

A SAFE HAVEN

Plymouth Sound is to become the first National Marine Park in the UK. But what will this mean for the sailors who take to its waters every year?

WORDS: BECCA EWING

That is Plymouth Sound National Marine Park out there.' With these few modest words, uttered in September 2019, Plymouth City Council leader Tudor Evans made history by confirming what local sailors, fishermen, swimmers and beach-lovers long suspected: that Plymouth Sound is officially on its way to becoming the UK's first National Marine Park (NMP).

As 'Britain's ocean city', Plymouth would seem the natural – if not obvious – choice for the title. Over 5.6 million visitors come to the Devon city each year, many taking the chance to swim or sail the waters. It has a rich maritime heritage: The *Mayflower* set sail from here in 1620 on its way to the New World, and a rich programme of events will celebrate the 400th anniversary of that historic voyage this year. Plymouth is also home to the largest naval base in western Europe. ▶

Cruise liners, fishing trawlers, keelboats, kayaks and canoes jostle for space on the choppy waters while, under the surface, thousands of species of fish and other marine life make this safe haven home.

PEOPLE AND PLACE

The decision to turn Plymouth Sound into a pioneering NMP has been welcomed by Phil Horton, RYA Environment & Sustainability Manager.

‘We support any initiative that promotes the positive impact the maritime environment and marine activities can have on society, the environment and the economy,’ he says. ‘The NMP will undoubtedly help to promote the area’s maritime opportunities to a wider audience, which we hope will increase club membership and participation.’

For those who fear the creation of the NMP may result in new restrictions being implemented in an already highly protected stretch of water, Phil says it will be ‘business as usual’ and that ‘no negative impact will be felt by the boating community. In fact, the NMP wants to encourage activity, not inhibit it.’

Sam Waites, Watersports and Activities Manager at Mount Batten Centre in Plymouth, concurs. ‘The NMP isn’t about new regulations but a way to develop better connections to the ocean,’ he says. ‘It uses the values of marine citizenship to create benefits for Place, People and Planet – it’s a “triple bottom line model” in geek speak. If the NMP can engage more people with activities in, on or under the water, while supporting knowledge and understanding of marine and maritime life, it has the opportunity to create empathy for Plymouth Sound and the ocean.’

This idea of connecting people with their local environment is one of the key objectives of the NMP – it’s the first in a list of benefits published on the NMP’s website, and for good reason. Figures suggest that 17% of children in Plymouth have never been to the coast. ‘We want to change that,’ says Sue Dann, Plymouth city councillor and

cabinet member for Environment and Street Scene. ‘We want everyone to enjoy this incredible free resource.’

It’s the belief of NMP’s supporters that fostering deeper community engagement will lead to increased health, wellbeing and enjoyment, and, crucially, a renewed respect for the seas and ocean that surround us.

“Sea blindness”, or a disconnection from our oceans, is something that affects a lot of our island nation,’ says Sam. ‘The NMP is all about rekindling and inspiring new connections. Our hope is the NMP will help tell that story, developing better understanding of the connections each and every one of us has to the ocean, and inspiring more people to love the ocean.’

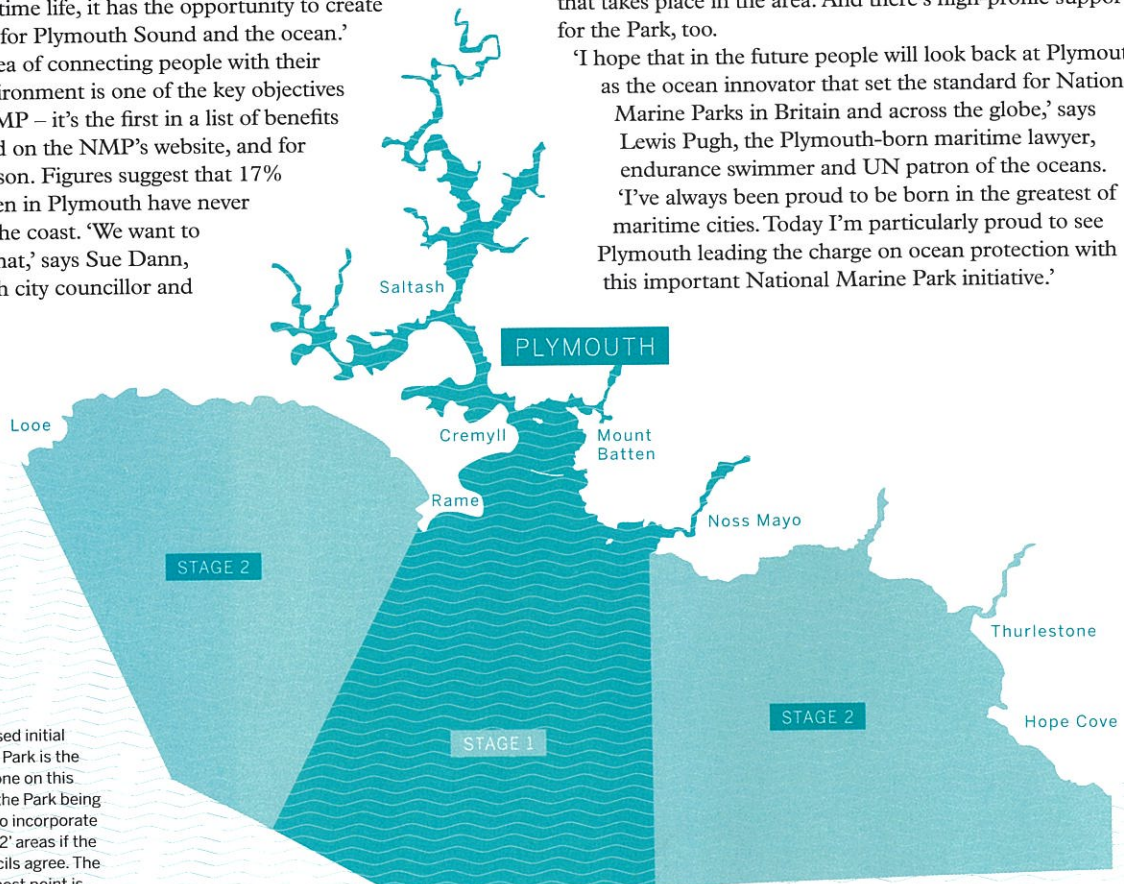
OCEAN INNOVATOR

As passengers of *The Mayflower* discovered following their historic voyage 400 years ago, being the first to do anything brings both opportunities and challenges. Establishing and defining the NMP, how it operates and what it means to those who relax or work on the water, will unfold in the coming months, but Tudor Evans is confident that the changes will be positive for everyone on the water.

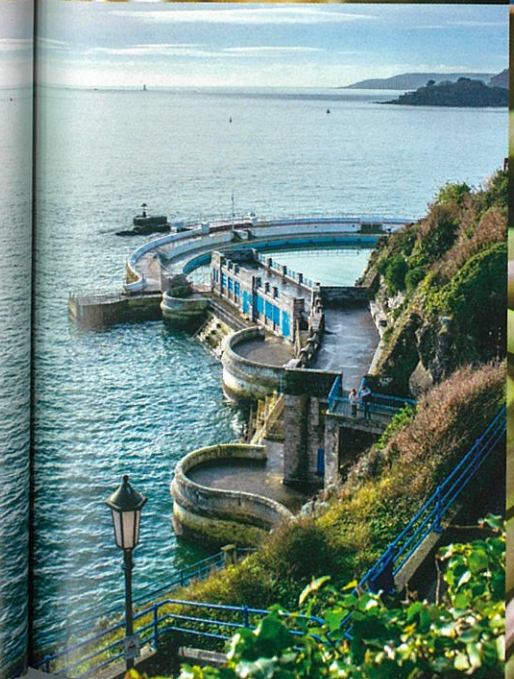
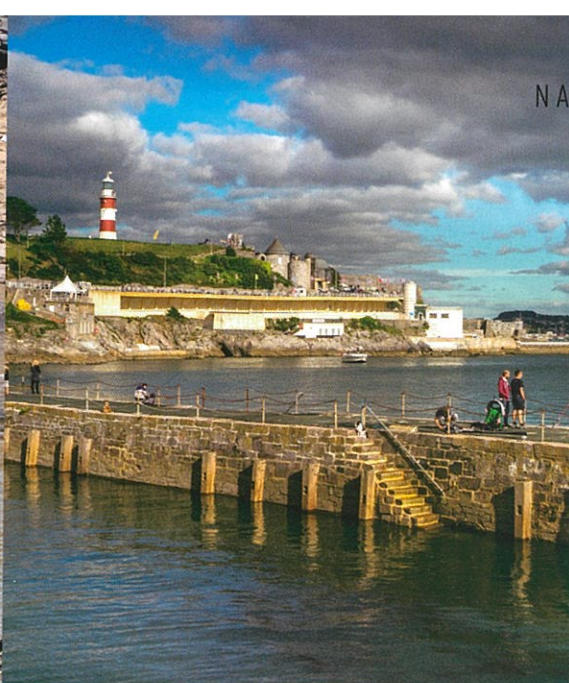
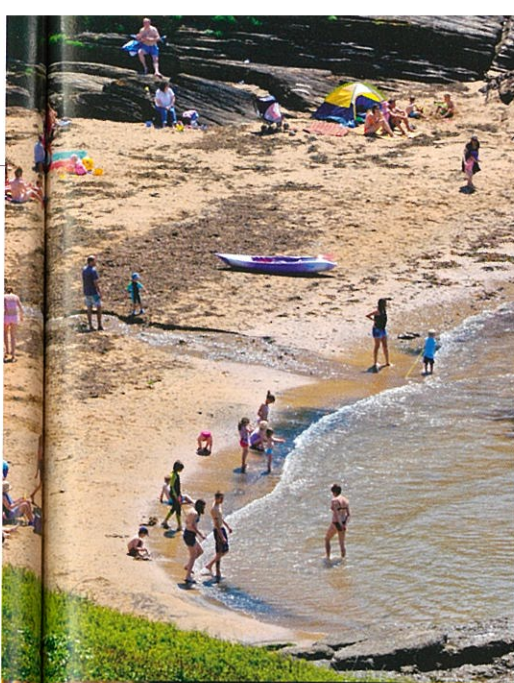
‘National Marine Parks don’t exist in Britain [so] it’s our job to invent one,’ he says. ‘I’m here to give some reassurance to people who currently use the water that nothing is going to change as far as they are concerned.’

A number of initiatives have already begun under the NMP banner and the RYA has been working closely with the group to ensure they understand and support the boating activity that takes place in the area. And there’s high-profile support for the Park, too.

‘I hope that in the future people will look back at Plymouth as the ocean innovator that set the standard for National Marine Parks in Britain and across the globe,’ says Lewis Pugh, the Plymouth-born maritime lawyer, endurance swimmer and UN patron of the oceans. ‘I’ve always been proud to be born in the greatest of maritime cities. Today I’m particularly proud to see Plymouth leading the charge on ocean protection with this important National Marine Park initiative.’



The proposed initial area of the Park is the ‘Stage 1’ zone on this map, with the Park being extended to incorporate the ‘Stage 2’ areas if the local councils agree. The southernmost point is the Eddystone Reef.



What is a National Marine Park?

Marine parks are areas of sea that have been set aside for recreational use or habitat protection. Much like its equivalent on dry land – the National Park – a Marine Park is usually designated by a government and limits are placed on human activity that takes place there, though some marine parks set out to make their waters more accessible and appealing to visitors.

At 640,000km², Chagos Marine Park in the Indian Ocean is the world's largest Marine Park. But the most famous is the Great Barrier Reef, 'the richest, most complex, most diverse ecosystem', according to *National Geographic*.

➡ Find more about the proposed Plymouth NMP at plymouthsoundnationalmarinepark.com

A historic year for Plymouth

Mayflower 400 is the umbrella title for a series of events in 11 locations with links to the voyage of The *Mayflower* from Plymouth, UK, to Plymouth, New England, in September 1620. Although the focus will be on Plymouth in England, which is planning a year-long programme of celebrations, there'll be events around the UK, including in Southampton, where the *Speedwell* joined the *Mayflower*; Dartmouth, where the flotilla put in for repair; and Rotherhithe, the home port of the *Mayflower*. Commemorations are also planned further afield in Leiden, Netherlands, home to many of the Pilgrim Fathers.

➡ For full details of the Mayflower 400 plans visit www.mayflower400uk.org

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