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Corporate report

# Heritage coasts: definition, purpose and Natural England's role

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## Overview

Heritage coasts are 'defined' rather than designated, so there isn't a statutory designation process like that associated with national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB).

They were established to conserve the best stretches of undeveloped coast in England. A heritage coast is defined by agreement between the relevant maritime local authorities and Natural England.

The national policy framework and objectives for heritage coasts were developed by the Countryside Commission, a predecessor of Natural England, and ratified by government.

## Purpose of heritage coasts

Heritage coasts were established to:

- conserve, protect and enhance:
  - the natural beauty of the coastline
  - their terrestrial, coastal and marine flora and fauna
  - their heritage features
- encourage and help the public to enjoy, understand and appreciate these areas
- maintain and improve the health of inshore waters affecting heritage coasts and their beaches through appropriate environmental management measures
- take account of the needs of agriculture, forestry and fishing and the economic and social needs of the small communities on these coasts

Work to achieve the aims of heritage coasts is undertaken by the relevant local authorities with help from national and local stakeholders and local communities.

Heritage coasts are protected through development control with the planning system. Paragraph 114 of the National Planning Policy Framework (March 2012) states that local authorities should: 'maintain the character of the undeveloped coast, protecting and enhancing its distinctive landscapes, particularly in areas defined as heritage coast, and improve public access to and enjoyment of the coast.'

A report commissioned by the Countryside Agency in 2006 evaluated the effectiveness of the 32 heritage coasts (<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4594438590431232?category=56001>) and also provides information about their locations.

## Natural England's role

Natural England supports heritage coasts by:

- advising government on national planning policy and the link between terrestrial and marine spatial planning
- encouraging local authorities to adopt local planning policies to conserve, protect and enhance heritage coasts

- promoting the integration of heritage coast purposes and management within AONB and national park management plans where these areas coincide with heritage coasts through their role as a statutory consultee
- encouraging local authorities to proactively plan management where heritage coasts are outside of those designated landscapes
- working with coastal AONB partnerships and national park authorities to meet its statutory responsibilities and support the conservation and enhancement of those areas
- working on the England Coast Path which will create a new national trail around the entire coast of England

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