



# MarLIN

## Marine Information Network

Information on the species and habitats around the coasts and sea of the British Isles

## Maerl beds

MarLIN – Marine Life Information Network  
Marine Evidence-based Sensitivity Assessment (MarESA) Review

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**Please note.** This MarESA report is a dated version of the online review. Please refer to the website for the most up-to-date version [<https://www.marlin.ac.uk/habitats/detail/255>]. All terms and the MarESA methodology are outlined on the website (<https://www.marlin.ac.uk>)

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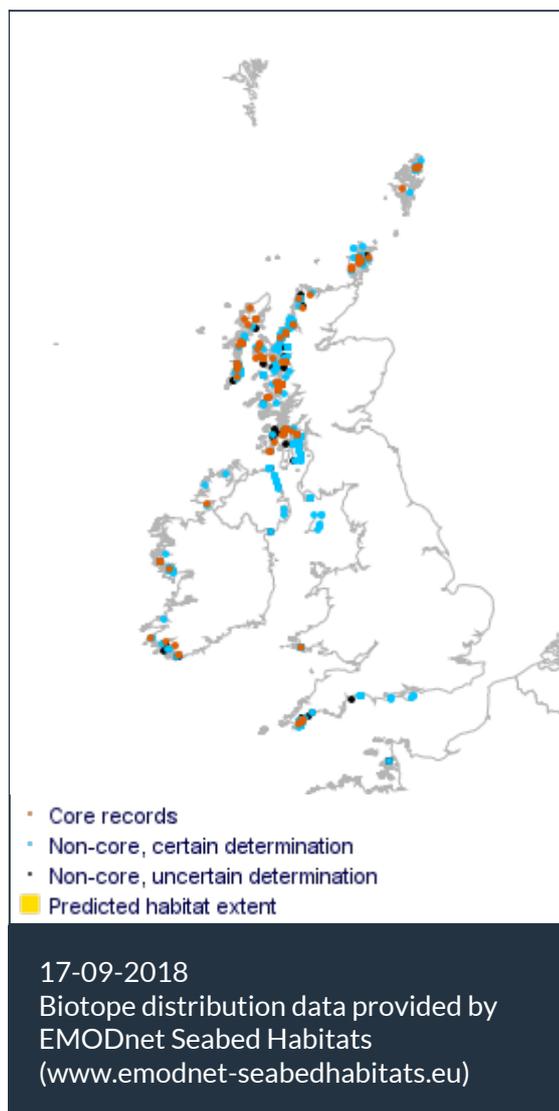
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*Lithothamnion corallioides* maerl beds on infralittoral muddy gravel

Photographer: Keith Hiscock

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Researched by Frances Perry & Dr Harvey Tyler-Walters

Refereed by Prof. Jason Hall-Spencer

## Summary

### ☰ UK and Ireland classification

EUNIS 2008	A5.51	Maerl beds
JNCC 2015	SS.SMp.Mrl	Maerl beds
JNCC 2004	SS.SMp.Mrl	Maerl beds
1997 Biotope	SS.IMX.MrlMx	Maerl beds (muddy mixed sediments)

### 🔍 Description

Beds of maerl (unattached coralline algae) occur either on the open coast and in tide-swept channels of marine inlets (the latter often stony). In fully marine conditions the dominant maerl is typically *Phymatolithon calcareum* (SMp.Pcal), whilst under variable salinity conditions in some sealochs beds of *Lithothamnion glaciale* (SMp.Lgla) may develop. (Adapted from Connor *et al.*, 2004; JNCC, 2015).

## ↓ Depth range

0-5 m, 5-10 m, 10-20 m

## Additional information

The 'Maerl beds' biotope complex (SS.SMp.Mrl) encompasses a number of biotopes. *Phymatolithon calcareum* dominates in SMP.Mrl.Pcal (and its sub-biotopes SMP.Mrl.Pcal.R, and SMP.Mrl.Pcal.Nmix), *Lithothamnion corallioides* dominates in SMp.Mrl.Lcor and *Lithothamnion glaciale* dominates SMP.Mrl.Lgla. In all cases, the dominant maerl forms a unique habitat that supports a diverse assemblage of species. But all maerl forming species are slow growing and loss of the bed would result in loss of the biotope. Therefore, the sensitivity of maerl beds is dependent on the sensitivity of the maerl species themselves. Another maerl species, *Lithophyllum fasciculatum* dominates in SMp.Mrl.Lfas. However, *Lithophyllum* spp. maerl is rare around Britain and Ireland (Pena *et al.*, 2013). A newly described species of maerl, *Lithothamnion erinaceum*, is found in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Iceland and Norway together with *Lithothamnion glaciale* (Melbourne *et al.*, 2017) but has not yet been assigned to a biotope.

## ✓ Listed By

- none -

## Further information sources

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## Sensitivity review

### Sensitivity characteristics of the habitat and relevant characteristic species

Maerl beds are formed by calcareous red algae that grow as unattached nodules (occasionally crusts) forming dense but relatively open beds of coralline algal gravel. Beds of maerl form on a variety of sediments and occur on the open coast and in tide-swept channels of marine inlets (the latter are often stony). In fully marine conditions, the dominant maerl is typically *Phymatolithon calcareum* or *Lithothamnion coralloides* in England. Maerl beds support diverse communities of burrowing infauna, especially bivalves, and interstitial invertebrates; including suspension feeding polychaetes and echinoderms.

Long-lived maerl thalli and their dead remains build upon underlying sediments to produce deposits with a three-dimensional structure that is intermediate in character between hard and soft grounds (Jacquotte, 1962; Cabioch, 1969; Keegan, 1974; Hall-Spencer, 1998; Barbera *et al.*, 2003). Thicker maerl beds occur in areas of water movement (wave or current based) while sheltered beds tend to be thinner with more epiphytes. The associated community varies with underlying and surrounding sediment type, water movement, depth of bed and salinity (Tyler-Walters, 2013).

Maerl beds are highly variable and range from a thin layer of living maerl on top of a thick deposit of dead maerl to a layer of live maerl on silty or variable substrata to a deposit of completely dead maerl or maerl debris of variable thickness. Live maerl beds vary in the depth and proportion of 'live maerl' present (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). In areas subject to wave action, they may form wave ripples or mega ripples e.g. in Galway Bay (Keegan, 1974) and in Stravanan Bay (Hall-Spencer & Atkinson, 1999). Maerl beds also show considerable variation in water depth, the depth of the bed, and biodiversity (see Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). They also vary in the dominant maerl forming species, with *Phymatolithon calcareum* dominating northern beds while both *Phymatolithon calcareum* and *Lithothamnion coralloides* occur in the south west of England and Ireland. *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion erinaceum* also occur in northern waters and replaces *Lithothamnion coralloides* in Scotland (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a; Melbourne *et al.*, 2017). Birkett *et al.* (1998a) list other minor maerl forming species in the UK, however, their taxonomic status remains unresolved (Pena *et al.*, 2013).

Maerl has a complex three dimensional structure with interlocking thalli providing a wide range of niches for infaunal and epifaunal invertebrates (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). Un-impacted maerl grounds are more structurally complex than those which have been affected by dredging (Kamenos *et al.*, 2003). The interstitial space provided by maerl beds allow water to flow through the bed, and oxygenated water to penetrate at depth so that other species can colonize the bed to greater depths than most other sediments. Maerl forming species are the pivotal, ecosystem engineer and biogenic reef species in maerl beds (including this biotope and its sub-biotopes). The integrity and survival of maerl beds are dependent on the thin surface layer of living maerl (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a; Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000a&b). Therefore, maerl species are the single most important functional group with respect to the sensitivity of this habitat. The other members of the community occur in other coarse substrata, although the maerl habitat supports a diverse community. Where appropriate, the sensitivity of other members of the community is mentioned. The biotopes assessed under this review are live maerl beds. The sensitivity of 'dead' maerl beds was reviewed by Tyler-Walters (2013).

### Resilience and recovery rates of habitat

Maerl beds occur from the tropics to the poles (Foster, 2001; Hinojosa-Arango & Riosmena-Rodriguez, 2004). Both dead and live maerl contribute to subtidal biotopes. Maerl thalli grow very slowly (Adey & McKibbin, 1970; Potin *et al.*, 1990; Littler *et al.*, 1991; Hall-Spencer, 1994; Birkett *et al.*, 1998a; Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000a,b) so that maerl deposits may take hundreds of years to develop, especially in high latitudes (BIOMAERL, 1998). Species of maerl are extremely slow growing. Growth rates of European maerl species range between tenths of a millimetre to 1 millimetre per annum (Bosence & Wilson, 2003). The growth rates of the three most abundant species of maerl in Europe (*Phymatolithon calcareum*, *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion coralloides*) ranged between 0.5 to 1.5 mm per tip per year under a wide range of field and laboratory conditions (Blake & Maggs, 2003).

Individual maerl thalli may live for >100 years (Foster, 2001). Maerl beds off Brittany are over 5500 years old (Grall & Hall-Spencer, 2003) and the maerl bed at St Mawes Bank, Falmouth was estimated to have a maximum age of 4000 years (Bosence & Wilson, 2003) while carbon dating suggested that some established beds may be 4000 to 6000 years old (Birkett *et al.* (1998a). A maerl bed in the Sound of Iona is up to 4000 years old (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2003). Maerl is highly sensitive to damage from any source due to this very slow rate of growth (Hall-Spencer, 1998). Maerl is also very slow to recruit as it rarely produces reproductive spores. Maerl is considered to be a non-renewable resource due to its very slow growth rate and its inability to sustain direct exploitation (Barbera *et al.*, 2003; Wilson *et al.*, 2004).

Maerl species in the UK propagate mainly by fragmentation (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). Recruitment of *Phymatolithon calcareum* is mainly through vegetative propagation. Although spore bearing individuals of *Phymatolithon calcareum* thalli have been found in the British Isles, the crustose individuals that would result from sexual reproduction have yet to be recorded in the British Isles (Irvine & Chamberlain, 1994). Recruitment may occur from distant populations that exhibit sexual reproduction and have crustose individuals (e.g. Brittany). Hall-Spencer (pers. comm.) observed that colonization of new locations by maerl can be mediated by a 'rafting' process where maerl thalli are bound up with other sessile organisms that are displaced and carried by currents (e.g. *Saccharina latissima* holdfasts after storms). Cabioch (1969) suggested that *Phymatolithon calcareum* may have phasic reproduction with peaks every six years. This may account for observed changes in the relative proportions of live *Lithothamnion coralloides* and *Phymatolithon calcareum* in maerl beds. Dominance cycles with periods of about thirty years have been recorded on some of the maerl beds of northern Brittany. Adey & McKibbin (1970) undertook growth studies of *Phymatolithon calcareum* in the field and under laboratory conditions. Field studies in the Ria de Vigo, show that growth occurs predominantly in the summer and suggests an annual growth of about 0.55 mm/year for branch tips of *Phymatolithon calcareum* (Adey & McKibbin, 1970). Newly settled maerl thalli have never been found in the British Isles (Irvine and Chamberlain, 1994). Hall-Spencer (2009) wrote a maerl recovery report for the Port of Falmouth development initiative. Hall-Spencer (2009) suggested that a live maerl bed would take 1000's of years to return to the site of navigation channel after planned capital dredging in the Fal estuary. He also suggested that it would take 100's of years for live maerl to grow on a translocated bed, based on the growth and accumulation rates of maerl given by Blake *et al.* (2007) (Hall-Spencer, 2009).

The BIOMAERL project confirmed the high levels of biodiversity associated with maerl beds that had been recorded from numerous other projects (Barbera *et al.*, 2003; BIOMAERL, 1998, 1999). The maerl thalli are frequently loose and mobile preventing colonization by many species. However, deep burrowing fauna (to 68 cm) are a notable feature of this biotope (Hall-Spencer & Atkinson, 1999). Maerl is known as a particularly diverse habitat with over 150 macroalgal species and 500 benthic faunal species recorded (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). To date, 349 macroalgal species

have been recorded on maerl beds in the North East Atlantic (Peña *et al.*, 2014). Around the UK there are several maerl specialists, e.g. *Cruoria cruoriiformis*, *Cladophora rhodolithocola* and *Gelidiella calcicola* (Peña *et al.*, 2014). The sea cucumber *Neopentadactyla mixta* can reach densities of up to 400 per square metre in loose gravels such as maerl (Smith & Keegan, 1985).

In an analysis of re-colonization processes following cessation of maerl dredging in Ireland, De Grave & Whitaker (1999a) found clear differences in the benthos between dredged and fallow sites but they were unable to determine whether there had been a return to pre-dredging conditions as there were no pre-dredge data (Hall-Spencer, 2009). The diverse nature of communities within maerl beds results in a high level of ecological function. Hall-Spencer (2009) stated that within a translocated maerl bed, from which the long-lived species such as *Dosinia exoleta* and *Mya truncata* had been killed, could take 20 – 50 years to recover, assuming dead or live maerl remained. De Grave & Whitaker (1999) compared a dredged (extracted) maerl bed with one that been left 'fallow' for six months in Bantry Bay, Ireland. They noted that the dredged bed had significantly fewer molluscs than the fallow bed, but significantly more crustaceans and oligochaetes. Hall-Spencer & Moore (2000a,b) examined the recovery of maerl community after scallop dredging in previously un-dredged and dredged sites in Scotland. In comparison with control plots, mobile epibenthos returned within one month; fleshy macroalgae within six months; the abundance of *Cerianthus lloydii* was not significantly different after 14 months; other epifauna (e.g. *Lanice conchilega* and *Ascidella aspersa*) returned after 1-2 years; but some of the larger sessile surface species (e.g. sponges, *Metridium senile*, *Modiolus modiolus* and *Limaria hians*) exhibited lower abundances on dredged plots after four years. Deep burrowing species (mud shrimp, large bivalves e.g. *Mya truncata* and the gravel sea cucumber *Neopentadactyla mixta*) were not impacted and their abundance changed little over the four year period. Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2003) noted that long-lived (>10 years) species (e.g. *Dosinia exoleta*) can occur at high abundances in maerl beds but that the sustainability of stocks is unknown at present. Hall-Spencer (2000a) noted that there was no significant difference between controls and experimentally dredged sites after 1-2 years at the sites previously subject to dredging. A review of historical data and the current situation at a maerl bed on the west coast of Scotland (Firth of Clyde) revealed extensive damage over the last 100 years (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010). A living maerl bed with abundant large thalli and nests of the gaping file shell *Limaria hians* had become a bed of predominately dead maerl with few, small, live maerl thalli and no *Limaria hians* (Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2003).

**Resilience assessment.** The current evidence regarding the recovery of maerl suggests that if maerl is removed, fragmented or killed then it has almost no ability to recover. Therefore, resilience is assessed as '**Very low**' and probably far exceeds the minimum of 25 years for this category on the scale in cases where the resistance is Medium, Low or None. If the maerl is killed but dead maerl remains then the resident community may recover within 2-10 years (Tyler-Walters, 2013), but where the maerl is fragmented, species richness will probably decrease. However, Hall-spencer (2009) suggested that large long-lived species such as *Dosinia exoleta* and *Mya truncata* may take 20-50 years to recover.

**Note.** The resilience and the ability to recover from human induced pressures is a combination of the environmental conditions of the site, the frequency (repeated disturbances versus a one-off event) and the intensity of the disturbance. Recovery of impacted populations will always be mediated by stochastic events and processes acting over different scales including, but not limited to, local habitat conditions, further impacts and processes such as larval-supply and recruitment between populations. Full recovery is defined as the return to the state of the habitat that existed prior to impact. This does not necessarily mean that every component species has returned to its prior condition, abundance or extent but that the relevant functional components are present and

the habitat is structurally and functionally recognisable as the initial habitat of interest. It should be noted that the recovery rates are only indicative of the recovery potential.

## Hydrological Pressures

	Resistance	Resilience	Sensitivity
<b>Temperature increase (local)</b>	<b>Medium</b> Q: Low A: NR C: NR	<b>Very Low</b> Q: High A: Medium C: High	<b>Medium</b> Q: Low A: Low C: Low

Maerl beds occur from the tropics to polar waters (Foster, 2001; Hinojosa-Arango & Riosmena-Rodriguez, 2004). Maerl beds in the North East Atlantic range from Norway to the African coast, although the component maerl species vary in temperature tolerance (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a; Wilson *et al.*, 2004). There are four species of maerl that create maerl beds in the UK. These species vary in their distribution within the UK, a phenomenon which is thought to be due to their temperature tolerances. Similarly, the associated communities within the maerl habitat differ and represent a diverse sample of species within the local area. *Lithothamnion coralloides* is absent from Scottish waters. This is due, either to winter temperatures dropping below the minimum survival temperature (between 2 and 5°C) or because the temperatures don't allow a suitable growing season (Adey & McKibbin, 1970; cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion coralloides* had a higher minimum survival temperature than *Phymatolithon calcareum*; dying at 2°C and surviving without growth at 5°C (Adey & McKibbin, 1970). In laboratory conditions, *Phymatolithon calcareum* survived down to 2°C, died at 0.4°C, and had a recorded optimum temperature for growth of 12-13°C (Adey & McKibbin 1970 cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Phymatolithon calcareum* showed no significant difference on photosynthetic activity at 9°C (the control), 17°C or 25°C for 4-5 weeks but were judged to be dead after 90 minutes at 40°C (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). Temperature appears to confine *Lithothamnion glaciale* to northern parts of the British Isles, possibly because reproductive conceptacles are only produced in winter when temperature fall below 9°C (Hall-Spencer, 1994 cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). In addition, Adey (1970) found optimal growth rates of *Lithothamnion glaciale* between 10-12°C and that development of reproductive conceptacles in *Lithothamnion glaciale* requires winter temperatures of between 1-5°C (Adey, 1970). Blake & Maggs (2003) reported that the growth rate of *Phymatolithon calcareum* in the laboratory was only slightly affected by temperature treatments (10, 14 and 18°C), with an optimum at 10°C while the growth rate of *Lithothamnion coralloides* was significantly affected by temperature with an optimum at 14°C, at which temperature it grew faster than *Phymatolithon calcareum*. Martin *et al.* (2006) reported that primary productivity in *Lithothamnion coralloides* was twice as high in August as in January to February in the Bay of Brest. They found that primary productivity, calcification and respiration rates of *Lithothamnion coralloides* increased as temperature rose from 10 to 16°C (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

The main maerl forming species have wide geographic ranges and their range indicates the limits of their temperature tolerance. *Phymatolithon calcareum* is a cold temperate species that ranges from Norway to the Mediterranean (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Martin *et al.*, 2006) and tolerates high temperatures better than many subtidal temperate red algae (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion coralloides* is a warm temperate species ranging from Ireland and the south of Britain to the Mediterranean, while *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion erinaceum* are cold temperate species that replace *Lithothamnion coralloides* in northern waters of the UK and the North East Atlantic (Melbourne *et al.*, 2017). Martin & Hall-Spencer (2017) noted that a 3°C increase in temperature above that normally experienced by tropical or warm-temperate coralline algae caused bleaching and adversely affected health, rates of calcification, photosynthesis and survival.

Current trends in climate change driven temperature increases have already caused shifts in seaweed biogeography, as the tropical regions widen polewards, to the detriment of the warm-temperate region, and the cold-temperate region shrinks (Martin & Hall-spencer, 2017).

**Sensitivity assessment.** An increase in temperature at the benchmark level is unlikely to affect *Phymatolithon calcareum* (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion coralloides* has a more southern distribution in the UK and may benefit from a localised temperature increase, so that the relative abundance of *Lithothamnion coralloides* and *Phymatolithon calcareum* may change in the long-term. However, given the slow growth rates exhibited by maerls, no effect is likely to be perceived within the duration of the benchmark. Therefore, SS.SMp.Mrl.Lcor and SS.SMp.Mrl.Pcal probably have a **'High'** resistance to an increase in temperature at the benchmark level. Resilience is, therefore, **'High'**, and sensitivity assessed as **'Not sensitive'** at the benchmark level.

However, an increase in temperature may be detrimental to *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion erinaceum* especially at the southernmost extent of their range. An increase in temperature of 2°C for a year is likely to reduce growth and reproduction in these species. Long-term climate-induced change in temperatures may result in loss of the extent of SS.SMp.Mrl.Lgla. Further research is required to determine the effect of a 2-5°C change in temperature on *Lithothamnion glaciale*. The northern species of maerl (*Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion erinaceum*) are likely to be vulnerable to sea surface warming in Scotland (Hall-Spencer, pers comm.). Therefore, a resistance of **'Medium'** is suggested at the benchmark level but with 'Low' confidence. Resilience is, therefore, **'Very low'**, and a sensitivity assessment of **'Medium'** is recorded.

#### Temperature decrease (local)

**Medium**

Q: Low A: NR C: NR

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**Medium**

Q: Low A: Low C: Low

Maerl beds occur from the tropics to polar waters (Foster, 2001; Hinojosa-Arango & Riosmena-Rodriguez, 2004). Maerl beds in the North East Atlantic range from Norway to the African coast, although the component maerl species vary in temperature tolerance (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a; Wilson *et al.*, 2004). There are four species of maerl that create maerl beds in the UK. These species vary in their distribution within the UK, a phenomenon which is thought to be due to their temperature tolerances. Similarly, the associated communities within the maerl habitat differ and represent a diverse sample of species within the local area. *Lithothamnion coralloides* is absent from Scottish waters. This is due, either to winter temperatures dropping below the minimum survival temperature (between 2 and 5°C) or because the temperatures don't allow a suitable growing season (Adey & McKibbin, 1970; cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion coralloides* had a higher minimum survival temperature than *Phymatolithon calcareum*; dying at 2°C and surviving without growth at 5°C (Adey & McKibbin, 1970). In laboratory conditions, *Phymatolithon calcareum* survived down to 2°C, died at 0.4°C, and had a recorded optimum temperature for growth of 12-13°C (Adey & McKibbin 1970 cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Phymatolithon calcareum* showed no significant difference on photosynthetic activity at 9°C (the control), 17°C or 25°C for 4-5 weeks but were judged to be dead after 90 minutes at 40°C (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). Temperature appears to confine *Lithothamnion glaciale* to northern parts of the British Isles, possibly because reproductive conceptacles are only produced in winter when temperature fall below 9°C (Hall-Spencer, 1994 cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004). In addition, Adey (1970) found optimal growth rates of *Lithothamnion glaciale* between 10-12°C and that development of reproductive conceptacles in *Lithothamnion glaciale* requires winter temperatures of between 1-5°C (Adey, 1970). Blake & Maggs (2003) reported that the growth rate of *Phymatolithon calcareum* in the laboratory was only

slightly affected by temperature treatments (10, 14 and 18°C), with an optimum at 10°C while the growth rate of *Lithothamnion corallioides* was significantly affected by temperature with an optimum at 14°C, at which temperature it grew faster than *Phymatolithon calcareum*. Martin *et al.* (2006) reported that primary productivity in *Lithothamnion corallioides* was twice as high in August as in January to February in the Bay of Brest. They found that primary productivity, calcification and respiration rates of *Lithothamnion corallioides* increased as temperature rose from 10 to 16°C (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

The main maerl forming species have wide geographic ranges and their range indicates the limits of their temperature tolerance. *Phymatolithon calcareum* is a cold temperate species that ranges from Norway to the Mediterranean (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Martin *et al.*, 2006) and tolerates high temperatures better than many subtidal temperate red algae (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion corallioides* is a warm temperate species ranging from Ireland and the south of Britain to the Mediterranean, while *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Lithothamnion erinaceum* are cold temperate species that replace *Lithothamnion corallioides* in northern waters of the UK and the North East Atlantic (Melbourne *et al.*, 2017).

**Sensitivity assessment.** A decrease in temperature at the benchmark level is unlikely to affect *Phymatolithon calcareum* (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). *Lithothamnion glaciale* has a more northern distribution in the UK and may benefit from a localised temperature decrease in the long-term, so that the relative abundance of *Lithothamnion glaciale* and *Phymatolithon calcareum* may change in the long-term. However, given the slow growth rates exhibited by maerls, no effect is likely to be perceived within the duration of the benchmark, but long-term climate change effects may be noticed in future. Therefore, SS.SMp.Mrl.Lgla and SS.SMp.Mrl.Pcal probably have a 'High' resistance to a decrease in temperature at the benchmark level. Resilience is, therefore 'High', and sensitivity is assessed as 'Not sensitive' at the benchmark level.

However, a decrease in temperature may be detrimental to *Lithothamnion coralloides*, which is restricted to southern waters in the UK, especially at the northernmost extent of its range. A decrease in temperature of 2°C for a year is likely to reduce growth and reproduction in *Lithothamnion coralloides*, although there was no information on the effect of a decrease of 5°C for one month. Therefore, a resistance of 'Medium' is suggested at the benchmark level to represent the possible reduction in abundance at its northernmost extent, but with 'Low' confidence. Resilience is, therefore 'Very low', and sensitivity is assessed as 'Medium'.

### Salinity increase (local)

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

The majority of maerl beds occur in full salinity. Joubin (1910 cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004) thought that maerl beds were only present in areas with lowered salinity. Bosence (1976) found that, although surface salinities could be low, the benthic water was mostly fully saline. The only maerl species currently thought to create beds in biotopes with salinities below fully marine is *Lithothamnion glaciale* (Connor *et al.*, 2004), although the recently described *Lithothamnion erinaceum* might also. Wilson *et al.* (2004) noted that *Phymatolithon calcareum* and *Lithothamnion coralloides* were tolerant up to 40 psu while most subtidal seaweeds can survive up to 50 psu. The growth of *Phymatolithon calcareum* is impaired at salinities <24% (Adey & McKibbin, 1970; King & Schramm, 1982).

**Sensitivity assessment.** An increase in salinity above full is unlikely, except via the discharge of hypersaline effluents from desalination plants, none of which occur in the UK at present. Where

the biotope was found in areas of reduced or variable salinity, an increase in salinity may result in an increase in biodiversity and a shift in the community to one more representative of full salinity. Maerl does not naturally occur within hypersaline areas, and although it may be able to tolerate a short-term increase in salinity, an increase to hypersaline conditions for a year would probably cause significant negative impacts. However, no evidence was found on which to base an assessment.

### Salinity decrease (local)

**Low**

Q: Medium A: Medium C: Medium

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: Medium A: Medium C: Medium

The majority of maerl beds occur in full salinity. Although Joubin, (1910, cited in Wilson *et al.*, 2004) thought that maerl beds were only present in areas with lowered salinity, Bosence (1976) found that although surface salinities could be low, the benthic water was mostly fully saline. The only maerl species currently thought to survive in biotopes with salinities below fully marine is *Lithothamnion glaciale* (Connor *et al.*, 2004). The growth of *Phymatolithon calcareum* is impaired at salinities <24 ppt (Adey & McKibbin, 1970; King & Schramm, 1982). However, Wilson *et al.* (2004) noted that *Phymatolithon calcareum* was more tolerant of low salinity than *Lithothamnion glaciale* in their experiments. Both species survived at 3 psu for five weeks but showed significantly reduced photosynthetic activity. However, at 15 psu, *Phymatolithon calcareum* recovered from the initial drop in photosynthetic activity, while *Lithothamnion glaciale* did not.

Adey & McKibbin (1970) slowly lowered the salinity of specimens of *Lithothamnion coralloides* (grown for two months at 33.5 ppt in the laboratory) to 23 ppt for a month, and then to 13 ppt for another two weeks. *Lithothamnion coralloides* stopped growing at 24 ppt but on return to full salinity, resumed growth after a month and appeared healthy. Adey & McKibbin (1970) suggested that low salinity had 'little lethal importance' but that low salinity may 'have an adverse effect on growth', especially in enclosed estuaries with 'large' streams.

**Sensitivity assessment.** SS.SMp.Mrl.Pcal, SS.SMp.Mrl.Pcal.R, SS.SMp.Mrl.Pcal.Nmix are characterized by *Phymatolithon calcareum* and are all only found in fully saline conditions. However, a reduced salinity for an extended period of time would stress *Phymatolithon calcareum* and could lead to mortality. No long-term salinity experiments have been carried out on *Phymatolithon calcareum*. Therefore, precautionary resistance assessment of 'Medium' has been given, the resilience is, therefore, 'Very low' and sensitivity is assessed as 'Medium'.

SS.SMp.Mrl.Lcor is dominated by *Lithothamnion coralloides* which may resist a change from 'full' to 'reduced' conditions and is unlikely to be adversely effected. However, a decrease from 'reduced' to 'low' may result in reduced growth and potentially death of the maerl over a period of a year. Hence, a resistance of 'Medium' is suggested but with 'Low' confidence. Resilience is probably 'Very low' so that a sensitivity of 'Medium' is recorded.

SS.SMp.Mrl.Lgla is characterized by *Lithothamnion glaciale* and can be found in both fully marine and variable salinity regimes. A decrease in salinity could result in a 'reduced' salinity regime. Experiments show that *Lithothamnion glaciale* does not recover from a relatively short-term exposure to 15 psu. This suggests that at the level of the benchmark prolonged exposure (for one year) to this pressure could cause significant mortality. Resistance has been assessed as 'Low' and as resilience is probably 'Very low', sensitivity is assessed as 'High'. There is no information on the responses of other maerl species to a reduction in salinity.

**Water flow (tidal current) changes (local)****Low**Q: **Low** A: **NR** C: **NR****Very Low**Q: **High** A: **Medium** C: **High****High**Q: **Low** A: **Low** C: **Low**

Maerl requires enough water movement to prevent smothering with silt (Hall-Spencer, 1998). Therefore, maerl beds are restricted to areas of strong tidal currents or wave oscillation (Birkett *et al.* 1998a). For example, Birkett *et al.* (1998a) quote a flow rate of 0.1 m/s across the maerl bed at spring tides in Greatman's Bay, Galway, while the UK biotope classification (Connor *et al.*, 2004) reports maerl beds occurring at sites with between moderately strong to very weak tidal streams. As Birkett *et al.* (1998a) note, local topography and wave generated oscillation probably result in stronger local currents at the position of the bed. However, Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2006) reported that maerls beds in the vicinity of fish farms became silted with particulates from fish farms even in areas of strong flow. Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2006) reported peak flow rates of 0.5 to 0.7 m/s at the sites studied, and one site experienced mean flows of 0.11 to 0.12 m/s and maxima of 0.21 to 0.47 m/s depending on depth above the seabed.

**Sensitivity assessment.** An increase in water flow to strong or very strong may winnow away the surface of the bed and result in loss of the biotope. A decrease in water flow may result in increased siltation, smothering maerl, and causing the death of maerl and significant change in the associated community (see smothering/siltation below). The effect will depend on local hydrography and the wave climate. A change of 0.1-0.2 m/s may have a limited effect in areas of moderately strong flow but may be significant in areas of weak or negligible flow. However, Hall-spencer (pers. comm.) noted that any change in water flow is likely to affect maerl beds. Therefore, a resistance of '**Low**' is suggested but with '**Low**' confidence. Hence, as resilience is likely to be '**Very low**', sensitivity is assessed as '**High**'.

**Emergence regime changes****Not relevant (NR)**Q: **NR** A: **NR** C: **NR****Not relevant (NR)**Q: **NR** A: **NR** C: **NR****Not relevant (NR)**Q: **NR** A: **NR** C: **NR**

In the UK, maerl beds do not occur in the intertidal, as maerl is highly sensitive to desiccation (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). Also, it is very unlikely that a maerl bed would be exposed at low water as a result of human activities or natural events. Therefore, this pressure is 'Not relevant'.

**Wave exposure changes (local)****High**Q: **High** A: **Medium** C: **Medium****High**Q: **High** A: **High** C: **High****Not sensitive**Q: **High** A: **Medium** C: **Medium**

Maerl requires enough water movement to prevent smothering with silt (Hall-Spencer, 1998). Therefore, maerl beds develop in strong currents but are restricted to areas of low wave action. For example, in Mannin Bay dense maerl beds were restricted to less wave exposed parts of the bay (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). In Galway Bay, Keegan (1974) noted the formation of ripples due to wave action and storms, where the ripples were flattened over time by tidal currents. However, he reported that the rippled area (average crest height 20 cm) had a poor faunal diversity with heavy macroalgal settlement on any firm substratum, including the tubes of *Chaetopterus* sp. However, the infauna was a typical '*Venus*' community, the majority of which was found at depths of more than 20 cm. Hall-Spencer & Atkinson (1999) noted that mega-ripples at their wave exposed site were relatively stable but underwent large shifts due to storms. However, the mixed sediments of the subsurface of the bed (>12 cm) were unaffected so that the burrows of the mud shrimp remained in place. Similarly, Birkett *et al.* (1998a) noted that in areas where storms affected the maerl at a depth of 10 m, only the coarse upper layer of maerl was moved while the underlying

layers were stable. Following storms, infaunal species renewed burrow linings within a week. However, the epiflora of maerl beds was severely disturbed by storms in Galway Bay with a marked drop in abundance in winter months. Deep beds are less likely to be affected by an increase in wave exposure.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Maerl beds occur in a range of wave exposures and can survive in areas subject to wave action and storms. Therefore, an increase in wave exposure is probably detrimental to shallow maerl beds. Similarly, a decrease in wave action may be detrimental where wave action is the main contribution to water movement through the bed, due to the potential increase of siltation and reduction in infaunal diversity. However, a 3-5% change in significant wave height is unlikely to damage the maerl bed. Both resistance and resilience are assessed as 'High', and the biotope is assessed as 'Not sensitive' to this pressure at the benchmark.

## Chemical Pressures

	Resistance	Resilience	Sensitivity
<b>Transition elements &amp; organo-metal contamination</b>	Not Assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR
This pressure is <b>Not assessed</b> but evidence is presented where available.			
<b>Hydrocarbon &amp; PAH contamination</b>	Not Assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR
This pressure is <b>Not assessed</b> but evidence is presented where available.			
<b>Synthetic compound contamination</b>	Not Assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR
This pressure is <b>Not assessed</b> but evidence is presented where available.			
<b>Radionuclide contamination</b>	No evidence (NEv) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not relevant (NR) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	No evidence (NEv) Q: NR A: NR C: NR
No evidence.			
<b>Introduction of other substances</b>	Not Assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR	Not assessed (NA) Q: NR A: NR C: NR
This pressure is <b>Not assessed</b> .			
<b>De-oxygenation</b>	<b>Low</b> Q: High A: High C: Medium	<b>Very Low</b> Q: High A: Medium C: High	<b>High</b> Q: High A: Medium C: Medium

Deoxygenation at the benchmark level is likely to be detrimental to the maerl beds and their

infaunal community but mitigated. Water flow experienced by these biotopes suggests that deoxygenating conditions may be short-lived. However, Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2006) examined maerl beds in the vicinity of fish farms in strongly tidal areas. They noted a build-up of waste organic materials up to 100 m from the farms examined and a 10-100 fold increase in scavenging fauna (e.g. crabs). In the vicinity of the farm cages, the biodiversity was reduced, particularly of small crustaceans, with significant increases in species tolerant of organic enrichment (e.g. *Capitella*). In addition, they reported less live maerl around all three of the fish farm sites studied than the 50-60% found at reference sites. Most of the maerl around fish farms in Orkney and South Uist was dead and clogged with black sulphurous anoxic silt. The Shetland farm had the most live maerl but this was formed into mega-ripples, indicating that the maerl had been transported to the site by rough weather (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2006). Eutrophication resulting from aquaculture is cited as one reason for the decline of maerl beds in the North East Atlantic (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010). In the laboratory, Wilson *et al.* (2004) noted that burial in black muddy sand, smelling of hydrogen sulphide, was fatal to live maerl. Even thalli placed on the surface of the black muddy sand died within two weeks, together with thalli buried by 0.25 cm and 2 cm of the sediment (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). A study of a phytoplankton bloom that killed herring eggs on a maerl bed in the Firth of Clyde found that the resultant anoxia caused mass mortalities of the burrowing infauna (Napier, in press, cited by Hall-Spencer pers comm.).

**Sensitivity assessment.** The available evidence suggests that maerl and its associated community is sensitive to the effects of deoxygenation and anoxia, even in areas of strong water movement. Therefore, resistance has been assessed as 'Low', resilience as 'Very low', and sensitivity is assessed as 'High'.

#### Nutrient enrichment

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not sensitive

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

This pressure relates to increased levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and silicon in the marine environment compared to background concentrations. The nutrient enrichment of a marine environment leads to organisms no longer being limited by the availability of certain nutrients. The consequent changes in ecosystem functions can lead to the progression of eutrophic symptoms (Bricker *et al.*, 2008), changes in species diversity and evenness (Johnston & Roberts, 2009) decreases in dissolved oxygen and uncharacteristic microalgal blooms (Bricker *et al.*, 1999, 2008).

Johnston & Roberts (2009) undertook a review and meta-analysis of the effect of contaminants on species richness and evenness in the marine environment. Of the 47 papers reviewed relating to nutrients as contaminants, over 75% found that it had a negative impact on species diversity, <5% found increased diversity, and the remaining papers finding no detectable effect. None of the 47 papers considered the impact of nutrients on this biotope. Yet this finding is still relevant as the meta-analysis revealed that the effects of marine pollutants on species diversity were 'remarkably consistent' between habitats (Johnston & Roberts, 2009). It was found that any single pollutant reduced species richness by 30-50% within any of the marine habitats considered (Johnston & Roberts, 2009). Throughout their investigation, there were only a few examples where species richness was increased due to the anthropogenic introduction of a contaminant. These examples were almost entirely from the introduction of nutrients, either from aquaculture or sewage outfalls. However research into the impacts of nutrient enrichment from these sources on intertidal rocky shores often lead to shores lacking species diversity and the domination by algae

with fast growth rates (Abou-Aisha *et al.*, 1995, Archambault *et al.*, 2001, Arévalo *et al.*, 2007, Diez *et al.*, 2003, Littler & Murray, 1975).

Grall & Glemarec (1997) noted that increased turbidity and eutrophication due to agricultural runoff in Brittany prevented the establishment of many algal species resulting in domination of ubiquitous species (e.g. *Ceramium* sp. and *Ulva* sp.), while localised eutrophication due to fish and mussel farming (aquaculture) in a sheltered area resulted in bacterial mats of *Beggiatoa*. Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2006) examined maerl beds in the vicinity of fish farms in strongly tidal areas. They noted a build-up of waste organic materials up to 100 m from the farms examined and a 10-100 fold increase in scavenging fauna (e.g. crabs). In the vicinity of the farm cages, the biodiversity was reduced, particularly of small crustaceans, with significant increases in species tolerant of organic enrichment (e.g. *Capitella*). In addition, they reported less live maerl around all three of the fish farm sites studied than the 50-60% found at reference sites. Most of the maerl around fish farms in Orkney and South Uist was dead and clogged with black sulphurous anoxic silt (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2006). Eutrophication resulting from aquaculture is cited as one reason for the decline of some beds in the North East Atlantic (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010).

In Brittany, numerous maerl beds were affected by sewage outfalls and urban effluents, resulting in increases in contaminants, suspended solids, microbes and organic matter with resultant deoxygenation (Grall & Hall-Spencer, 2003). This resulted in increased siltation, higher abundance and biomass of opportunistic species, loss of sensitive species and reduction in biodiversity. Grall & Hall-Spencer (2003) note that two maerl beds directly under sewage outfalls were converted from dense deposits of live maerl in the 1950s to heterogeneous mud with maerl fragments buried under several centimetres of fine sediment with species poor communities. These maerl beds were effectively lost.

**Sensitivity assessment.** The effect of eutrophication on maerl beds is difficult to disentangle from the effects of organic enrichment, and sedimentation. It is likely that nutrient enrichment could adversely affect the infauna and epiflora communities. Nevertheless, the biotope is assessed as **Not sensitive** at the pressure benchmark of compliance with good status as defined by the WFD.

<b>Organic enrichment</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Very Low</b>	<b>High</b>
	Q: High A: High C: High	Q: High A: Medium C: High	Q: High A: Medium C: High

The organic enrichment of a marine environment at this pressure benchmark leads to organisms no longer being limited by the availability of organic carbon. The consequent changes in ecosystem functions can lead to the progression of eutrophic symptoms (Bricker *et al.*, 2008), changes in species diversity and evenness (Johnston & Roberts, 2009) and decreases in dissolved oxygen and uncharacteristic microalgal blooms (Bricker *et al.*, 1999, 2008). Grall & Hall-Spencer (2003) considered the impacts of eutrophication as a major threat to maerl beds.

Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2006) examined maerl beds in the vicinity of fish farms in strongly tidal areas. They noted a build-up of waste organic materials up to 100 m from the farms examined and a 10-100 fold increase in scavenging fauna (e.g. crabs). In the vicinity of the farm cages, the biodiversity was reduced, particularly of small crustaceans, with significant increases in species tolerant of organic enrichment (e.g. *Capitella*). In addition, they reported less live maerl around all three of the fish farm sites studied than the 50-60% found at reference sites. Most of the maerl around fish farms in Orkney and South Uist was dead and clogged with black sulphurous anoxic silt. The Shetland farm had the most live maerl but this was formed into mega-ripples, indicating that the maerl had been transported to the site by rough weather (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2006).

Eutrophication resulting from aquaculture is cited as one reason for the decline of maerl beds in the North East Atlantic (Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010).

Grall & Glémarec (1997) noted similar decreases in maerl bed biodiversity due to anthropogenic eutrophication in the Bay of Brest. In Brittany, numerous maerl beds were affected by sewage outfalls and urban effluents, resulting in increases in contaminants, suspended solids, microbes and organic matter with resultant deoxygenation (Grall & Hall-Spencer, 2003). This resulted in increased siltation, higher abundance and biomass of opportunistic species, loss of sensitive species and reduction in biodiversity. Grall & Hall-Spencer (2003) note that two maerl beds directly under sewage outfalls were converted from dense deposits of live maerl in the 1950s to heterogeneous mud with maerl fragments buried under several centimetres of fine sediment with species poor communities. These maerl beds were effectively lost.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Little empirical evidence was found to directly compare the benchmark organic enrichment of maerl biotopes. However, the evidence strongly suggests that organic enrichment and resultant increased in organic content, hydrogen sulphide levels and sedimentation may result in loss of maerl beds. Resistance has been assessed as '**None**' and resilience has been assessed as '**Very low**'. This gives an overall sensitivity score of '**High**'.

## A Physical Pressures

	Resistance	Resilience	Sensitivity
Physical loss (to land or freshwater habitat)	<b>None</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>Very Low</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>High</b> Q: High A: High C: High

All marine habitats and benthic species are considered to have a resistance of '**None**' to this pressure and to be unable to recover from a permanent loss of habitat (resilience is '**Very low**'). Sensitivity within the direct spatial footprint of this pressure is, therefore '**High**'. Although no specific evidence is described confidence in this assessment is 'High', due to the incontrovertible nature of this pressure.

Physical change (to another seabed type)	<b>None</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>Very Low</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>High</b> Q: High A: High C: High
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Maerl biotopes can contain a variety of sediment types including gravels, sand and mud. However, maerl biotopes never contain bedrock. Therefore, if rock or an artificial substratum was to replace the normal substratum within this biotope the physical conditions required for this biotope would be lost along with the biotope itself. Therefore, resistance is likely to be '**None**', resilience '**Very low**' (permanent change) and sensitivity is assessed as '**High**'.

Physical change (to another sediment type)	<b>High</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>High</b> Q: High A: High C: High	<b>Not sensitive</b> Q: High A: High C: High
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The sediment associated with maerl biotopes varies from shell and maerl gravel through to sand and mud. The characterizing maerl species is also not attached to the substratum, and instead, lies over the top of it. Therefore, if the substratum were to change this wouldn't have a negative effect on the characterizing species. The other species within the associated community depend on different aspects of the sediment. Those species that are found infaunally may be negatively

affected.

**Sensitivity assessment.** A change in this pressure at the benchmark will not affect the characterizing species yet may affect other species found infaunally within the biotope. The loss of an infaunal species will create a niche for another species to become established, therefore continuing the biological function and ensuring the character of the biotope remains. Resistance and resilience are assessed as '**High**', resulting in an assessment of '**Not Sensitive**'.

**Habitat structure changes - removal of substratum (extraction)**

**None**

Q: High A: High C: High

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

As maerl need to photosynthesize only the top layer of the deposit which has access to light will be alive. Live maerl also requires good water flow around it, a factor which is likely to be limited 30 cm into the bed. Maerls requirement for both light and water flow suggest that the majority if not all of the live maerl will be found in the top 30 cm of a maerl bed. This is also where many of the associated species will be found. Although long-lived elements of maerl bed fauna are known to burrow up to 72 cm into the substrate (Hall-Spencer & Atkinson, 1999). The extraction of the substratum to 30 cm within this biotope would remove the vast majority of the biological component of the biotope.

Hauton *et al.* (2003) undertook experimental suction (hydraulic dredging) in Stravanan Bay, Scotland, a site subject to scallop dredging and recorded as impacted dead maerl by Kamenos *et al.* (2003). The suction dredge removed epiflora (burrowing algae and macroalgae), maerl, slow moving epifauna (e.g. starfish, gastropods and clingfish) and mainly infauna. Large or fragile polychaetes (e.g. *Chaetopterus*) and *Cerianthus lloydii* were removed and damaged, while polychaetes with tough bodies or strong tubes survived. Large infaunal bivalves dominated the catch, including *Dosinia exoleta*, *Tapes rhomboides*, *Abra alba*, and *Ensis arcuatus* but, while *Mya truncata* and *Lutraria angustior* were not caught because of their depth, the catch did include torn siphons from these species; an injury they are unlikely to survive. The dredge resulted in a visible track that left numerous damaged megafauna, which in turn attracted scavengers. In addition, the dredging fragmented maerl and resulted in a large plume of fine sediment that settled over the surrounding area. However, recovery was not examined. Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2003) drew attention to the dangers of suction dredging for bivalves in maerl beds, especially as many of the larger infaunal bivalves are long-lived (e.g. *Dosinia exoleta*), suggesting that the population would take a long time to recover.

**Sensitivity assessment.** The resistance of the biotope to this pressure at the benchmark is probably '**None**', based on the above evidence, and the resilience is assessed as '**Very low**', giving the biotope a '**High**' sensitivity.

**Abrasion/disturbance of the surface of the substratum or seabed**

**None**

Q: High A: High C: High

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

Physical disturbance can result from; channelization (capital dredging), suction dredging for bivalves, extraction of maerl, scallop dredging or demersal trawling. The effects of physical disturbance were summarised by Birkett *et al.* (1998a) and Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2010), and documented by Hall-Spencer and co-authors (Hall-Spencer, 1998; Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2003; Hall-

Spencer & Moore, 2000a, b; Hauton *et al.*, 2003; and others). For example, in experimental studies, Hall-Spencer & Moore (2000a, 2000c) reported that the passage of a single scallop dredge through a maerl bed could bury and kill 70% of living maerl in its path. The passing dredge also re-suspended sand and silt that settled over a wide area (up to 15 m from the dredged track) and smothered the living maerl. The dredge left a 2.5 m track and damaged or removed most megafauna within the top 10 cm of maerl (Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000a). For example; crabs, *Ensis* species, the bivalve *Laevicardium crassum*, and sea urchins. Deep burrowing species such as the tube anemone *Cerianthus lloydii* and the crustacean *Upogebia deltaura* were protected by depth, although torn tubes of *Cerianthus lloydii* were present in the scallop dredge tracks (Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000a). *Neopentadactyla mixta* may also escape damage due to the depth of its burrow, especially during winter torpor. Hall-Spencer & Moore (2000a) reported that sessile epifauna or shallow infauna such as *Modiolus modiolus* or *Limaria hians*, sponges and the anemone *Metridium senile* where present, were significantly reduced in abundance in dredged areas for 4 years post-dredging. Other epifaunal species, such as hydroids (e.g. *Nemertesia* species) and red seaweeds are likely to be removed by a passing dredge. The tracks remained visible for up to 2.5 years. In pristine live beds, experimental scallop dredging reduced the population densities of epibenthic species for over 4 years. However, in previously dredged maerl beds, the benthic communities recovered in 1-2 years.

Abrasion may break up maerl thalli into smaller pieces reducing structural heterogeneity and lowering diversity of species (Kamenos *et al.*, 2003). Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2003) noted that certain maerl beds in the Bay of Brest have been dredged for scallops and *Venus verrucosa* for over 40 years, yet remain productive with high levels of live maerl. Although they suggest that this is due to local restrictions that limit the activity to one scallop dredge per boat. Nevertheless, scallop dredging, demersal trawling and extraction have been reported to contribute to declines in the condition of maerl beds in the North East Atlantic and the UK (Barbera *et al.*, 2003, Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010, Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2003). Irish maerl is considered to be in generally good condition but some are deteriorating due to commercial extraction, mariculture, demersal fishing and the localized effects of boat mooring chains (Vize, 2005).

**Sensitivity assessment.** Physical disturbance is likely to result in drastic changes in and loss of components of the community within the maerl bed. Fragmentation of the maerl will not kill the maerl directly but subsequent death is likely due to a reduction in water flow caused by compaction and sedimentation (Hall-spencer & Moore, 2000a; 2000c). Dredging can create plumes of sediment that can settle on top of the maerl, and overturn and bury maerl, causing it to be smothered, a pressure to which maerl is highly intolerant (see smothering and siltation (light) pressure). The evidence from Hall-Spencer & Moore (2000a, 2000c) alone strongly suggests that resistance to physical disturbance and abrasion is '**None**'. Therefore, resilience is probably '**Very low**', resulting in a sensitivity assessment of '**High**'.

**Penetration or disturbance of the substratum subsurface**

**None**

Q: High A: High C: High

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

As maerl need to photosynthesise, only the top layer of the deposit which has access to light will be alive. Live maerl also requires good water flow around it. Maerl beds become less structurally complex if they have been affected by dredging (Kamenos *et al.*, 2003). A lack of structural complexity will restrict the niches for other species, reducing biodiversity and will also restrict water flow through the bed. Penetration and disturbance both have the capacity to break up

maerl into smaller fragments. The evidence provided within the abrasion and disturbance pressure (above) shows that maerl is not resistant to physical disturbance. Penetration of the maerl bed will exacerbate the negative effect by damaging more of the underlying maerl.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Based on the evidence provided within the abrasion and disturbance assessment the resistance of the biotope to this pressure at the benchmark is considered '**None**' and the resilience is assessed as '**Very low**', giving the biotope a '**High**' sensitivity.

### Changes in suspended solids (water clarity)

**Medium**

Q: Medium A: Medium C: Medium

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**Medium**

Q: Medium A: Medium C: Medium

Maerl's requirement for light restricts live thalli to depths shallower than 32 m in the relatively turbid waters of northern Europe (Hall-Spencer, 1998). An increase in suspended sediments in the water column will increase light attenuation and decrease the availability of light to the biotope. A decrease in light availability will alter the ability of the maerl to photosynthesize. This could be detrimental to maerl beds found towards the bottom depth limits (i.e. 32 m). An increase in suspended solids within this biotope is likely to also increase scour, as there are characteristically high levels of water movement through maerl beds. Scour is known to induce high mortality in early post-settlement algal stages and prevents the settlement of propagules owing to the accumulation of silt on the substratum (Vadas *et al.*, 1992). Increased particulates may provide additional food for filter feeders. However, an increase in suspended sediment may increase the fines within the bed, decreasing water flow and oxygenation through the bed, and hence the depth of the surface epifauna. It may result in an increase in burrowing species compared to filter feeding species. However, De Grave (1999) noted that sedimentary heterogeneity within maerl beds (including maerl debris with mud, sand or gravel) resulted in only minor changes in the community of amphipods and crustaceans present.

A decrease in suspended solids will increase light levels, which could benefit maerl. However, a decrease in the suspended matter is likely to reduce the quantity of food available for filter feeders. This could lead to a change in the species present within the community.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Any factor which decreases the ability for the characterizing maerl species to photosynthesize will have a negative impact. Examples of the biotope found at the very bottom depth limit may experience high levels of mortality of the characterizing species. The resistance of this biotope is assessed as '**Medium**' and the resilience is '**Very low**'. Hence, the sensitivity is assessed as '**Medium**' to the pressure at the benchmark level.

### Smothering and siltation rate changes (light)

**None**

Q: High A: High C: High

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

Smothering results from the rapid deposition of sediment or spoil, which may occur after dredging (suction or scallop), capital dredging (channelization), extreme runoff, spoil dumping etc. The effects depend on the nature of the smothering sediment. For example, live maerl was found to survive burial in coarse sediment (Wilson *et al.*, 2004) but to die in fine sediments. *Phymatolithon calcareum* survived for 4 weeks under 4 and 8 cm of sand or gravel but died within 2 weeks under 2 cm of muddy sand. Wilson *et al.* (2004) suggested that the hydrogen sulphide content of the muddy sand was the most detrimental aspect of burial since even those maerl nodules on the surface of the muddy sand died within two weeks. They also suggested that the high death rate of maerl observed after burial due to scallop dredging (Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000a,c) was probably

due to physical and chemical effects of burial rather than a lack of light (Wilson *et al.*, 2004).

In addition, detrimental effects on *Fucus* embryos were reported in fine sediments, presumably as fine sediment restricts water flow. Similarly, fine sediment is likely to prevent settlement of algal propagules, so that the effects are potentially greater during their settlement period. Kranz (1972; cited in Maurer *et al.* (1986) reported that shallow burying siphonate suspension feeders are typically able to escape smothering with 10-50 cm of their native sediment and relocate to their preferred depth by burrowing. Dow & Wallace (1961) noted that large mortalities in clam beds resulted from smothering by blankets of algae (*Ulva* sp.) or mussels (*Mytilus edulis*). In addition, clam beds have been lost due to smothering by 6 cm of sawdust, thin layers of eroded clay material, and shifting sand (moved by water flow or storms) in the intertidal.

Smothering by 5cm of sediment (the benchmark) is likely to clog or reduce water flow through the surface of the bed, and directly smother small non-mobile members of the epifauna and epiflora, while larger species e.g. sea squirts, anemones, some sponges and macroalgae would protrude above the smothering sediment. Mobile small burrowing species (e.g. amphipods and polychaetes) would probably burrow to safety. However non-motile epifauna (e.g. encrusting bryozoans and small hydroids) and small or prostrate algal will probably be reduced in abundance. Deep burrowing bivalves may experience some mortality due to loss of water flow through the bed, deoxygenating and lack of food depending on their depth. But large burrowing anemones and mud shrimp would probably just burrow through the smothering material. In Galicia, France, ongoing deterioration of maerl has been linked to mussel farming which increases sedimentation, reducing habitat complexity, lowering biodiversity, and killing maerl (Pena & Barbara, 2007a, b; cited in Hall-Spencer *et al.*, 2010). Wilson *et al.* (2004) also point out that the toxic effect of fine organic sediment and associated hydrogen sulphide explain the detrimental effect on maerl beds of *Crepidula fornicata* in Brittany, sewage outfalls, and aquaculture (Grall & Hall-spencer, 2003).

**Sensitivity assessment.** Even though these biotopes occur in areas of tidal or wave mediated water flow, the fine smothering material would penetrate the open matrix of the maerl bed rather than sit on top of the bed. At the pressure benchmark this biotopes resistance is assessed as '**None**', and the resilience as '**Very low**' so that sensitivity is assessed as '**High**'.

#### Smothering and siltation rate changes (heavy)

**None**

Q: High A: High C: High

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

A deposit at the pressure benchmark would cover all species with a thick layer of fine materials. The pressure is significantly higher than light smothering discussed above. Therefore, resistance is assessed as assessed as '**None**', the resilience as '**Very low**', and sensitivity is assessed as '**High**'.

#### Litter

Not Assessed (NA)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not assessed (NA)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not assessed (NA)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not assessed.

#### Electromagnetic changes

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

No evidence was found

**Underwater noise changes**

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Species characterizing this habitat do not have hearing perception but vibrations may cause an effect, however, no studies exist to support an assessment.

**Introduction of light or shading**

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Maerl forming species require light, which restricts them to depths shallower than 32 m in the relatively turbid waters of northern Europe (Hall-Spencer, 1998). Suggesting that maerl is intolerant of long-term reductions in light availability. However, in the short-term maerl exhibits little stress after being kept in the dark for 4 weeks (Wilson *et al.*, 2004).

**Sensitivity assessment.** Artificial light is unlikely to affect any but the shallowest biotopes. There is a possibility that shading by artificial structures could result in a loss of live maerl in deep examples of the biotope, but only where shading was long-term or permanent. There is insufficient information to assess the effect of this pressure at the benchmark on this biotope. The sensitivity of this biotope is given as 'No evidence'.

**Barrier to species movement**

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant – this pressure is considered applicable to mobile species, e.g. fish and marine mammals rather than seabed habitats. Physical and hydrographic barriers may limit propagule dispersal. But propagule dispersal is not considered under the pressure definition and benchmark.

**Death or injury by collision**

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant to seabed habitats. NB. Collision by grounding vessels is addressed under 'surface abrasion'.

**Visual disturbance**

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant.

** Biological Pressures**

Resistance

Resilience

Sensitivity

**Genetic modification & translocation of indigenous species**

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

This pressure is not relevant to the characterizing species within this biotope.

### Introduction or spread of invasive non-indigenous species

None

Q: High A: High C: High

Very Low

Q: High A: Medium C: High

High

Q: High A: Medium C: High

No evidence of the effects of non-native species in the UK was found. However, Grall & Hall-spencer (2003) note that beds of invasive slipper limpet *Crepidula fornicata* grew across maerl beds in Brittany. As a result, the maerl thalli were killed, and the bed clogged with silt and pseudo-faeces so that the associated community was drastically changed. Bivalve fishing was also rendered impossible. Peña *et al.* (2014) identified eleven invasive algal species found on maerl beds in the North East Atlantic. The invasive species included *Sargassum muticum*, which causes habitat shading (Hall-Spencer pers. comm.).

**Sensitivity assessment.** Removal of the surface layer of *Crepidula fornicata* is possible but only with the removal of the surface layer of maerl itself, which would be extremely destructive on live beds. A resistance of 'None' and a resilience of 'Very low' has been given, resulting in an overall sensitivity assessment of 'High'.

### Introduction of microbial pathogens

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Not relevant (NR)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

No evidence (NEv)

Q: NR A: NR C: NR

Coralline lethal orange disease found in the Pacific and could have devastating consequences for maerl beds in Europe. However, this disease was not known to be in Europe (Birkett *et al.*, 1998a). Many of the species that make up the biological community within this biotope will be susceptible to disease in the form of viruses or parasites. However, 'No evidence' of the effects of diseases and pathogens on maerl beds was found.

### Removal of target species

None

Q: High A: High C: Medium

Very Low

Q: High A: Medium C: High

High

Q: High A: Medium C: Medium

Maerl is mainly sold dried as a soil additive but is also used in animal feed, water filtration systems, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and bone surgery. Maerl beds are dredged for scallops (found in high densities compared with other scallop habitats) where extraction efficiency is very high. This harvesting has serious detrimental effects on the diversity, species richness and abundance of maerl beds (Hall-Spencer & Moore, 2000c).

Within Europe, there is a history of the commercial collection and sale of maerl. Two notable sites from western Europe from which Maerl has been collected are off the coast of Brittany, where 300,000 – 500,000 t / annum are dredged (Blunden, 1991), and off Falmouth Harbour in Cornwall where extraction is around 20,000 t / annum (Martin, 1994; Hall-Spencer, 1998).

Kamenos *et al.* (2003) reported that maerl grounds impacted by towed demersal fishing gears are structurally less heterogeneous than pristine, un-impacted maerl grounds, diminishing the biodiversity potential of these habitats. Birkett *et al.* (1998a) noted that although maerl beds subject to extraction in the Fal estuary exhibit a diverse flora and fauna, they were less species-rich than those in Galway Bay, although direct correlation with dredging was unclear. Grall & Glemarec (1997; cited in Birkett *et al.*, 1998a) reported few differences in biological composition between exploited and control beds in Brittany. Dyer & Worsfold (1998) showed differences in the communities present in exploited, previously exploited and unexploited areas of maerl bed in the Fal Estuary but it was unclear if the differences were due to extraction or the hydrography and

depth of the maerl beds sampled. In Brittany, many of the maerl beds are subject to extraction (Grall & Hall-Spencer, 2003). For example, the clean maerl gravel of the Glenan maerl bank described in 1969, was degraded to muddy sand dominated by deposit feeders and omnivores within 30 years. Grall & Hall-Spencer (2003) noted that the bed would be completely removed within 50-100 years at the rates reported in their study. Hall-Spencer *et al.* (2010) note that maerl extraction was banned in the Fal in 2005.

The other species of commercial interest found within maerl beds are scallops, for which there are two methods of capture for these organisms. Firstly the use of a scallop dredge the effect of which is assessed under the abrasion and disturbance pressure. The second method of removal is diver collection. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a symbiotic relationship between maerl and scallops. Consequently, the removal of this species is unlikely to have a significant effect on the health of the biotope.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Maerl itself has historically been targeted for commercial collection. The removal of this characterizing species is highly destructive for this biotope and the resistance is assessed as '**None**', and the resilience is assessed as '**Very low**', giving a sensitivity assessment of '**High**'. However, the practice of removing maerl for industry is now banned in places such as the Fal.

#### Removal of non-target species

**Low**

Q: High A: High C: Medium

**Very Low**

Q: High A: Medium C: High

**High**

Q: High A: Medium C: Medium

Direct, physical impacts from harvesting are assessed through the 'abrasion' and 'penetration of the seabed' pressures above. The extraction of maerl itself, scallop dredging for scallops and/or suction dredging for other commercially exploited shellfish would also damage other members of the community. For example, the red seaweed community is likely to be damaged or removed at the surface, and interstitial bivalves damaged within or removed from the bed. The loss of these species and other associated species would decrease species richness and negatively impact on the ecosystem function.

**Sensitivity assessment.** Removal of a large percentage of the characterizing species would alter the character of the biotope. The resistance to removal is '**Low**' due to the easy accessibility of the biotopes location and the inability of these species to evade collection. The resilience is '**Very low**', with recovery only being able to begin when the harvesting pressure is removed altogether. This gives an overall sensitivity score of '**High**'.

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