water taxis to take visitors to different vantage points around the area. (He suspects that adjoining coastal lands will also be designated as part of the park.) Whatever the mechanism, marine park advocates want people to get out onto the water: While 96 percent of people in England, according to a prospectus for the park, "say they want every child to experience a National Park first hand," those parks are associated with terrestrial landscapes. Some 18 percent of British children, according to the Marine Policy paper, say they have never visited any of the United Kingdom's beaches.

Some of this has to do with structural issues of access and inequity. Many of Plymouth's poorer residents, says Attrill, live near the imposing naval dockyards, and so they've had "no real history or culture of engaging with the sea." National park status could be enough to draw residents toward the marine resources that were in their backyard all along, and to engender what Curry calls "a sense of ownership" that, in turn, can help the city stay farther out ahead of conservation challenges.

Other cities have seen how increased public engagement can help revitalize the water. New York is one oft-cited success story, with initiatives like the Billion Oyster Project planting 28 million oysters in New York Harbor in less than a decade (the goal is 1 billion by 2035). As nitrogen filters, the mollusks have helped make the city's waters more hospitable to other creatures, including whales.

Roland Lewis, president and CEO of New York's Waterfront Alliance, cites increased ferry service as instrumental in making New Yorkers more invested in their blue spaces, as they can enjoy views to which they previously lacked access. Lewis says his goal is "fundamentally to change the psychology" of the region – to make New Yorkers feel like the waterfront is an indispensable part of their urban identity. The corresponding legislation and policies, he says, will ideally flow naturally from that collective investment.

Just this month, meanwhile, the Zoological Society of London launched the Mother Thames campaign on a similar premise. The society hopes the program will teach Londoners about the diversity beneath the sometimes-opaque river, and that it will get them in the habit of looking out for and reporting sightings of marine mammals. The campaign will culminate in the publication of the "State of the Thames Report," the first such report in more than 60 years.

The Plymouth park, of course, is not without its skeptics. Ed Parr Ferris, conservation manager for the local Devon Wildlife Trust, answered the recent public consultation with concerns that park advocates were focused on commercial benefits instead of scientific specifics, and that their branding strategies – no matter how effective – could backfire. Planning to launch the park in conjunction with next year's Mayflower 400 celebrations, he believes, does not provide enough time to carefully carry out the implementation process. (He could get his wish for a delay, since

Brexit has the potential to knock the park down the central government's list of priorities, even if the support is there.)

Though he supports the park concept and the mission of raising awareness, Parr Ferris also notes the potential for increased engagement to stress sensitive natural resources, and potentially expose them to further degradation. The park will have to be planned with these vulnerabilities in mind, he writes, and those plans have not yet been fully drawn.

From his experiences in New York, however, Lewis does not believe that increased engagement leads to increased pollution. As you spend time with it, he says, the water is "a place you start to love and care for and become stewards of."

As more and more of us move to cities and the seaside, Pittman says, we cannot be "turning our backs on the" coast. Instead, it's a matter of "facing the ocean and saying, 'Look at this amazing wilderness on our doorstep. Let's make as much of this as we can in a responsible way that is beneficial to all.”