

Marine Character Areas (MCAs): How people describe their appreciation of Caernarfon Bay, Menai Strait, and Conwy Bay

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The aim of this research was to gain insights about the public's perception of coastal areas. A questionnaire was designed with 14 questions covering background information on the participants (age, gender, where they lived and for how long, native language, level of Welsh proficiency) as well as data on their perceptions of the three MCAs (Menai Strait, Caernarfon Bay, Conwy Bay). The participants were first asked to describe each of these areas individually, and then to specify what made them different to each other. Then they were asked how the location of things in the area (such as where places and attractions are) affected what these areas meant to them. Then, they were asked to draw the boundaries of the different areas and to describe how they decided where the boundaries were. The final question (followed only by an option to add Further Comments) was on how their perception would change if changes were made to the environment.

The participants were randomly recruited at different locations (public places in Bangor, Y Felinheli, and Caernarfon) in Gwynedd, North Wales and were asked for their consent to participate. 72 people answered the questionnaire (39 females; 33 males) among whom 44 were native speakers of Welsh (20 females; 24 males), whereas the other participants named English as their native language. 21 participants answered the questionnaire in Welsh, the others in English, and 1 person answered in both languages. The English native speakers had different levels of proficiency in Welsh, ranging from none (9 participants) to the ability to understand, speak, read and write in Welsh (7 participants).

The main elements in the descriptions of Menai Strait area were the dangerous currents, the impact of the tides and the two bridges. The biodiversity of the area and associated activities were also pointed out (landscapes, fauna, flora, outdoor activities). The atmosphere was described as peaceful, quiet and rich in history and culture.

Caernarfon Bay area was described in terms of visual- and bio-diversity (changing colours, landscapes, marine life), but was also described as touristy. The castle was also a recurrent element in the descriptions. These descriptions fell roughly into two categories: some of the participants chose to put the emphasis on the lushness of nature, whereas others focussed on the industrial character of the area.

The main elements in the descriptions of Conwy Bay were its busyness (activities, marine life, A55, windfarm, tourists). Within this area 3 key places came up: Penmon, which was described as peaceful; Conwy/Llandudno, described as busy; and Red Wharf, described as fabulous and rich in

landscapes. Specific landmarks mentioned repeatedly included Puffin Island, the Great Orme, Llandudno's pier, the A55 and the windfarm.

Descriptions of the main differences between the three MCAs were related to the organisation of the environment (in terms of landscapes, flora and wildlife). The Menai Strait area was described as more closed to the sea whereas the Caernarfon Bay and Conwy Bay areas are more open to the sea. The types of beaches were also described as wider in Caernarfon Bay and Conwy Bay and as nonexistent in the Menai Strait area. The impact of the tide is felt more strongly in Menai Strait than in the other areas, and the flora, fauna and marine life of Conwy Bay is described as being different to Caernarfon Bay and the Menai Strait. Conwy Bay area is more populated, built up, touristy and has more access to activities and attractions whereas the two other areas are considered more rural and less impacted by tourism. It is also noted that the level of Welshness decreases as you travel east.

In answer to the question about locations of things in the area, many people mentioned the importance of accessibility; they clearly appreciated being spoilt for choice with many different attractions on their doorstep, and they preferred those areas that were closer to their homes. Some replied that it depended on the day and the weather, which would dictate the type of activity they could do and therefore the location of attractions/activities themselves mattered less. A few participants said they wanted to avoid tourists and would therefore be more likely to prefer quieter places whereas a couple of participants said that the location of things mattered a lot as they had children. A fairly common answer was that they placed more importance on the emotional connection with the place they live in rather than the access to attractions.

Regarding the division of the areas, most of the participants drew the boundaries based on local knowledge or personal experience of the areas through walks. They also used the openness/closeness to the sea, the different coastlines, type of beaches and town names to help them. Most of them used The Great Orme, the castles, the beaches and the bridges as landmarks.

When asked about the effects of changes that might happen to the environment, such as plans to resource tidal energy, a wind farm, a large housing project, a new nature reserve, a new visitor attraction, most participants didn't mind change as long as it did not disfigure the landscape or harm the environment. The vast majority felt attached to their environment and wanted to preserve it, so they welcomed changes that were beneficial or at least didn't harm the environment. However, it appeared that Welsh native speakers were more resistant to change than the English speakers.

Only 30 participants had any further comments. Of those, the vast majority mentioned how lucky they felt to live in a beautiful environment and that they cherish it. They added that each area is unique in its own way and in the diversity of activities and landscapes they offer. Also, the preservation of nature often came up in the further comments.