

## Location and boundaries

This Marine Character Area (MCA) covers the coastal and inshore waters of Holyhead Bay in western Anglesey, extending northwards to take in the Skerries and their associated seas and submerged rocks/reefs.

- The extent of Holyhead Bay is consistent with how the area is depicted for navigational purposes (including Imray, 2009).
- MCA boundaries are guided by bathymetry and information marked on the Marine Charts, with outer waters reaching an average maximum depth of 25 metres.
- The boundaries around the Skerries are closely guided by the Marine Charts, ensuring all related features (e.g. Platters Reef, smaller offshore rocks, wrecks and areas of rough sea/high wave climate) are included.
- MCA encompasses the marine components of local Anglesey Seascape Character Areas 10: Carmel Head to Penrhyn, 11: Holyhead and the northern part of 13: Holyhead Mountain.

## Key Characteristics

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This MCA encompasses the <b>large-scale Holyhead Bay</b> , backed by an <b>AONB-designated</b> coastline stretching from Carmel Head in the north to Porth Namarch on Holy Island.
The <b>rocky islets of the Skerries</b> (with associated rough seas) are found to the north of Carmel Head. The Skerries lighthouse is visible over long distances.
Bay fringed to the east by <b>rugged volcanic cliffs punctuating small sandy bays</b> . Shelter is provided to the south by the <b>rising mass of Holyhead Mountain</b> .
The seabed substrate follows the energy gradient, with <b>exposed rock</b> in the north and areas of <b>coarse sediment</b> in the south.
The Skerries designated as SPA, SSSI and Important Bird Area, managed as a reserve by the RSPB. The islets are <b>important for Arctic terns</b> and as a <b>seal haul site</b> .
<b>Nationally important geology</b> exposed in the cliffs – some of the oldest rocks in Wales. Cliffs topped by wind-pruned maritime grasslands and heath, supporting <b>important sea bird colonies</b> (including within the Holy Island Coast SPA and SAC).
<b>Extensive SSSI covering intertidal areas</b> , including the Afon Alaw estuary, as well as the seagrass beds, sand and rock found in Beddmanarch Bay.
<b>Very strong tidal currents and wave climate</b> around the Skerries in the north, with a more sheltered region of water within Holyhead Harbour to the south.
<b>Many wrecks</b> , including the <b>protected wreck</b> of the 17th century Royal Yacht <i>Mary</i> and the dangerous wreck of the <i>Castillian</i> , which sank in 1943 with live ordnance on board.
<b>Breakwaters, beacons and lit shipping markers</b> mark passage into the 19 <sup>th</sup> century Holyhead Harbour. The Skerries lighthouse is visible over long distances.
The wider bay is used by many different types of <b>shipping for transport and trade</b> – a long-standing use, particularly associated with close connections to Ireland.
<b>Waters support a range of recreational activities</b> including sailing, boating, diving and fishing/sightseeing charters. The surrounding beaches are popular tourism destinations.
Seascape setting <b>dominated by the Skerries</b> to the north, and by <b>Holyhead Mountain</b> to the south.
<b>Coastline traversed by the Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path</b> , with large sections under National Trust ownership.
<b>A strong contrast between remote seas and coasts</b> and the bustling port and marina at <b>Holyhead</b> .
<b>Ferries</b> (Holyhead- Dublin) are features on the seaward horizon. <b>The Wicklow and Mourne Mountains in Ireland</b> can be visible in clear conditions. The <b>Isle of Man</b> is also visible in distant views north from Carmel Head.

## Natural Influences

This MCA encompasses the west and north-westerly orientated Holyhead Bay. Its long adjacent coastline stretches from Carmel Head in the north to Porth Namarch on Holy Island to the south-west. The rocky islets of the Skerries are located nearly three kilometres offshore from the north-west of Carmel Head. Apart from development at Holyhead, the entire coastline is within the Anglesey AONB. The Holyhead Mountain coast and the coastline from Church Bay to Carmel Head (including the Skerries) are also defined as Heritage Coast.

The west-facing coastline comprises rugged cliffs of volcanic tuff, with jagged spurs jutting out between sandy beaches and bays. Ancient pre-Cambrian rocks, transformed by extreme heating and compression from later earth movements, create a distinctive and varied topography (including the famous 'Carmel Head thrust' – SSSI designated). The orange/red cliffs backing the beach at Church Bay are used as natural navigational features due to their visual prominence from the sea. Topping the cliffs are swathes of wind-pruned maritime grassland and coastal heath, with patches of gorse and sweeping expanses of blackthorn complementing the dark, muted colours of the volcanic cliffs. Colonies of seabirds, including chough, Atlantic tern and fulmars bring movement and sound to the cliffs. To the south-west, the Holy Island Coast is of international importance for its seabird colonies; a national stronghold for chough and home to guillemots, razorbills, puffin, peregrine and ravens.

An open expanse of intertidal sand and mudflats fringing the Afon Alaw estuary defines the south-east of the MCA. Variety and texture is added by swathes of saltmarsh and seagrass beds which extend into Beddmanach Bay. SSSI-designated, these habitats support a wide range of wintering water-birds, especially ringed plover, greenshank, red-breasted merganser and goldeneye. There are areas of rare dune heathland and the whole site supports a range in scarce plants such as sea lavender, dwarf rush and golden samphire.



*Survey boat near the Skerries*

Holyhead Bay itself ranges in depth from shallow coastal and intertidal waters hugging the coast to an average of 25 metres bathymetry on its westerly fringes. The seabed is gently undulating, composed of schist bedrock overlain by Holocene-derived sand and gravel

sediments and rock outcrops. A rocky seabed is particularly associated with the waters surrounding the Skerries and Holyhead Mountain. Here, the submerged rocks and reefs – often lying close to the water surface – combine with strong tidal streams and wind exposure to create wild and unpredictable seas. Within the bay itself, localised dangers are associated with the rocky seas and overfalls surrounding Carmel Rocks and the Langdon Ridge – the latter marked by a white flashing light and a pillar cardinal mark.

The volcanic rock islets of the Skerries are encircled by strong currents and large breaking waves. The islands' lighthouse is visible over long distances, used in conjunction with other nearby land and sea markers (including the distinctive 'White Ladies' pilot beacons on Carmel Head, MCA 6) to guide safe navigation. The Skerries are designated as SPA, SSSI and Important Bird Area, managed as a reserve by the RSPB. These designations reflect the internationally important population of Arctic terns found on the islets, as well as their role as valued haul sites for grey seals. A number of maritime habitats also contribute to the Skerries' special interest, including maritime grassland, inter-tidal rocks and pools and low maritime cliff with associated ledges and crevices. The species-rich sediment-floored rock pools are of particular interest.

Contrasting sea conditions prevail in the south of the MCA. As well as the physical mass of Holyhead Mountain to the south-west, the long, historic breakwater shelters Holyhead harbour and marina from the open and exposed seas. The Cliperau rocks to the east of the Outer Harbour formed hazards for vessels driven from their anchors; Newry Beach and Penrhos beach were traditionally used by vessels in distress for beaching. Since its completion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the harbour has provided valuable refuge to many – accessible in all weather and tide conditions. The distinctive black and white lighthouse on the end of the breakwater, along with the Holyhead Mail Pier Light on Salt Island, form prominent historic markers for pilotage. Numerous shipping buoys and flashing lights provide further guides to the many commercial and recreational vessels that visit the harbour, day and night.

## Cultural/social influences

This is a landscape of present-day cultural contrasts – from some of the most remote coastline in Wales at Carmel Head to the bustling harbour and marina at Holyhead. A diverse range of coastal and marine activities have shaped the seascape over the centuries, all responding to the strategic position of the bay, its challenging marine environment, and the natural resources it offers.

The MCA is recognised as a key historic gateway and trading route between the UK and Ireland, with ferry services retaining important links across the Irish Sea to Ireland (as well as forming large-scale, moving features within the bay). The Romans appreciated the bay's strategic importance, building a fort and naval base on the edge of today's harbour to defend Anglesey from Irish Sea pirates. The walls of the fort are still visible as evidence of this early defensive function.

Thousands of years later, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, construction began on Holyhead Harbour – stimulated by the need for refuge by ships unable to reach Liverpool in adverse weather conditions. The breakwater is the longest in the UK at nearly three kilometres, with a promenade leading to the unusual square lighthouse on the end – the shape chosen to make the living quarters more comfortable. Around 1,300 men were employed to build the breakwater, using seven million tons of limestone from Holyhead Mountain (now the aptly named Breakwater Country Park).



*Skerries Lighthouse*

Another important historical landmark that reinforces Holyhead's maritime history is the Grade II Listed Holyhead Mail Pier Light on Salt Island. Constructed by John Rennie in 1821, it is the second oldest lighthouse in Wales and remains a charismatic day marker even though the light is no longer operational.

The exploitation of the MCA's marine and coastal resources has also fuelled the prosperity and development of the area over centuries. Carmel Head includes disused shafts, a chimney and historic buildings associated with Carmel Head Mine, a small copper works first established in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The mine was sold in the 1860s and abandoned soon after because of poor yields, despite the rich mineral fault lying below the headland. Immediately to the south the coastline is dominated by traces of ancient cultivation and farmsteads, linked to traditional landing places in the lee of Fydlyn Island and Porth y Nant. A long history of fishing in the bay's waters is evidenced by the well-preserved remains of a medieval fish weir on the banks at Newlands (a Scheduled Monument). Further historical fishtraps are revealed at low tide within Beddmanarch Bay, and the Welsh name for Church Bay – Porth Swtan – means '*bay of the whiting*' – after the species of fish common in the local waters<sup>1</sup>. Today the marine area continues to support local fishing communities as well as recreational angling. The rocky seabed is particularly important for crab and lobster potting. All of the area is licenced for oil and gas exploration and a number of submarine cables cross the seabed, making landfall at Holyhead.

Turning to the Skerries, their name is thought to derive from the English word 'skerry' ('rock') but it possibly has its origins in the Scandinavian word 'sker', meaning '*stretch of rocks, reef*' reflecting its role as a landmark for Viking voyagers from Ireland. The original and modern Welsh name, however, is Ynysoedd y Moelrhoniaid, meaning '*the islands of bald-headed grey seals*'. The islands were once the property of the bishops of Bangor who had fishing rights for the surrounding seas, but are often most strongly associated with ship wrecks.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversely the English name – Church Bay – is likely to reflect the prominent offshore view of St Rhuddlad's church spire, a key local landmark for sea navigators.

The islands' reputation as a notorious wrecking site is reflected in the concentration of sunken vessels found beneath its waters. The nationally protected Royal Yacht *Mary* is located on the south west side of the islands. Built by the Dutch East India Company in 1660, it was embellished and given by the City of Amsterdam to Charles II on his restoration to the English throne. The *Mary* was en-route from Dublin to Chester with a crew of 28, three noblemen and 43 other passengers when it sank in 1675. Rediscovered in 1971, the wreck has been extensively excavated, the associated artefacts, such as fine jewellery and cutlery, taken to Merseyside museums. The finding of the Royal Yacht *Mary* and the subsequent ill-controlled salvage and removal of guns from the wreck prompted the hasty passing of the 1971 Protection of Wrecks Act, the principal legislation by which historic vessels are now protected. Nearby, the *SS Castilian* is marked as a dangerous wreck, sinking in 1943 with live ordnance on board. The only means of access to the Skerries is by boat - an old supply bridge from Anglesey has long since been removed. Recreational boat trips to the islets are available from several ports in Anglesey, including Holyhead and Cemaes Bay (MCA 6). The potential for harnessing the sea's high energy resources in this location is being explored through test tidal stream devices.

As well as its long-standing commercial importance, Holyhead Bay is a regional hub for recreational sailing and boating. Holyhead Marina currently provides space for around 200 berth-holders, with infrastructure for 350 berths. Combined with linked modern developments and shoreline facilities, the marina generates a significant influence on the local seascape, prominent in views from the sea when entering the harbour. The marina supports a number of sea-based recreational activities across Anglesey, such as sailing, boating, sea canoeing/kayaking, diving (including to popular wreck diving spots off Carmel Head), surfing, fishing and tourist boat trips. A number of organised sailing events and races start and/or end at Holyhead, such as the Celtic Goodwill Raid and Gaffers Sailing Event. The marina also functions as a research hub for wildlife and conservation, with specialist dive surveys frequently departing from the facility. Holyhead Coastguard Station is located by the marina, providing a designated Rescue Centre for the local area. Practice sessions (e.g. helicopter-based boat rescues) are frequently held in the open waters of Holyhead Bay.

The coastline's beaches with designated bathing waters are popular tourism draws, particularly in the summer, with nearby caravan and camping sites providing close access for staying visitors. The Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path – part of the Wales Coast Path – rewards users with spectacular views across the bay, the surrounding coasts and further out to the Irish Sea. Significant areas of coast under National Trust ownership create further access and enjoyment opportunities for informal recreation.

## Aesthetic and perceptual qualities

Perceptual qualities vary markedly across the MCA, owing to the differing degrees of human activity (with seasonal variations) as well as the natural influences of the sea and prevailing weather conditions. Outside the harbour breakwater, the whole of the bay is open to westerly and northerly weather conditions sweeping in from the Irish Sea. In stormy conditions the nationally designated coastal landscape is pounded by powerful waves, a sense of danger arising from complete exposure to the elements. The black volcanic rocks comprising much of the adjacent AONB-designated coastline reinforce a feeling of bleakness, enhanced when exposed to the full brunt of the weather sweeping in from the Irish Sea. In all weather conditions, a strong degree of tranquillity, remoteness and relative wildness pervades away from the bustling port of Holyhead. These qualities decline at a local level during busy summer periods, with more movement and people in the wider landscape and occupying the coastal caravan parks in the south-east of the bay (featuring prominently in landward views from within the bay).

Around Holyhead, human influence dominates – both on the water and along the shoreline, with high levels of movement and activity from marine traffic and activities, as well as associated noise and visual disturbance – including at night. The tall chimney stack at the former Anglesey Aluminium works forms a major landmark feature in views, standing in stark contrast to the nearby expanses of flat, open naturalistic habitat within Beddmanarch Bay. The scale of infrastructure and the frequent moving and stationary ferries create an overall large scale character, forming a dominant presence visible from across Holyhead Bay and the western coastline of Anglesey. Nevertheless, Holyhead Mountain provides a dramatic setting behind, adding a sense of scale to the town and port below.

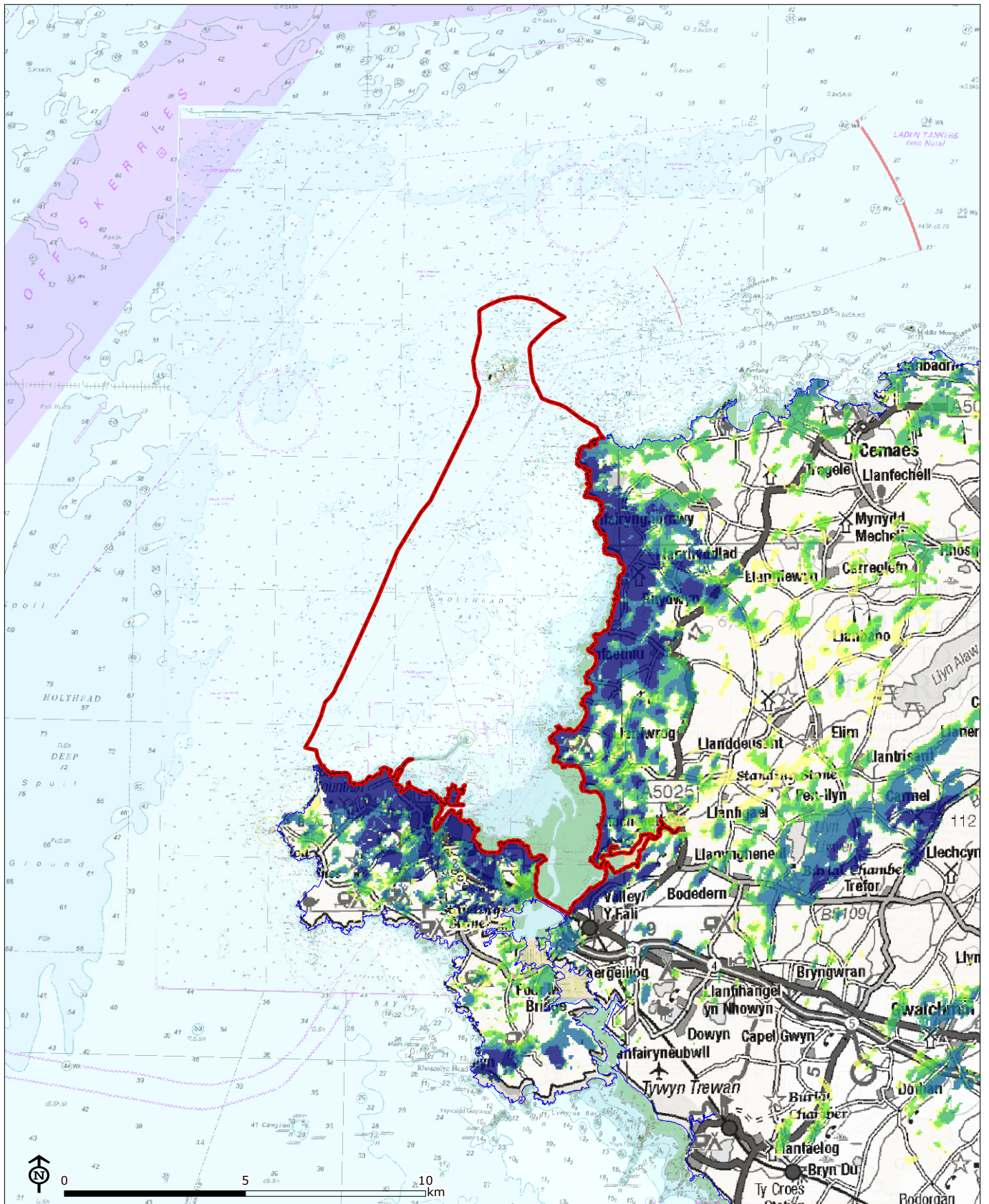
Offshore, the Skerries form an extremely remote and wild seascape, with a high degree of exposure. Big waves and sweeping winds create a tempestuous and noisy seascape, generating further feelings of vulnerability and isolation. The location and relative inaccessibility of the rocky islets only reached by chartered boat, further enhances their mysterious qualities. They form a strong maritime setting to the north of Holyhead Bay, the flashing light of the tall lighthouse featuring in views from across the coastline, with particularly strong intervisibility with Carmel Head.

Landward views are relatively contained to the western coastline and rising backdrop of Anglesey and Holy Island, whilst open, expansive views are afforded out to sea (MCAs 5 and 8). The Isle of Man is visible in distant views north from Carmel Head, whilst the westerly views from elevated positions, including Holyhead Mountain, can be framed by the distance shapes of the Wicklow and Mourne Mountains in Ireland.

*The Visual Resource Maps (VRM) that follow provide a more detailed spatial representation of the visibility of this MCA from the surrounding land in Wales. Please refer to the technical report for an explanation of how these maps were generated and how they should be interpreted.*

*The first map shows land with views to this MCA, the darker shading indicating land where from which more of this MCA is visible.*

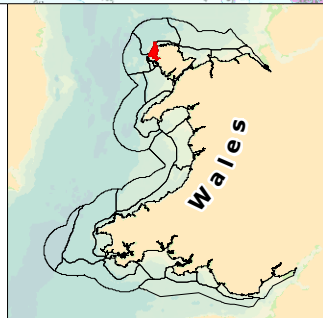
*The second map shows sea visible from land, the warmer colours being areas of sea that are visible from more places on land. This comes from a national assessment of Wales so the results do not relate specifically to this MCA, whose boundary is overlaid for location only. The four individual versions show how the results vary depending on how far inland hypothetical viewers are located.*



- 07: Holyhead Bay and The Skerries
- Wales Inshore Marine Plan Area

**Land with sea views (Percentile)**

- < 20 (Lowest)
- 21 - 40
- 41 - 60
- 61 - 80
- 81 - 100 (Highest)



Wales National Seascape Assessment

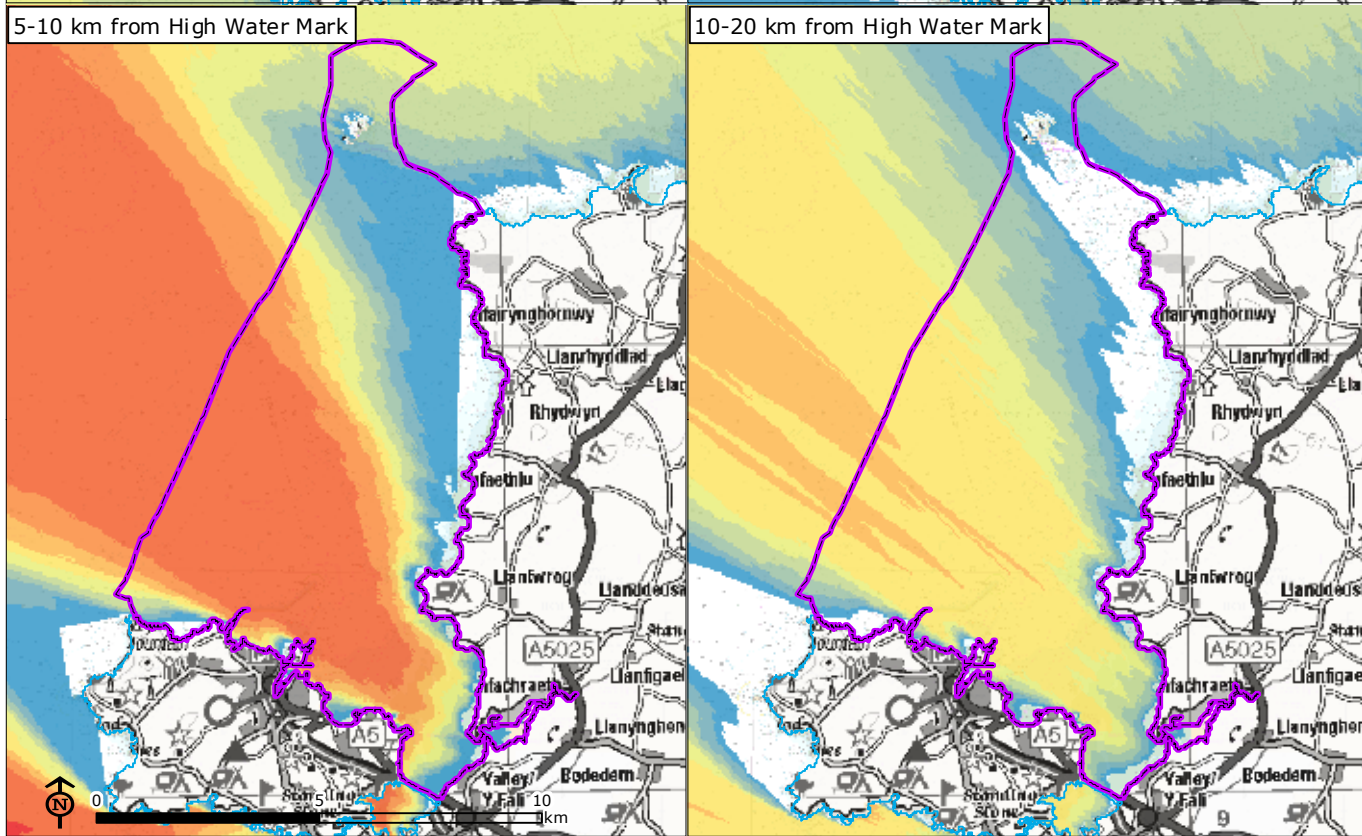
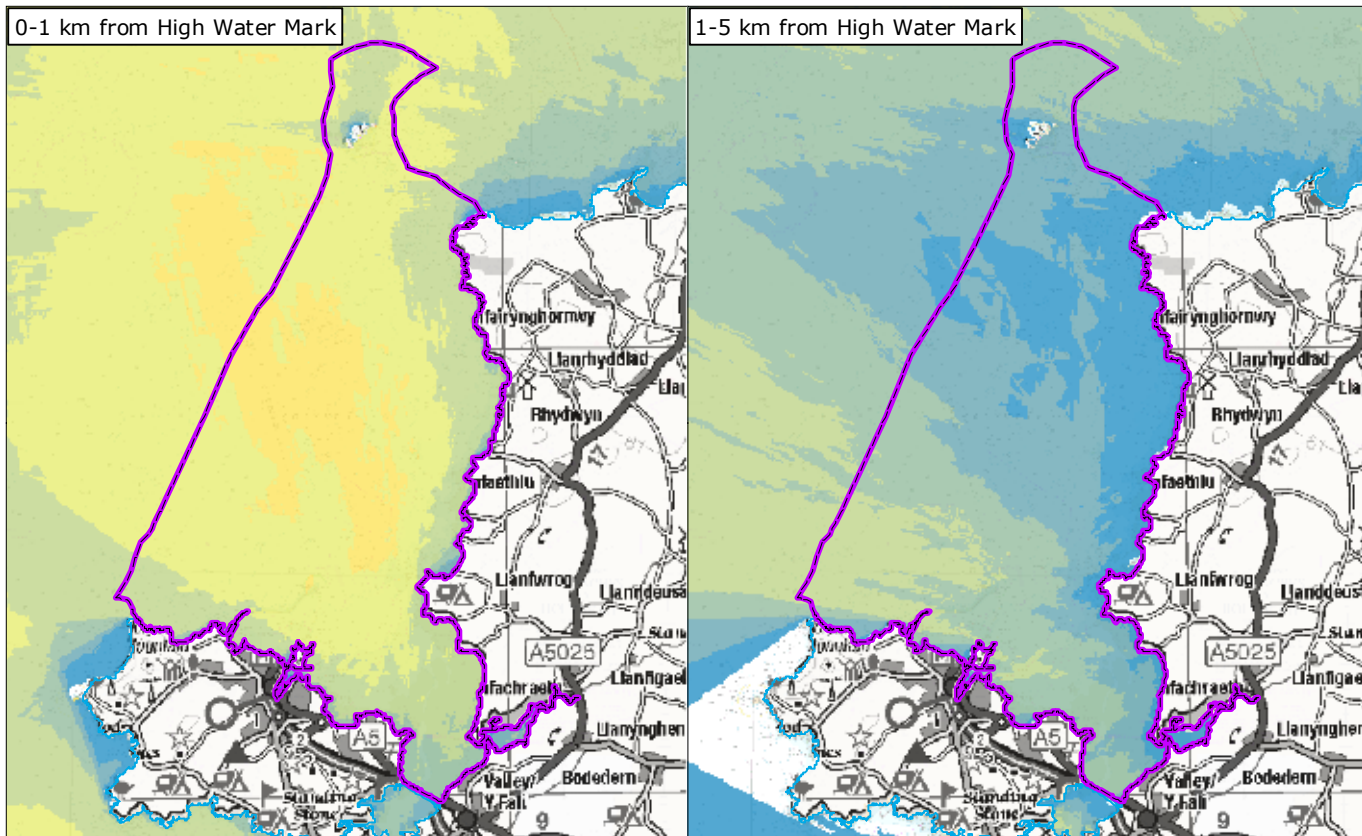
**Land with Views of:  
MCA 07: Holyhead Bay  
and The Skerries**

Source: LUC, NRW, OceanWise



Map Scale @ A4: 1:150,000

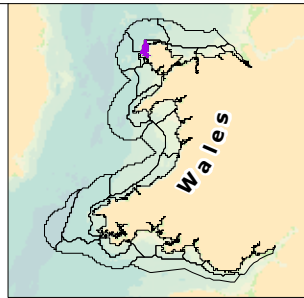




07: Holyhead Bay and The Skerries  
 Wales Inshore Marine Plan Area

**Visibility of sea from land (percentile)**

	<10 (Lowest)		51-60
	11-20		61-70
	21-30		71-80
	31-40		81-90
	41-50		91-100 (Highest)



Wales National Seascape Assessment

**Relative Visibility of the Sea Surface from Viewers on Land**  
**MCA 07: Holyhead Bay and The Skerries**

LUC

Map Scale @ A4: 1:170,000