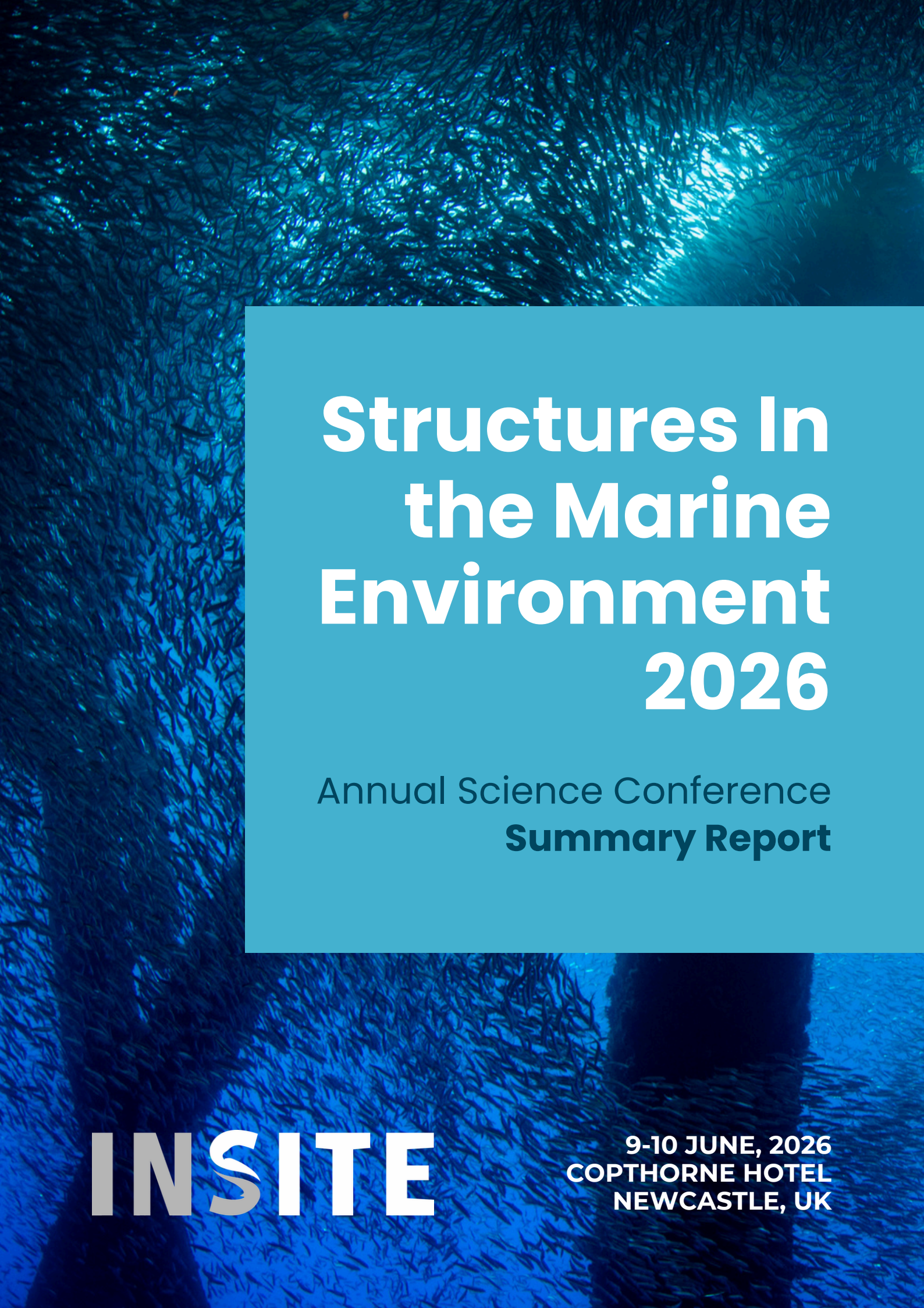




Structures In the Marine Environment 2026

Annual Science Conference
Summary Report

INSITE

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CONFERENCE HEADLINES

The **2026 Structures In the Marine Environment (SIME) Conference**, held on 9–10 June in Newcastle upon Tyne, brought together approximately 120 researchers, regulators, policymakers, industry representatives, consultants and environmental organisations to examine the ecological, economic and social implications of Marine Artificial Structures (MAS) in the context of the offshore energy transition.

The conference explored the full lifecycle of marine artificial structures, from design and deployment through operation, monitoring and decommissioning, and considered whether existing approaches to their management need to evolve to better align climate action, biodiversity recovery, energy security and sustainable marine management. Across six themed sessions, two keynote presentations and a stakeholder engagement workshop, speakers presented emerging research, policy developments, practical case studies and decision-making approaches.

The conference was an important opportunity for the INSITE community to share emerging evidence and explore how research can inform policy, regulation and practice. Presentations from INSITE Phase 3 projects - including VALMAS, READ-ME and CoRRODE - demonstrated the breadth of current research into the ecological, social and governance dimensions of marine artificial structures, while wider contributions highlighted the importance of connecting this evidence with industry practice, regulatory processes and public values.

A consistent message throughout the conference was that **offshore structures should no longer be viewed solely as engineering assets. They are also components of wider ecological, social, economic and governance systems, with effects that can persist and evolve over decades**. This has important implications for how decisions about deployment, operation, repurposing and decommissioning are made.



SEVERAL OVERARCHING THEMES EMERGED:

- **A long-term, system-wide vision is needed.** A 100-year vision for the North Sea could provide a framework for considering oil and gas and offshore wind infrastructure collectively, while integrating energy security, circular economy principles, nature-positive approaches and longer-term marine planning.
- Energy transitions are also transitions in governance and public values. **Historical decisions continue to shape today's marine environment and infrastructure landscape.** The transition from offshore oil and gas to renewable energy therefore requires not only technological change, but also new approaches to governance, regulation and societal decision-making.
- **Decommissioning is not ecologically neutral.** Removal can eliminate established artificial reef communities and alter biodiversity, ecological connectivity and food-web dynamics. Decisions should therefore be based on case-specific assessments of ecological trade-offs rather than assumptions that complete removal is always the environmentally preferable outcome.
- **Lifecycle thinking needs to be embedded earlier.** Decommissioning should be considered from the outset of infrastructure planning and design, alongside opportunities for life extension, repowering, reuse, repurposing and circularity. Offshore wind presents an opportunity to learn from the legacy of oil and gas rather than reproduce existing end-of-life challenges.
- **Nature-positive approaches require better evidence and decision frameworks.** Nature-inclusive design and natural capital approaches could help recognise and value the ecological functions of marine artificial structures, but significant evidence gaps remain, particularly around fisheries, carbon and social values.
- **Decision-making needs to move beyond project-by-project assessment.** Increasingly crowded marine environments require system-wide approaches that consider cumulative impacts, ecological connectivity and opportunities for positive outcomes, supported by standardised evidence and interoperable data.
- Social values and public legitimacy matter. **Effective marine management requires more than scientific evidence.** Ocean literacy, meaningful stakeholder engagement and attention to procedural and distributive equity are essential to developing decisions that are both scientifically robust and socially legitimate.
- **Adaptive management and long-term monitoring are essential.** The ecological functions and social values of marine artificial structures can change over time. Decisions therefore need to be supported by monitoring, evidence development and the ability to adapt management as knowledge and environmental conditions evolve.

Overall, the conference highlighted a shift from viewing decommissioning as a discrete end-of-life compliance activity towards understanding marine infrastructure and asset transition as part of long-term marine and energy system management.

Delivering this transition will require stronger connections between science, policy, regulation, industry and society, alongside governance frameworks capable of weighing removal, partial removal, retention, reuse and repurposing against broader environmental and societal objectives.



DAY ONE

SUMMARY

OPENING KEYNOTE: TRANSITION AT SEA, OR TRANSITION IN THINKING?

The opening keynote by [Karen Alexander \(Heriot Watt University\)](#), used historical energy transitions to frame the current shift from offshore oil and gas towards renewable energy. Drawing on the [TRANSECTS](#) (Transitions in Energy for Coastal Communities Over Time and Space) project, the presentation compared two marine energy transitions: from whale oil to offshore oil and gas (Fig. 1), and from offshore oil and gas to offshore wind.

A key message was that **energy transitions are not simply technological or economic shifts but reshape marine environments, coastal communities, governance systems and public values.** They involve changes in governance, regulation, societal expectations and environmental management, with decisions made during one transition often creating legacies that persist into the next.

The keynote therefore challenged the assumption that the current offshore energy transition is primarily about replacing one form of energy infrastructure with another. Instead, it represents a broader transition in how society understands, values and manages the marine environment in the context of climate change. This has important implications for the management of offshore infrastructure: decisions made today about decommissioning, retention, reuse and new development will shape the marine environment and coastal communities for decades to come.



Figure 1. AI-generated image from Karen Alexander's keynote, depicting the offshore oil and gas transition.

SESSION 1

FROM LEGACY TO FUTURE – UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MARINE ARTIFICIAL STRUCTURES

SESSION SUMMARY

The first session explored how marine artificial structures interact with marine ecosystems and the implications this has for future management and decommissioning decisions.

Anaëlle Lemasson (University of Plymouth) presented findings from a recent global review of marine artificial structure decommissioning, highlighting the ecological trade-offs associated with complete removal and partial or in situ decommissioning. This INSITE research demonstrates that **while complete removal may restore the seabed to conditions closer to its pre-development state, it can also result in the loss of established biological communities that have developed on structures over time.** These artificial reef communities may contribute to biodiversity, ecological connectivity and food-web dynamics. Decommissioning decisions therefore need to consider not only the potential impacts of retaining structures, but also the ecological consequences of their removal (Fig. 2).

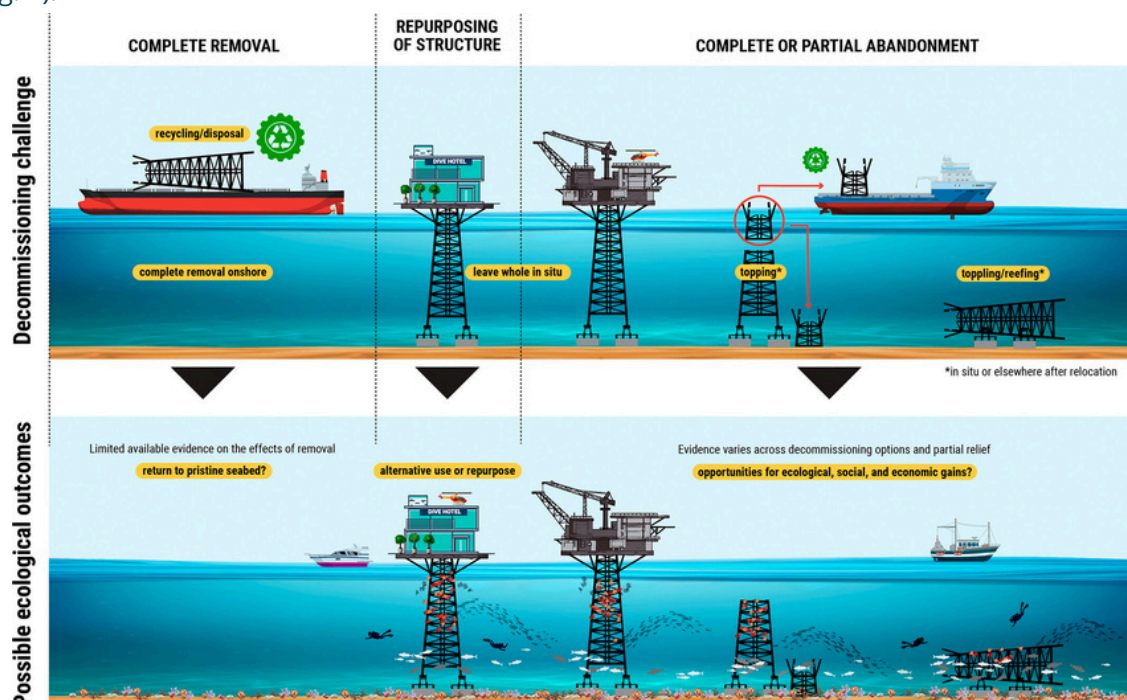


Figure 2. Image from Lemasson and Knights (2026) visualising the environmental effects of various decommissioning options for oil and gas platforms, based on their systematic evidence synthesis.

Other speakers highlighted the difficulties of interpreting such complex ecological effects. While offshore structures may support marine life, ecological benefits vary significantly according to location, design, age, and surrounding environmental conditions. Several presentations also highlighted the importance of distinguishing between increased abundance and genuine ecological enhancement.

INSITE research presented by Tan Tjui Yeuw (Wageningen University) examined the mechanisms through which artificial reef communities associated with offshore energy structures can influence water filtration. The research demonstrated how **structures can facilitate coexistence between mussels and zooplankton by altering local hydrodynamic conditions and creating distinct niches for filter-feeding organisms.** This provides further evidence that MAS can influence ecological processes beyond simply providing physical habitat.

Leandra Kornau (Wageningen University) presented complementary INSITE research examining benthic food-web complexity around two contrasting offshore structures: an older oil and gas platform and a younger offshore wind turbine. Using stable isotope analysis, **the study identified a greater range of food sources, more species at lower trophic levels and a greater presence of fish and other predators around the oil and gas platform.** However, the study could not establish the extent to which these differences were attributable to the age, location or spatial complexity of the structures, as these factors were not independently tested. The findings nevertheless illustrate the potential for offshore assets to function as components of wider food webs and ecological networks, rather than simply as physical structures within the marine environment.

These findings raise important questions for regulatory frameworks that have historically been developed around assumptions of full removal at end-of-life. As evidence grows that structures can develop ecological functions over time, **the environmental consequences of removal need to be considered alongside the potential risks and benefits of leaving structures in place.** This reinforces the need for case-by-case, evidence-based assessment rather than a presumption that either removal or retention is inherently the environmentally preferable option.

Jay Butler (WSP Consulting) outlined a forward-looking approach to nature-positive deployment, highlighting the potential to **combine AI-driven analytics with remote monitoring technologies to support more responsive environmental management** (Fig. 3). Such approaches could enable operators to better understand and manage ecological outcomes throughout the lifecycle of offshore infrastructure, with the potential to move beyond mitigating environmental impacts towards actively designing infrastructure that provides ecological value alongside its primary energy function.



Figure 3. Screenshot from a video featured in Jay Butler’s presentation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The session established a central theme that continued throughout the conference: **offshore structures can create both ecological risks and opportunities.** Understanding their role in marine ecosystems requires consideration of ecological function, context and change over time, with decommissioning decisions based on evidence of the trade-offs associated with removal, partial removal and retention rather than one-size-fits-all assumptions about environmental benefits or impacts.

SESSION 2

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF LESSER-KNOWN MARINE ARTIFICIAL STRUCTURES

SESSION SUMMARY

The second session broadened the discussion beyond offshore energy infrastructure to consider a diverse range of marine artificial structures, including subsea pipelines, dumped munitions, shipwrecks, meteorological masts and structures designed to support nature-inclusive design (NID). Across these examples, a common challenge emerged: structures can simultaneously present environmental risks and provide ecological functions, while their **long-term management is often complicated by fragmented regulatory responsibilities and limited understanding of their cumulative effects.**

PIPELINES

Christoph Gade (National Decommissioning Centre, University of Aberdeen) presented findings from INSITE's CoRRODE project), which examines the long-term degradation and environmental risks associated with approximately 40,000 km of subsea pipelines. The research highlighted **significant differences in regulatory approaches across the North Sea**, with the UK retaining a removal-first baseline while in situ decommissioning is more commonly applied in Dutch and Norwegian waters.

The CoRRODE project is investigating pipeline corrosion processes, including electrochemical, microbial-enhanced and erosion-corrosion mechanisms, as well as the potential transport of corrosion products and particulates beyond the original pipeline footprint and the mobilisation of residual contaminants following cessation of production. **Early findings also point to limitations in current pipeline cleaning standards**, which focus primarily on reducing hydrocarbon contamination but may give less consideration to other substances that can accumulate within pipelines, including mercury, scale, wax residues and naturally occurring radioactive materials (NORMs).



Figure 4. An image of risers and umbilicals from a platform in the North Sea. Images from Joe Ferris' presentation at SIME 2026.

Joe Ferris (ECAP Consultancy) provided a critical assessment of existing Environmental Appraisals and Comparative Assessments used to inform pipeline end-of-life decisions. He highlighted concerns around reliance on outdated reference frameworks and gaps in the treatment of contaminants such as mercury and NORMs. The scale of materials associated with offshore infrastructure also presents a significant challenge: estimates for in situ decommissioning on the UK Continental Shelf between 2020 and 2026 include approximately 11,930 tonnes of plastics and 22,140 tonnes of metals, while a 0.8 GW offshore wind farm could involve approximately 2,315 tonnes of plastic associated with subsea cabling.

The Norwegian-funded [Plaschem](#) project has also identified around 16,000 chemical additives associated with marine plastics, many of which have potential endocrine-disrupting properties.

Together, these presentations highlighted the **potential for significant environmental risks associated with the long-term degradation of offshore infrastructure that may not be fully captured by current assessment and regulatory approaches.**

MUNITIONS DUMPS

[Tülin Fidan](#) ([German Maritime Museum](#)) highlighted the **significant quantities of conventional and chemical munitions and unexploded ordnance remaining in the North Sea** (Fig. 5). Building on work undertaken through North T-Rex (2018–2023), the [REMARCO](#) project (Remediation, Management, Monitoring and Cooperation addressing North Sea UXO) estimates that **approximately 1.3 million tonnes remain**, creating complex and long-term challenges for environmental monitoring and risk management.



Figure 5. Life-encrusted grenades at the HMS Basilisk munitions dumping site, North Sea, showing ordnance colonised by marine organisms — © VLIZ. Presented by Tülin Fidan, at SIME 2026.

Historical disposal practices have resulted in dispersed contamination extending beyond formally designated dumping sites. Concerns include the persistence of toxic TNT metabolites as munitions corrode, alongside reported ecological effects such as elevated tumour incidence in fish populations near some dumping areas. At the same time, **these sites can become colonised by reef-dwelling organisms, creating a management dilemma in which structures may simultaneously represent potential pollution sources and established artificial reef habitats.**

SHIPWRECKS

[Harriet Rushton](#) ([UK Ministry of Defence; MOD](#)) and [Antony Firth](#) ([Historic England](#); MDEHA project – Marine Data Exchange Heritage Accelerator) provided complementary perspectives on the management of shipwrecks, particularly those associated with Royal Navy heritage (Fig. 6). Their presentations highlighted the **need for active, long-term monitoring rather than static or "set and forget" approaches, given that wrecks can present continuing pollution risks while also developing ecological functions.**



Figure 6. HMS Falmouth, a Royal Navy wreck site colonised by marine life. Image: M. Radley. Presented by Anthony Firth, at SIME 2026.

Case studies demonstrated the complex interaction between environmental risks and ecological benefits. Some wrecks continue to present risks associated with oil leakage and other contaminants, while others support diverse biological communities and function as artificial reefs. As with other marine artificial structures, **the balance between risk and ecological value varies considerably between sites, reinforcing the need for site-specific assessment and long-term stewardship.**



Figure 7. HMS/M A1 (Protected Wreck, LEN 1000043), showing marine life sheltering within the wreck structure. Image: Wessex Archaeology.

OFFSHORE METEOROLOGICAL MASTS

Tim Wilms (Vattenfall) presented findings from the decommissioning of a 16-year-old meteorological mast in Danish waters (Fig. 8), providing insights into ecological succession and the environmental effects of removal activities. Monitoring before removal identified clear habitat zonation, with algae-dominated communities on the more light-exposed southern side and fauna-dominated assemblages, including anemones and sponges, on the more shaded northern side. **The structure supported 18 native species not recorded on nearby natural habitats, alongside three non-native species** that were already well established in Danish waters.



Figure 8. An offshore meteorological mast in Danish waters during decommissioning. Source: Tim Wilms, Vattenfall, presented at SIME 2026.

The study also examined noise generated during decommissioning. **Dredging was identified as the most acoustically disruptive activity**, with potential to exceed temporary threshold shift ranges for harbour porpoises at distances of up to approximately 2.6 km.

Jacking operations generated elevated but lower levels of disturbance, while monopile cutting using **internal hydro-jetting techniques produced comparatively lower acoustic impacts**. The case study demonstrated the value of monitoring structures before, during and after decommissioning, both to understand ecological succession and to inform decisions about the environmental consequences of different removal techniques.

NATURE-INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

The session also explored the potential to design marine infrastructure to deliver ecological benefits alongside its primary engineering function. Samuel Hickling (ArcMarine) presented evidence from ArcMarine's reef mat and reef cube (Fig. 9) projects in Plymouth Sound, demonstrating how **engineered structures can be designed to support biodiversity objectives**. The discussion highlighted the potential for such approaches to be **incorporated into Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and Marine Net Gain (MNG)** frameworks, potentially enabling the ecological enhancement provided by engineered structures to be recognised more systematically in planning and development decisions.



Figure 9. ArcMarine's reef mat and reef cube units prior to deployment in Plymouth Sound. Source: Samuel Hickling, ArcMarine.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The session demonstrated that the environmental management of marine artificial structures extends well beyond offshore energy infrastructure and encompasses a wide range of legacy and contemporary structures with different risk profiles, ecological functions and governance arrangements. A key message was the **need to consider marine artificial structures as part of an interconnected marine ecosystem, rather than managing different structure types through isolated regulatory frameworks. Divergent decommissioning baselines across the North Sea can create inconsistent environmental outcomes and potentially distort decisions and markets.** At the same time, complex legacy risks -including contaminants associated with pipelines, plastics and dumped munitions - require improved data, monitoring and shared approaches to risk assessment. This will require better regional coordination, shared data and assessment standards, and greater integration of ecological evidence into decisions about decommissioning, retention and nature-inclusive design.

SESSION 3

Communication and Consultation in a Just, Nature-Positive Offshore Energy Transition

SESSION SUMMARY

The third session highlighted the importance of public engagement, ocean literacy and stakeholder participation in shaping a just and nature-positive offshore energy transition. A consistent message was that **effective marine management cannot rely on scientific evidence alone**: decisions about offshore infrastructure are also shaped by public values, perceptions of fairness and the extent to which communities feel informed and able to participate.

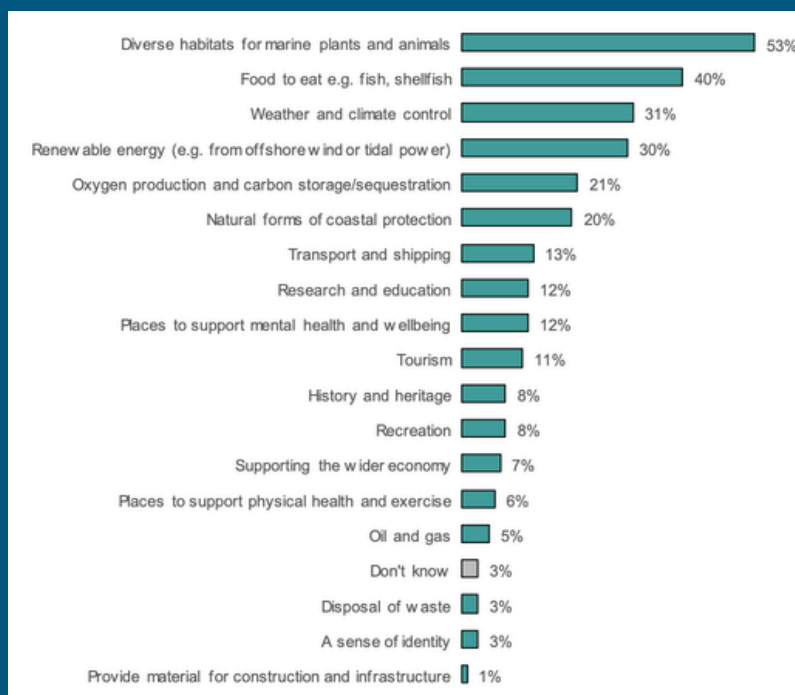


Figure 10. Public perceptions of the most important benefits of the marine environment (weighted %). Source: [Ocean Literacy Survey: Headline Report](#). Emma Mckinley, Cardiff University, presented at SIME 2026.

[Emma Mckinley \(Cardiff University\)](#) highlighted the importance of ocean literacy in developing whole-system approaches to marine management, such as those being developed in the [VALMAS project](#). Rather than being limited to the transfer of information, ocean literacy was presented as a broader societal outcome in which people understand, value and care for the ocean (Fig. 10) and are able to participate in its stewardship. **Effective approaches need to be place-based, climate-smart and co-developed across sectors, reaching beyond existing stakeholder "echo chambers". Improved ocean literacy can help build understanding of the potential implications of offshore infrastructure deployment, operation and decommissioning and support more inclusive decision-making.**

[Siân Rees \(University of Plymouth\)](#) introduced the [READ-ME project](#), which is investigating public and stakeholder attitudes towards the decommissioning of marine artificial structures, including oil and gas platforms, offshore wind farms and shipwrecks. The project is using **large-scale public surveys**, with more than 1,600 respondents, **to explore baseline attitudes and how views change in response to different evidence-based narratives covering 16 decommissioning scenarios**. The use of immersive 3D models and interactive geo-visualisations provides an innovative way of enabling participants to explore ecological and socio-economic trade-offs. The work links closely with VALMAS in exploring procedural equity (whether decision-making processes are fair) and distributive equity (whether the outcomes of decisions are fairly distributed).

Jenny Pope (artist) and Karen Boswarva (Haven Bay Environmental Ltd; Seasearch Coordinator Orkney and Shetland) presented the Shoogly Holm project in Orkney, demonstrating a different approach to community engagement through the integration of art, marine science and community wellbeing. The project involved the co-construction and monitoring of a nature-inclusive floating sculpture and mooring, with Seasearch citizen science protocols used to monitor ecological change over time (Fig. 11). The project illustrates how **creative and participatory approaches can provide tangible opportunities for communities to engage with marine environments and contribute to environmental stewardship.**



Figure 11. The Shoogly Holm project, Orkney: (A) the nature-inclusive floating sculpture - designed to be eye-catching, seaworthy, and bioreceptive - under construction on land; (B) the submerged mooring; (C) bioreceptive materials made by the community, designed to encourage colonisation by marine organisms. Source: Jenny Pope (Artist) and Karen Boswarva, Haven Bay Environmental Ltd, presented at SIME 2026.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The key messages from this session are that a **just and nature-positive offshore energy transition requires more than raising awareness or communicating scientific evidence. It requires meaningful participation in which communities and stakeholders can contribute to defining values, understanding trade-offs and shaping decisions.** Projects such as VALMAS and READ-ME demonstrate the importance of integrating social values and equity into decommissioning decisions, while initiatives such as Shoogly Holm show how creative and citizen science approaches can build stronger connections between communities and the marine environment. These approaches point towards a model of marine governance in which social legitimacy, procedural fairness and local knowledge are treated as integral to decision-making alongside scientific and environmental evidence.

SESSION 4

From Evidence to Action – Building Decision Making Frameworks

SESSION SUMMARY

The fourth session explored how scientific and social evidence can be translated into practical tools and decision-making frameworks to support more integrated approaches to offshore development, decommissioning and nature-positive management.

Nicola Beaumont (National Oceanography Centre) presented progress from the VALMAS project, which aims to understand the ecological, economic and social value of Marine Artificial Structures and use this evidence to inform nature-positive management throughout their lifecycle (Fig. 12). **VALMAS has mapped more than 400 stakeholder organisations and governance systems**, highlighting the complexity of the regulatory landscape within which future management decisions will need to operate. Its' evidence review also identified significant gaps in understanding ecosystem services: **evidence is strongest for biodiversity, weaker for fish and fisheries, and substantially more limited for carbon sequestration and storage**. VALMAS is using these findings to develop a natural capital framework capable of assessing different values under alternative climate, management and decommissioning scenarios, supported by modelling. Model fact sheets have been published to build understanding of each models' capabilities (FVCOM, ERSEM, PYLAG, MIZER, EwE, StrathE2E). **VALMAS is also creating a coordinated community of practice and evidence-based roadmap for a just, nature-positive energy transition. Follow [this link to join the community of practice](#).**

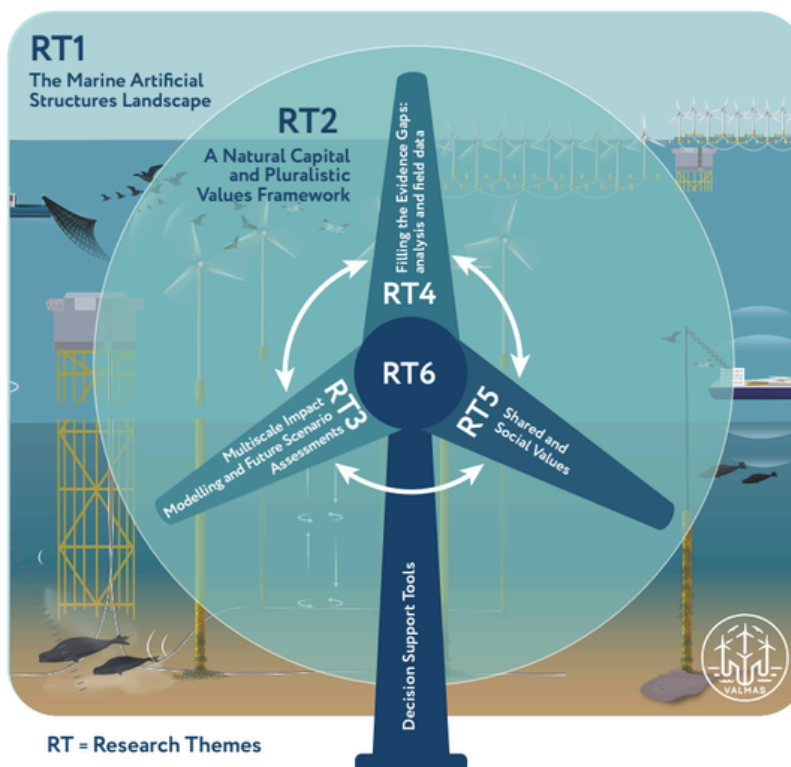


Figure 12. Infographic showing the VALMAS project's six interconnected research themes (RT1–RT6). Source: Nicola Beaumont, National Oceanography Centre, presented at SIME 2026.

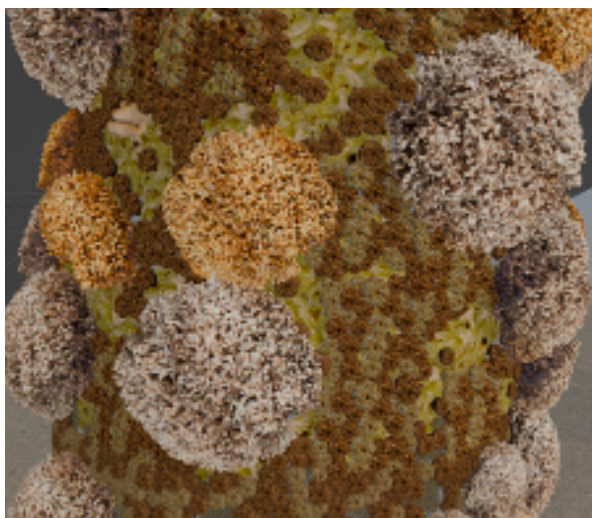


Figure 13. A 3D-photogrammetry model of marine growth on an offshore structure. Source: Megan Squire, University of Aberdeen/National Decommissioning Centre, presented at SIME 2026.

Megan Squire (University of Aberdeen / National Decommissioning Centre), demonstrated how 3D simulations of marine growth could improve both stakeholder understanding and decommissioning decision-making. Using 3D photogrammetry of museum specimens, **the project is developing a digital library of 83 species models that can be combined to simulate realistic marine communities on offshore structures** (Fig. 13). These visualisations address the limitations of interpreting ecological communities through often poor-quality or turbid remotely operated vehicle footage.

The models are being integrated into READ-ME and used within an interactive dome simulator, allowing stakeholders to explore ecological trade-offs more directly. The technology also has potential practical applications for improving estimates of biomass associated with offshore structures.

Nathalie van Caster (International Marine and Dredging Consultants) introduced Marine Ecosystem Performance (MEsP) 2.0, **a standardised, science-based tool for assessing the environmental performance of offshore marine projects**, particularly during early-stage offshore wind planning. The tool divides the marine environment into discrete seabed and water-column components and uses pre- and post-intervention scoring to assess project impacts and the effectiveness of mitigation measures and nature-inclusive design. The approach provides a potential basis for more consistent assessment of environmental performance and the effectiveness of interventions.

Daniel Wood (Cefas) examined the challenges of applying Cumulative Impact Assessment (CIA) within Marine Spatial Planning, drawing on the UKRI-funded component of the GES4SEAS project. Although CIA is increasingly important in increasingly crowded marine environments, its effectiveness is constrained by data availability, inconsistent datasets and uncertainty about future pressures. Risk-based mapping can support spatial planning but needs to be interpreted carefully given these limitations. The discussion also highlighted the difficulty of incorporating intangible social values into spatial assessments. Looking forward, **CIA could evolve from a primarily risk-focused approach towards broader "impacts and opportunities" frameworks**, enabling decision-makers to consider not only cumulative environmental pressures but also potential positive ecological and social outcomes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The session highlighted that the offshore energy transition requires a shift from fragmented evidence gathering and project-specific impact assessment towards integrated, standardised and system-wide decision-making frameworks. Tools such as those developed by VALMAS, MEsP 2.0, 3D visualisation and cumulative impact assessment can help bring together ecological, social and economic evidence and make complex trade-offs more accessible to decision-makers and stakeholders. **The next step is to develop approaches that not only identify and quantify risks, but also recognise cumulative benefits and opportunities for nature-positive outcomes.** This could provide a stronger basis for comparing management options across borders and throughout the lifecycle of marine infrastructure, while creating clearer incentives for industry to adopt nature-inclusive approaches.

DAY TWO

SUMMARY

SECOND KEYNOTE: CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE NEEDS TOWARDS THE ALIGNMENT OF CLIMATE, NATURE AND ENERGY SCIENCE TO INFORM FUTURE MARINE POLICY

The second keynote, delivered by [Andrew Gill \(Australian Institute of Marine Science\)](#), highlighted the need to move from project- and impact-based approaches towards more systems-based approaches to offshore management and decision-making. As climate mitigation, biodiversity recovery, economic development and energy security increasingly intersect in the marine environment, decision-making needs to account for cumulative effects, ecosystem functioning, ecological connectivity and long-term environmental outcomes.

Drawing on examples from Australia, Andrew demonstrated the value of co-developing research with industry, policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that scientific evidence addresses the questions that decision-makers face, to produce more targeted research and practical methods for improving management. **Co-development of research questions between researchers and stakeholders, such as policy makers, takes time, effort and many iterations, but typically leads to more targeted research and prescriptive methods.**

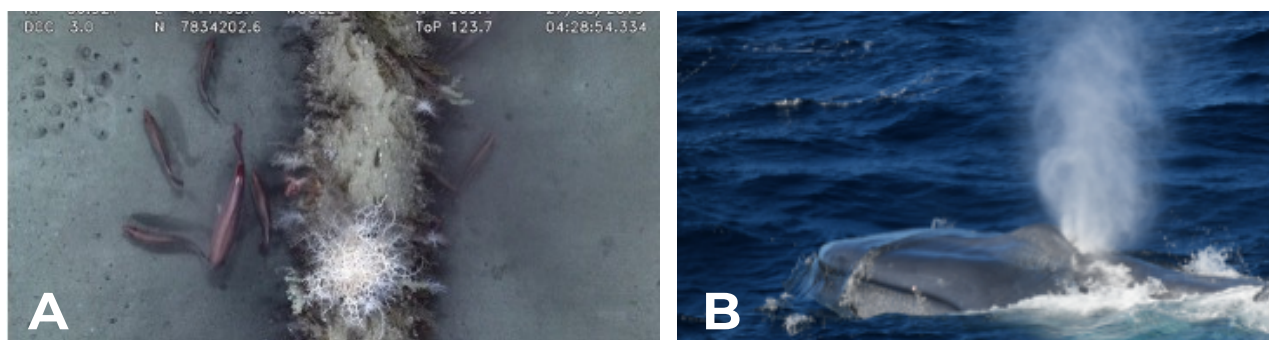


Figure 14. Examples of Australian marine research informing offshore management: (A) fish associating with subsea infrastructure; (B) a pygmy blue whale surfacing, from tracking studies used to identify migration, feeding, and breeding areas. Source: Andrew Gill, Australian Institute of Marine Science, presented at SIME 2026.

Examples of research included combining multiple methods to better understand fish associations with oil and gas structures (Fig. 14-A) and their significance for wider population dynamics; evidence that **pipelines can contribute to species connectivity across natural reef systems** in the Bass Strait; and **industry-funded tracking data that identified important migration, feeding and breeding areas for pygmy blue whales** (Fig. 14-B). The latter revealed a significant mismatch between observed whale movements and existing designated Biologically Important Areas, prompting calls for these areas and associated policy to be reviewed.

The keynote also highlighted emerging collaborative work through ICES working groups, including development of the DaPSIR (Driver, Activity, Pressure, State, Impact, Response) and TOR-C frameworks to support fisheries and wider ecological management.

A key implication is that future offshore policy will require a shift towards integrated, system-level decision-making which more strongly integrates science, policy, regulation and effective stakeholder engagement. This will depend on **stronger collaboration between researchers, policymakers, regulators and industry** to co-produce the evidence needed to understand cumulative effects, ecological connectivity and long-term outcomes. It also highlights the importance of ensuring that **policy frameworks and spatial designations remain responsive to new evidence**, particularly as the marine environment and patterns of human activity change.

SESSION 5

ALIGNING CLIMATE, NATURE AND ENERGY SECURITY WITH OFFSHORE CIRCULARITY

SESSION SUMMARY

The fifth session focused on the emerging policy and governance challenges associated with offshore wind decommissioning. As the first generation of offshore wind farms approaches the end of its operational life, there is increasing recognition that **decommissioning needs to be considered alongside wider objectives for energy security, climate action, biodiversity recovery and marine planning**. The issue is also gaining attention at the regional level through the OSPAR Task Group on Offshore Wind Decommissioning, with new policy measures for the North Sea expected in 2028.

Lizzie Turabi (DESNZ) highlighted the tension between the rapid expansion of offshore wind and the **need to plan for infrastructure end-of-life from the outset**. Longer asset lifetimes, life extension and repowering may provide alternatives to full decommissioning, reinforcing the importance of considering end-of-life options earlier in project design and planning.



Eline van Onselen (North Sea Foundation) emphasised the need for stronger regional collaboration and science-based approaches to offshore governance. **The North Sea Alliance provides a platform for supporting ecosystem-based management and exploring approaches such as nature-friendly decommissioning**. Infographics are soon to be released to highlight the ecological costs and benefits of operational oil and gas, and offshore wind structures. Get notified when infographics (Fig. 15) are ready by scanning the QR code.



Scan the QR code to explore the interactive infographics

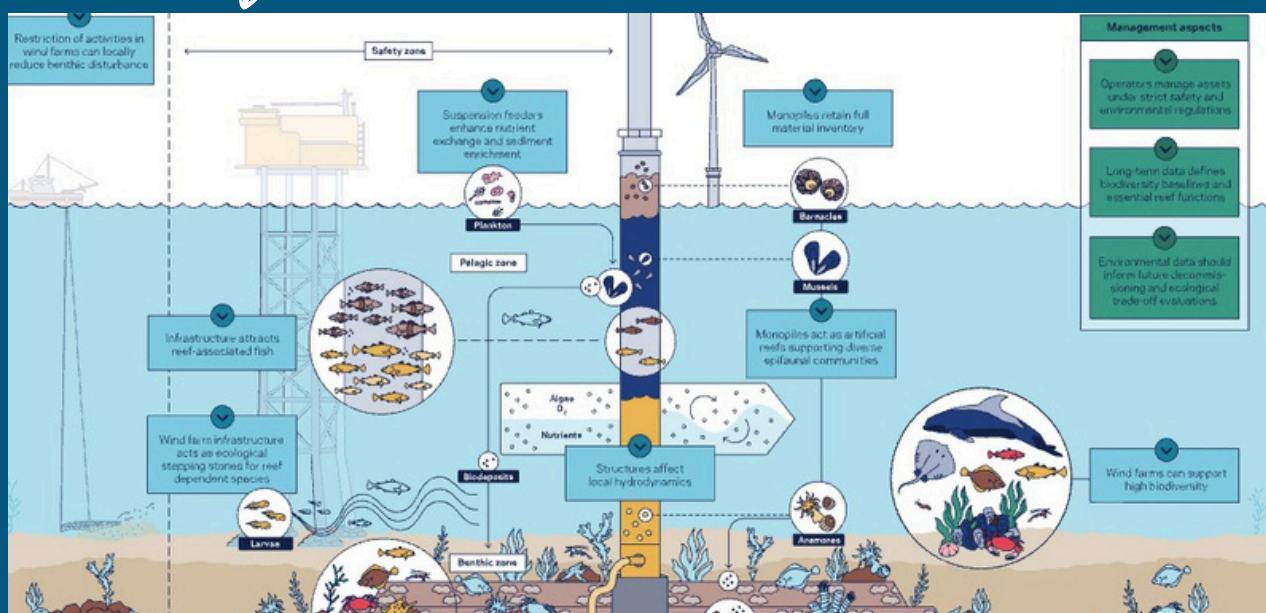


Figure 15. A screenshot from the North Sea Foundation's interactive infographics illustrating the ecological interactions associated with offshore oil, gas, and wind infrastructure. Source: Eline van Onselen, North Sea Foundation, presented at SIME 2026.

Tim Adey (Office for Environmental Protection) similarly highlighted the importance of policy integration and effective implementation across the increasingly complex landscape of marine environmental policy and regulation. In their **mission to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account**, the OEP currently has open consultations investigating the UK Government's approaches and delivery of the UK Marine Strategy Part 1, Marine Net Gain, the Joint Fisheries Statement, Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs), Fisheries Management Plans, Marine Recovery Fund, and Offshore wind compensation. The UK Environmental Plan is also currently under scrutiny.

Across the session, speakers drew on lessons from oil and gas decommissioning, particularly the importance of planning for future costs, technological requirements and environmental consequences. There was **support for considering removal, partial removal, retention, life extension and repurposing as potential options, rather than assuming that full removal should always be the default**. However, any decision to retain infrastructure would need to be supported by robust evidence of ecological benefit, alongside clear long-term governance and accountability arrangements.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The session highlighted that **offshore decommissioning needs to move from a predetermined end-of-life requirement towards a more flexible, evidence-based and adaptive approach**. Decisions should be informed by the specific ecological, environmental and societal context of each asset, while being integrated with wider marine spatial planning, environmental objectives and energy policy. This will require **stronger alignment between currently fragmented policy and regulatory frameworks**, supported by **long-term monitoring** and the ability to **adapt decisions** as evidence and environmental conditions evolve.



SESSION 6

Offshore Circularity and Next-Life Solutions

SESSION SUMMARY

The final session explored the shift from viewing decommissioning as a discrete end-of-life activity towards a broader asset transition approach, in which offshore infrastructure is managed throughout its lifecycle to support circularity, resource security, nature recovery and long-term energy system objectives.

Anne Velenturf (University of Leeds) presented findings from the RESCUE project highlighting the fragmented regulatory landscape governing offshore wind lifecycles which is challenging to navigate, and the need to embed circular economy principles from the outset of asset design and planning. Meeting the UK's offshore wind ambitions will require substantial quantities of steel, concrete and other materials, much of which is currently under-prioritised in policies. **Circularity**, including reuse, recycling and recovered-material markets, **needs to be built into procurement, consenting and regulatory frameworks from the outset rather than addressed only once assets reach end-of-life. A long-term vision for circularity needs to be established**, setting recycling targets in tenders, and creating markets for recovered materials, to ensure meeting net-zero targets and ensuring resource security.

Dickon Howell (Howell Marine Consulting; INSITE Programme) argued that decommissioning should be understood as a system design question rather than simply a compliance requirement. Evidence from the **INSITE programme shows that removal is not ecologically neutral**: offshore structures can support distinct ecological communities, increase habitat complexity and contribute to ecological connectivity. The challenge is therefore not simply a lack of ecological evidence, but the absence of sufficiently clear governance and delivery pathways through which regulators and developers can manage long-term liability and stewardship. **A more strategic approach is needed in which removal, partial removal and retention are assessed against wider nature recovery objectives and future marine uses** (Fig. 16).

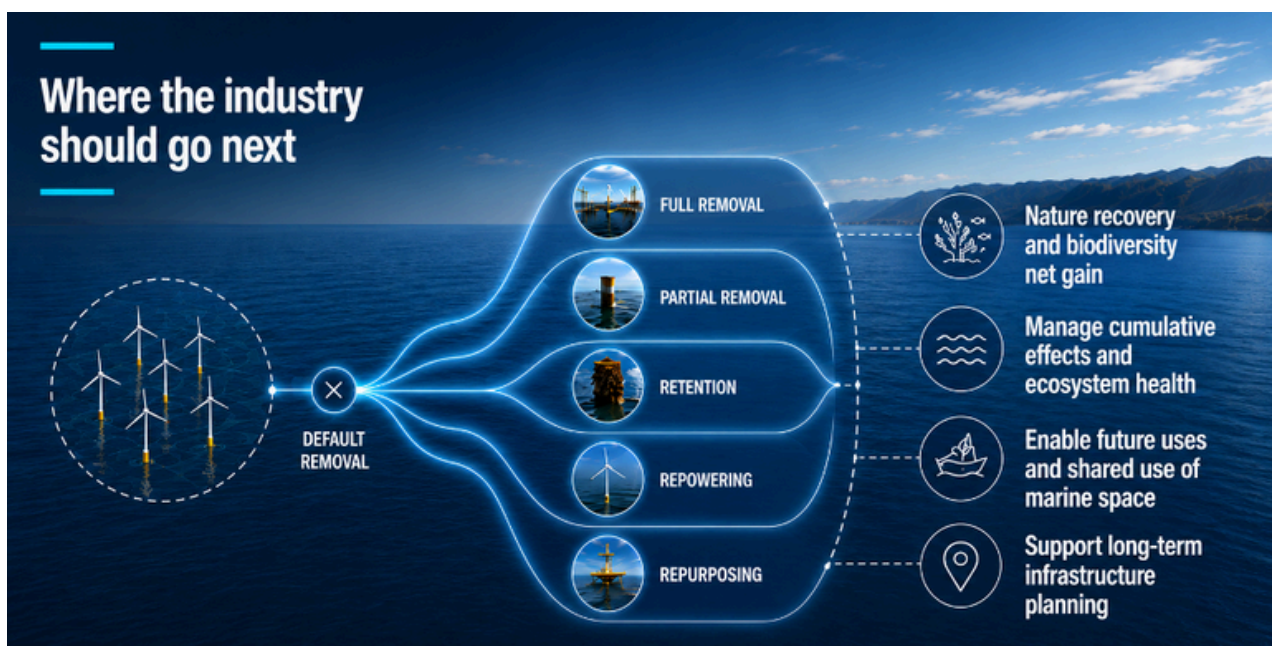


Figure 16. Illustration of the decision framework for offshore decommissioning end-of-life options. Source: Dickon Howell, Howell Marine Consulting/INSITE. Presented at SIME 2026.

Oliver Goldsmith (Marine Management Organisation; MMO) described the **cross-government decommissioning working group** established in 2025 as an important mechanism for addressing fragmented governance. Comprising approximately 20 government organisations (Fig. 17), the group aims to **develop a common decision-making framework, strengthen collaboration across government and improve knowledge sharing between regulators and researchers**. This could also provide a route for emerging evidence, including INSITE research, to be incorporated more effectively into regulatory decision-making to provide guidance and assurance for developers. Limited government capacity remains a significant constraint, reinforcing the importance of coordination and shared approaches.



Figure 17. Logos of the government organisations comprising the cross-government decommissioning working group established in 2025. Source: Oliver Goldsmith, MMO, presented at SIME 2026.

Claire Hepworth (North Sea Transition Authority; NSTA) presented the NSTA's **Asset Transition Management framework**, which considers technical, commercial and emissions factors alongside Petroleum Act obligations when assessing end-of-life options.

The framework (Fig. 18) **encourages operators to consider alternatives to decommissioning, including life extension, reuse and potential repurposing for activities such as carbon capture and storage and hydrogen**, while the infrastructure screening tool supports a more strategic, **hub-based approach to potential reuse and facilitate collaboration between asset owners**. This can support cost-effective outcomes for well plug and abandonment, which currently accounts for approximately 48% of total decommissioning costs.



Figure 18. Infographic representing the Asset Transition Management framework. Source: Claire Hepworth, North Sea Transition Authority, presented at SIME 2026.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The key message is that **asset transition is no longer just an end-of-life activity but is central to managing the UK's long-term energy systems, and offshore decommissioning needs to be reframed as part of a wider, long-term process**. Delivering this requires circularity and future reuse to be considered from the outset, alongside ecological functions and nature recovery objectives, and supported by governance frameworks that can manage long-term liability and stewardship. The session underlined the **need for a long-term vision for the North Sea that considers oil, gas and offshore wind infrastructure as part of a connected energy and marine system, rather than managing each asset or sector in isolation**. Achieving this will require moving beyond project-specific decisions towards system-wide frameworks that can balance resource security, climate, nature and future marine uses over multiple decades.

WORKSHOP

READ-ME STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

The workshop led by [Paula Duffy \(University of Aberdeen\)](#), and [Daryl Burdon \(Daryl Burdon Ltd\)](#), from the [READ-ME](#) project team took place on the afternoon of the second day, with the dual purpose of:

- **Exploring approaches for understanding public and stakeholder perceptions** of offshore decommissioning and marine artificial structures,
- and **informing the development of the READ-ME public survey** to investigate perceptions and attitudes to decommissioning offshore structures.

During the workshop participants from across sectors reviewed a range of decommissioning scenarios and discussed how different forms of evidence may influence stakeholder preferences. Discussions focused on procedural fairness, transparency, communication, and the role of values in decision-making. Feedback was gathered and will be used to refine the READ-ME public survey.

The **workshop reinforced the importance of developing decision-making processes that are both scientifically robust and socially legitimate**. Participants highlighted the need for clear communication of uncertainty, trade-offs, and potential outcomes associated with different management options.

The **READ-ME project team are conducting online surveys throughout September and October**, and there will be an **in-person workshop on the 5th of November 2026 at the [National Decommissioning Centre](#)**, Aberdeenshire. The READ-ME team invite interested stakeholders to engage and **[get in contact](#) to express interest in these processes**.



SCAN THE QR CODE

to express your interest in being kept informed about opportunities to take part in research and dissemination activities as the READ-ME project progresses.

CONCLUSION

SIME 2026, the 8th edition of the conference, marked a significant shift in how marine artificial structures are understood and managed. Across the six sessions, the discussion moved beyond viewing offshore infrastructure as individual assets with defined end-of-life points, towards recognising their evolving ecological, social and economic roles within a complex and changing marine and energy system. The evidence presented demonstrated that **structures can create both environmental risks and ecological opportunities, and that their functions and impacts can change over time**. This reinforces the need to consider their full lifecycle and to move beyond assumptions that removal is always the most environmentally beneficial outcome.

A central message from the conference was that a nature-positive offshore energy transition requires more than environmental evidence alone. It requires **integrated decision-making that brings together ecological science, natural capital, circular economy principles, industry realities, social values and regulatory frameworks**. Future decisions will need to consider not only individual project impacts, but also cumulative effects, ecological connectivity, resource security and opportunities to deliver positive environmental outcomes. This will require a shift from fragmented, risk-focused assessments towards system-wide frameworks that can identify and compare both impacts and opportunities.

The conference highlighted the **need for a long-term vision for the North Sea, extending beyond individual infrastructure lifecycles and political cycles**. Such a vision should consider oil and gas and offshore wind infrastructure collectively as part of a changing energy system, while recognising that decisions made today will shape the marine environment for decades to come. It also raises a fundamental societal question about **what forms of biodiversity and ecosystem function we value, and what we want the future North Sea to look like** as the seascape changes. Answering this will require meaningful engagement with communities and stakeholders, ensuring that decisions are not only evidence-based but also socially legitimate and procedurally fair.

Several priorities emerged. **Decommissioning should be approached flexibly and on a case-by-case basis**, with removal, partial removal, retention, reuse, repurposing and life extension assessed against their environmental and wider societal consequences. **Circularity should be embedded from the outset of infrastructure planning and design**, rather than treated solely as an end-of-life consideration. **Governance and regulatory frameworks need to become more coherent and adaptive**, providing credible pathways for managing long-term liability and stewardship while enabling emerging evidence to inform decisions. And **long-term monitoring and adaptive management will be essential** as ecological functions, environmental conditions and societal priorities evolve.

The **INSITE Phase 3 projects - including VALMAS, READ-ME and CoRRODE - will make important contributions to addressing these challenges** by strengthening understanding of natural capital, ecological processes, social values, decommissioning perceptions and the environmental risks associated with ageing infrastructure. Alongside this, initiatives such as **RESCUE**, the **North Sea Transition Authority's Asset Transition Management** approach and the **cross-government decommissioning working group** demonstrate how evidence, circularity and improved governance can begin to translate these principles into practice.

The strong participation and engagement throughout SIME 2026 demonstrated the value of bringing together researchers, industry, regulators, policymakers and wider society. This interdisciplinary network is critical to bridging the gap between evidence and action and to developing the governance and decision-making approaches needed for a long-term, just and nature-positive transition.

The challenge for the SIME community is now to build on this momentum: moving from understanding the risks and opportunities associated with marine artificial structures towards shaping a shared, long-term vision for how they can be responsibly managed and, where appropriate, contribute to a resilient and nature-positive future marine environment.

We look forward to continuing this vital journey together at SIME 2027.



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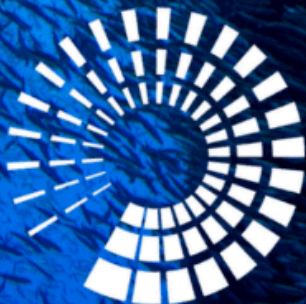
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/18084231>

YOUTUBE:

<https://www.youtube.com/@INSITENorthSea-r9s/featured>

ANNEX 1

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME



**STRUCTURES IN THE
MARINE ENVIRONMENT
Conference Programme**

9-10 June 2026 | Newcastle | Copthorne Hotel

SIME 2026

Structures in the Marine Environment Conference

9 – 10 June 2026 | Newcastle

Day 1 – Tuesday, 9 June 2026

TIME	TALK / ITEM	SPEAKER
09:00 – 09:30	Arrival – tea, coffee & pastries	
09:30 – 09:40	Conference opening	Henk van Rein INSITE Programme Director Team
09:40 – 10:15	Keynote address Transition at sea, or transition in thinking?	Karen Alexander Heriot-Watt University

Session 1 · From Legacy to Future: Decommissioning and Expansion in a Nature-Positive Era

Chair: Dave Paterson, Member of the INSITE Scientific Advisory Group / University of St Andrews

10:15 – 10:25	What happens after oil and gas decommissioning? A global systematic review of marine environmental effects	Anaëlle Lemasson University of Plymouth
10:25 – 10:35	Suspension-feeder refiltration promotes coexistence among aquatic primary consumers	Tan Tjui Yeuw Wageningen University & Research
10:35 – 10:45	Back to the future: old production platform predicts trophic structure in offshore wind farms	Leandra Kornau Wageningen University & Research
10:45 – 10:55	From decommissioning to nature positive deployment	Jay Butler WSP
10:55 – 11:15	Panel Q&A (20 min)	

11:15 – 11:45 Coffee, posters & networking

Session 2 · From the Unseen to the Under-Studied: Risks and Opportunities of Lesser-Known Marine Artificial Structures

Chair: Georgina Roberts, INSITE Programme Director Team

11:45 – 11:55	CoRRODE – Coating and Residue Release from Offshore Degraded Equipment	Christoph Gade The University of Aberdeen
11:55 – 12:05	Long-term risks from offshore marine energy infrastructure end-of-life management	Joe Ferris ECAP Consultancy Group
12:05 – 12:15	REMARCO – tracing dumped munitions in the North Sea	Tülin Fidan German Maritime Museum
12:15 – 12:25	Panel Q&A (10 min)	

TIME	TALK / ITEM	SPEAKER
12:25 – 12:35	A unique offshore test case: ecological and acoustic insights from a meteorological mast removal	Tim Wilms Vattenfall
12:35 – 12:45	From under-studied asset protection to accountable nature-inclusive structures: evidence from the Plymouth reef mat study	Samuel Hickling ARC Marine
12:45 – 12:55	MOD wrecks: potentially polluting underwater eutopias	Harriet Rushton Ministry of Defence - Salvage & Marine Operations
12:55 – 13:05	New information on the extent, distribution and character of wrecks and other artificial structures in English marine plan areas	Antony Firth Historic England
13:05 – 13:15 <i>Panel Q&A (10 min)</i>		

13:15 – 14:15 *Lunch & networking*

Session 3 · From Awareness to Shared Understanding: Communication and Consultation in a Just, Nature-Positive Offshore Energy Transition

Chair: Gretchen Bakke, Member of the INSITE Scientific Advisory Group / Humboldt University

14:15 – 14:30	Ocean literacy and MMS (extended talk)	Emma McKinley Cardiff University
14:30 – 14:45	READ-ME – Research to Explore Attitudes and perceptions to Decommissioning in the Marine Environment (extended talk)	Siân Rees University of Plymouth
14:45 – 15:00	Orkney – Seasearch Scotland / Shoogly Holm (extended talk)	Karen Boswarva & Jenny Pope Seasearch Scotland / Shoogly Holm
15:00 – 15:15 <i>Panel Q&A (15 min)</i>		

15:15 – 15:45 *Coffee, posters & networking*

Session 4 · From Evidence to Action: Building Transparent and Defensible Decision-Making Frameworks for the Offshore Energy Transition

Chair: Christine Maggs, Chair of the INSITE Scientific Advisory Group / Queen's University Belfast

15:45 – 16:05	VALMAS – Valuing Marine Artificial Structures (extended talk)	Nicky Beaumont National Oceanography Centre
16:05 – 16:15	3D visualisations of reef-like communities at offshore energy structures and their utilisation for stakeholder engagement	Megan Squire University of Aberdeen / National Decommissioning Centre
16:15 – 16:25	Marine Ecosystem Performance Framework (MEsP) 2.0: quantifying ecosystem impacts for offshore operations	Nathalie van Caster International Marine and Dredging Consultants
16:25 – 16:35	Here be (no?) dragons: the challenge of using cumulative impact assessments in marine spatial planning	Daniel Wood Cefas
16:35 – 16:50 <i>Panel Q&A (15 min)</i>		
16:50 – 17:00	Day close	Henk van Rein INSITE Programme Director Team

Day 2 – Wednesday, 10 June 2026

TIME	TALK / ITEM	SPEAKER
09:00 – 09:30	<i>Arrival – tea, coffee & pastries</i>	
09:30 – 09:40	Conference opening	Henk van Rein INSITE Programme Director Team
09:40 – 10:15	Keynote address Critical environmental evidence needs towards the alignment off climate, nature and energy science to inform future marine policy	Andrew Gill Australian Institute of Marine Science

Session 5 · Aligning Climate, Nature and Energy Security with Offshore Circularity: From Policy Conflict to Next-Life Energy Solutions

Chair: Paul Whomersley, INSITE Programme Director Team

10:15 – 10:25	Offshore renewables decommissioning policy	Lizzie Turabi Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
10:25 – 10:35	Introducing the North Sea Alliance and the integration of nature into end-of-life decisions	Eline Van Onselen North Sea Foundation
10:35 – 10:45	An overview of the OEP and its work on marine issues	Tim Adey Office for Environmental Protection
10:45 – 11:15	<i>Panel Q&A (30 min)</i>	

11:15 – 11:45 *Coffee, posters & networking*

Session 6 · Aligning Climate, Nature and Energy Security with Offshore Circularity (continued)

Chair: Paul Whomersley, INSITE Programme Director Team

11:45 – 12:05	More power from less materials: towards a circular economy in UK wind	Anne Velenturf University of Leeds
12:05 – 12:15	Offshore wind decommissioning: evidence, policy and future choices	Dickon Howell INSITE Programme Director Team
12:15 – 12:25	Strengthening regulatory alignment for offshore wind decommissioning in the UK	Oliver Goldsmith Marine Management Organisation
12:25 – 12:35	The NSTA's role in offshore decommissioning and asset transition management	Claire Hepworth North Sea Transition Authority
12:35 – 13:05	<i>Panel Q&A (30 min)</i>	

13:05 – 13:15	Conference close – events, updates & next steps	Henk van Rein INSITE Programme Director Team
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13:15 – 14:15 *Lunch & networking*

TIME

TALK / ITEM

SPEAKER

Workshop · Shaping the First Public Perception Survey on Marine Artificial Structure Decommissioning



14:15 – 16:15 | All attendees welcome

READ-ME

Join the READ-ME research team for a hands-on 120-minute workshop at SIME 2026. This is a unique opportunity to directly influence the design of our public perception survey on Marine Artificial Structure (MAS) decommissioning - the survey is the first of its kind and will reach 1,600 members of the public. Participants will be guided through the survey block-by-block using a live digital platform.

This piloting exercise will allow participants to provide real-time feedback on each question. No specialist expertise is required - all perspectives are welcome. Your input will directly inform the final survey design.

Please bring a laptop or mobile device. No personal data will be collected.

Posters

<i>Name</i>	<i>Poster title</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Megan Squire	Understanding the role of offshore energy structures in ecosystem service delivery	University of Aberdeen
Gennadi Lessin	Assessing Marine Artificial Structure Impacts Across Scales: The VALMAS Model Ensemble Approach	Plymouth Marine Laboratory
Melanie McDonnell	Integrating Geotechnical and Ecological Considerations in Early-Stage Design of Floating Offshore Wind Anchoring Systems	Reflex Marine Ltd.
Dr Ashleigh Tinlin-Mackenzie	Emerging Oyster Reef Cube Structures for Marine Habitat and Species Recovery: Insights from a 2025 Subtidal Pilot Deployment	Groundwork North East & Cumbria - Wild Oysters Project
Daniel Wood	FLOWERS: A framework for multiple pressures within EIA for floating offshore wind farms.	Cefas
Christoph Gade	Project PILE - Pollutants In Legacy Emissions	University of Aberdeen
Paul Causon	Nature Inclusive Design in Offshore Wind: Opportunities and Challenges in Practice	NIRAS
Lara Band and Emmie Bowlt	MDE Heritage Accelerator: remobilising industry data to speed strategic and project-specific decision-making for offshore energy	Historic England
Stephen Watson	VALMAS: Decision Support Tools for Marine Artificial Structures	Plymouth Marine Laboratory
Tan Tjui Yeuw	Functional differences between aquatic herbivores emerge from bioenergetic processes	Wageningen Marine Research
Alethea Madgett	Feeding ecology of reef fish across artificial (Rigs-to-Reefs) and natural habitats revealed by stable isotope analysis	National Decommissioning Centre
Leah Brown	Offshore Wind Structures: A Tool for Habitat Restoration and Biodiversity Enhancement in Marine Planning?	Natural Power
Becky Smith	Physical disturbance to benthic habitats from offshore wind/renewable energy (BH3c): A pilot assessment methodology	JNCC

ANNEX 2

ATTENDING ORGANISATIONS

APEM
ARC Marine
Australian Institute of Marine Science
Bernicia Marine
BP
Buchan Offshore Wind
Canadian Natural Resources Ltd
Cardiff University
CEA
Cefas
Chevron
Daryl Burdon Ltd
Decom Mission
Dept. for Energy Security & Net Zero
ECAP Consultancy
ERM
Genesis/Technip Energies
German Maritime Museum
GNFC
GoBe Consultants
Groundwork UK
Harbour Energy
Haven Bay Environmental
Heriot-Watt University
Historic England
Howell Marine Consulting (HMC)
Humboldt University
IMDC
Innovate UK Business Connect
Intertek
Jenny Pope - independent artist
JERA NEX bp
JNCC
Macalister Elliott & Partners
Mara Consultants
Marine Management Organisation
Ministry of Defence

National Oceanography Centre
Natural England
Natural Power
Natural Resources Wales
NIRAS
North Sea Foundation (Noordzee)
North Sea Transition Authority
Northern Endurance Partnership
Ocean Science Consulting (OSC)
Ocean Winds
Oceana
Office for Environmental Protection
Ørsted
Plymouth Marine Laboratory
Port of Tyne
Queen's University Belfast
RenewableUK
Royal HaskoningDHV
SAMS Enterprise
Scottish Government
Scottish White Fish Producers
Association
ScottishPower
SMRU Consulting
Subsea7
Tetra Tech
TotalEnergies
University of Aberdeen
University of Edinburgh
University of Glasgow
University of Hull
University of Leeds
University of Plymouth
University of St Andrews
University of Southampton
Vattenfall
Wageningen University & Research
WSP