



THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE UK FISHERIES POLICY APOCALYPSE



**BLUE
MARINE**
FOUNDATION



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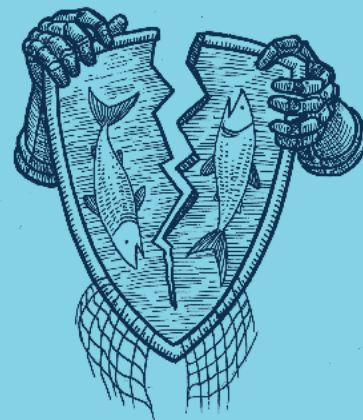
Political decisions in recent decades have brought the UK's fisheries to the point of collapse. Marine life, fishers, coastal communities and the wider UK public are all suffering. These problems have deep historical roots, but the ocean has remarkable powers of recovery. Simple choices by the government can begin to turn the tide.



THE FOUR HORSEMEN:

The decline is driven by four clear areas of government mismanagement. We are calling these ‘the four horsemen of the UK’s fisheries policy apocalypse’:

Failing Marine Protection



Our marine environment receives inadequate protection from its network of designated marine protected areas.

Overfishing



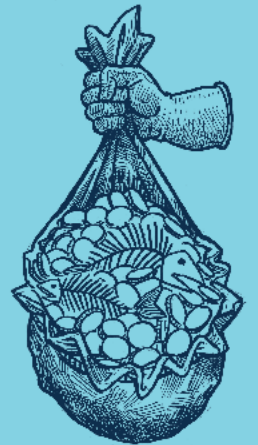
Overfishing of the species that rely on those habitats remains widespread, causing serious declines in fish populations.

Inequitable Quotas



Dwindling fish populations and an inequitable quota system leave most fishers out in the cold and struggling to make ends meet, while a handful of companies make eye-watering profits.

Harmful Subsidies



Those dominant companies are being heavily subsidised by the public purse via fuel tax concessions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

As a result, we are left with a ravaged seascape that works for almost no one, when it could easily be made to benefit everyone.

In the face of the climate and biodiversity crises, concerns about livelihoods, food security and the natural world requiring protection for future generations, a thriving ocean should be an immediate and achievable priority

for the UK. This report examines the systems designed to protect the UK’s marine environment, reveals how their misuse has driven our seas into a state of crisis, and recommends that the UK Government:

01

Remove destructive fishing gear from all UK marine protected areas (MPAs).

England and Scotland should proceed with plans to remove bottom trawling from offshore MPAs, and the Secretary of State should urgently sign off the byelaws proposed for in-shore MPAs in England.

02

Set all catch limits below scientific advice.

Ending overfishing will ensure sustainable fish populations over the long term, which can support the coastal communities who rely on them for their livelihoods.

03

Reform the quota system.

The economic benefits of the UK’s seas should be felt by the UK public. Allocation should reward sustainable fishing practices and guarantee access for the inshore fleet.

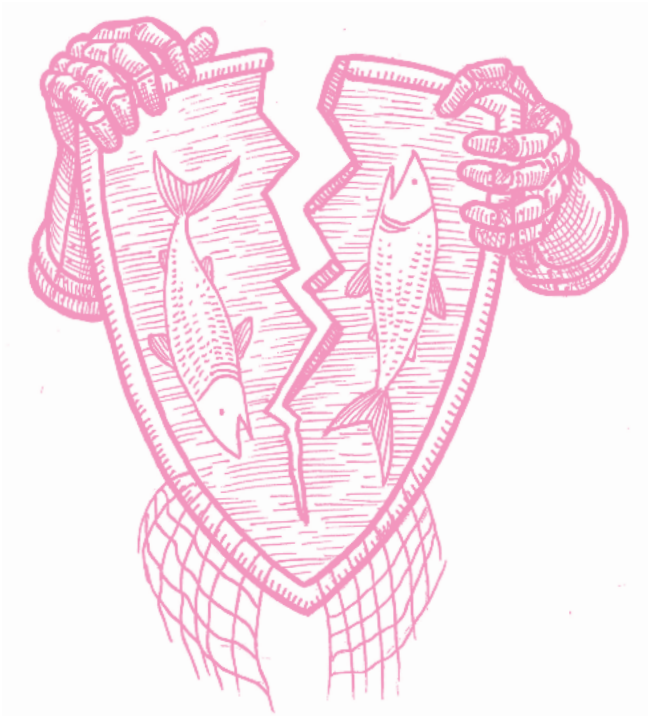
04

Stop providing harmful fishing subsidies.

A review of existing policies to phase out harmful subsidies under World Trade Organization guidance should focus first on the subsidies currently captured by the wealthiest in the fishing sector.



Horseman One: FAILING MARINE PROTECTION



Martin Yorwarth
Fisherman,
English Channel
and North Sea

As soon as some fish turns up, one of these industrial vessels turns up and wipes it out. And it's just not sustainable. You wouldn't allow a bulldozer in a nature reserve, would you?

The UK's 30 X 30 Commitment

While the UK has some of the largest and most effectively enforced marine protected areas in the world around its overseas territories, many of the MPAs in its domestic waters are protected in name only. This undermines the UK's commitment to conserve 30% of its marine areas by 2030 under the United Nations Global Biodiversity Framework.

The UK has started to make progress towards this target in its domestic waters, with the closure of some MPAs to bottom trawling. Scotland's

recent commitment to close 53,000 square kilometres to bottom trawling is an encouraging step forward. Similarly, the consultation on banning this practice in 30,000 square kilometres of English waters presents a major opportunity for the government to significantly improve the level of domestic protection.

A review of MPAs across 25 countries failed to find a single case where the neighbouring fisheries experienced net-negative impact.

40%
of the seabed in UK MPAs is still open to bottom-trawling – dragging heavy gear and nets along the sea floor – the most destructive way to fish.

Why Marine Protected Areas?

When the ocean is given respite, its ability to regenerate is unparalleled. In marine protected areas, habitats regain their structure and flora, and the fish that live there multiply and grow larger. Healthier populations and greater species diversity are more resilient to climate change, and competition for space leads to fish leaving the MPA, in turn producing a 'spillover' effect that benefits neighbouring fisheries.

Effectively managing MPAs would allow whole ecosystems to thrive. Far from being a threat to fishing communities, they would help to

ensure the long-term sustainability and productivity of the fisheries surrounding them. A review of MPAs across 25 countries failed to find a single case where the neighbouring fisheries experienced a net negative impact; instead, coastal communities and fishers benefitted from increased catches, larger fish and enhanced tourism.¹ The Marine Management Organisation's (MMO) own assessment of the effects of closing 41 offshore MPAs to bottom trawling identified enormous potential environmental and economic benefits.²

Protected Areas or Paper Parks?

The UK Government defines the purpose of an MPA as 'to protect and recover rare threatened and important marine ecosystems, habitats and species from damage caused by human activities'.³

Within UK domestic waters there are 371 MPAs, covering 33% of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). On paper, this seems to deliver on the 30x30 commitment, but many of these areas are "paper parks", with little or no management of damaging activities. One of the key threats to the objectives for these MPAs is bottom trawling. Bottom-trawling – dragging heavy gear and nets along the sea floor – is the most destructive way to fish and yet it is still permitted on 40% of the seabed in UK MPAs. This directly contradicts the government's own definition of the purpose of an MPA, putting at risk the species and habitats that they are meant to protect.

Decisions on MPA management are devolved, with England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each having their own governing bodies responsible for the implementation of MPA management measures. Significant progress has been made towards removing bottom trawling from MPAs in English inshore waters through evidence-based byelaws made by Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs). However, in the offshore in England progress has been slow. Protected areas that were designated over a decade ago still do not have any management of bottom trawling.

A process that began in 2020 to introduce byelaws to remove bottom trawling from English offshore MPAs was due to complete by the end of 2024 but is still crawling along in 2025.

Some significant steps forward have been made, such as the closure of the Dogger Bank to bottom trawling in 2022 and the ban on fishing for sandeels anywhere in the UK's waters. In June 2025, the MMO entered the third phase of its proposal to remove bottom trawling from approximately 30,000 square kilometres in 41 MPAs in the UK.⁴ If approved and implemented, this would increase the coverage of English MPAs protected from bottom trawling from 35% to 82%.

In September 2025, Scotland announced that it plans to remove bottom trawling from 20 of its offshore MPAs, covering around 53,000 km².⁵

While a welcome step, a patchwork approach was taken for several of the MPAs, leaving fragile habitats open to fishing. This failure to protect the whole site means these MPAs will have insufficient protection to achieve their conservation objectives.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government needs to greatly improve the management of its inshore areas. Despite most being designated in 2014, over 90% of the seabed covered by Scottish inshore MPAs remains unprotected from destructive bottom fishing.⁶

1. 2024. Costello, Mark John. "Evidence of economic benefits from marine protected areas." Scientia Marina
2. 2025. Marine Management Organisation. MMO De Minimis Assessment: Marine Protected Areas Fishing Gears Byelaw
3. 2025. Marine Management Organisation. Guidance: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
4. 2025. Marine Management Organisation. Marine protected areas Stage 3 Consultation

5. 2024. Scottish Government. Fisheries management measures within Scottish Offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): consultation
6. 2014. Scottish Government. Consultation on the Management of Inshore Special Areas of Conservation and Marine Protected Areas Approaches.



Bottom Trawling Within Marine Protected Areas Around the UK 2015-2023

This map overlays bottom trawling activity with the UK's marine protected areas, showing how some of the most intense fishing is concentrated inside areas that should be protected.

Fishing activity data



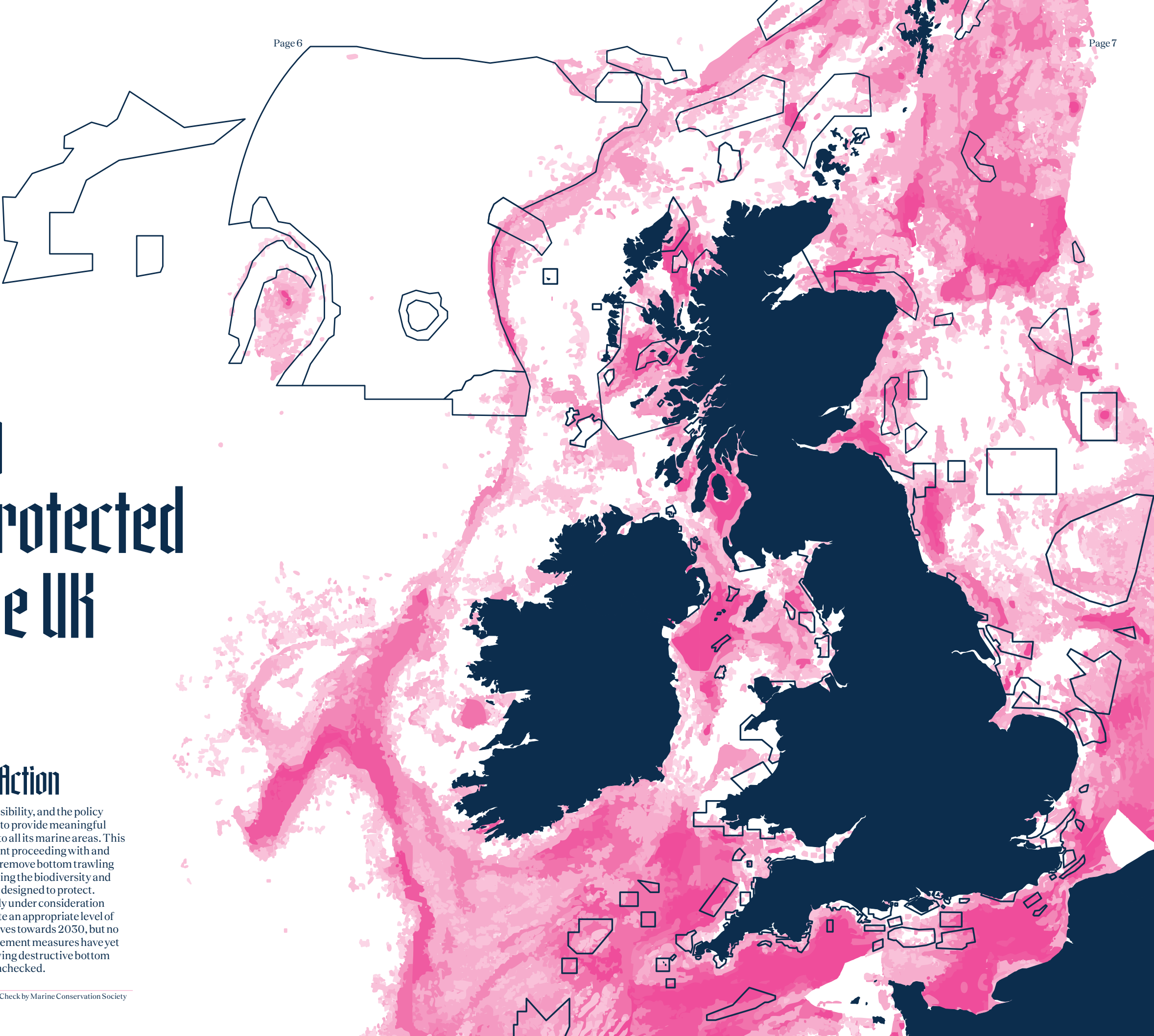
Marine 'protected' area



A Time for Action

The UK has the responsibility, and the policy frameworks available, to provide meaningful and lasting protection to all its marine areas. This includes the government proceeding with and concluding its plans to remove bottom trawling from MPAs, safeguarding the biodiversity and habitats that they were designed to protect. The proposals currently under consideration in England demonstrate an appropriate level of ambition as the UK moves towards 2030, but no actual fisheries management measures have yet been introduced, allowing destructive bottom trawling to continue unchecked.

All data taken from MPA Reality Check by Marine Conservation Society





Horseman Two: OVERFISHING

“

Jerry Percy
Former Director
Under Ten Metres
Fishing Association

We're here against a background of almost no fish left on the initial grounds in the English waters for the majority of the coastline, and this is an existential threat that needs to be dealt with.

60%

Decline in The North-East Atlantic mackerel, the UK's most valuable fishery, in just a decade.

98%

Collapse in the Celtic Sea cod stock since 2012.

53%

Decline in Celtic Sea pollack stock since 2012.

While marine habitats continue to be degraded in areas that are supposed to be protected, the fish populations they support are being exposed to fishing pressure that is far too high. In 2025, the Government's own marine experts, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture (Cefas), confirmed that catch limits for over half of the UK's key fish stocks were set above the levels recommended by scientists. A further 50 stocks do not even have baseline data. Cefas has been carrying out an annual assessment of the government's performance since 2020, and every year it has found that

the government has effectively been sanctioning overfishing.⁷

This has not been accidental but is in fact the outcome of deliberate political choices. Each year, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) provides clear scientific advice on what constitutes a sustainable catch limit. Yet, in annual negotiations, the UK Government repeatedly agrees to higher limits, either through immediate decisions to ignore the science or because of the chronic mismanagement of stocks like mackerel.

Three key examples highlight the current crisis. The North-East Atlantic mackerel, the UK's most valuable fishery, has seen its population decline by 60% in just a decade. This is due to an international 'race to the bottom' where coastal states, the UK included, set inflated unilateral

quotas that far exceed scientific advice. Meanwhile, the Celtic Sea cod stock has collapsed by a staggering 98% since 2012. For six straight years, scientists advised a zero catch to allow the stock to recover, yet every year a quota was set. Similarly, the pollack stock, vital to small-scale fishers in the south of England, has declined by 53% over the same period. Even after scientists recommended a zero catch, a quota was still put in place. This year's scientific assessments show that the haddock population in the Celtic Sea has collapsed – joining cod, pollack, whiting and herring.

Overfishing is not a new phenomenon and has been the primary driver of marine biodiversity loss in the UK. The consequences of this extend beyond individual fish stocks, impacting the entire marine ecosystem, and it is difficult to grasp the scale of what we have lost without looking to the past.⁸ On the Dogger Bank, the vast sandbank that stretches across the centre of the North Sea, men working handlines in the early nineteenth century could each pull in 200 cod in a single day's fishing. One depression in the Dogger was known as the Great Silver Pit, because it contained such a wealth of sole and other valuable species. Sharks were so common that they occasionally took sailors who fell overboard.

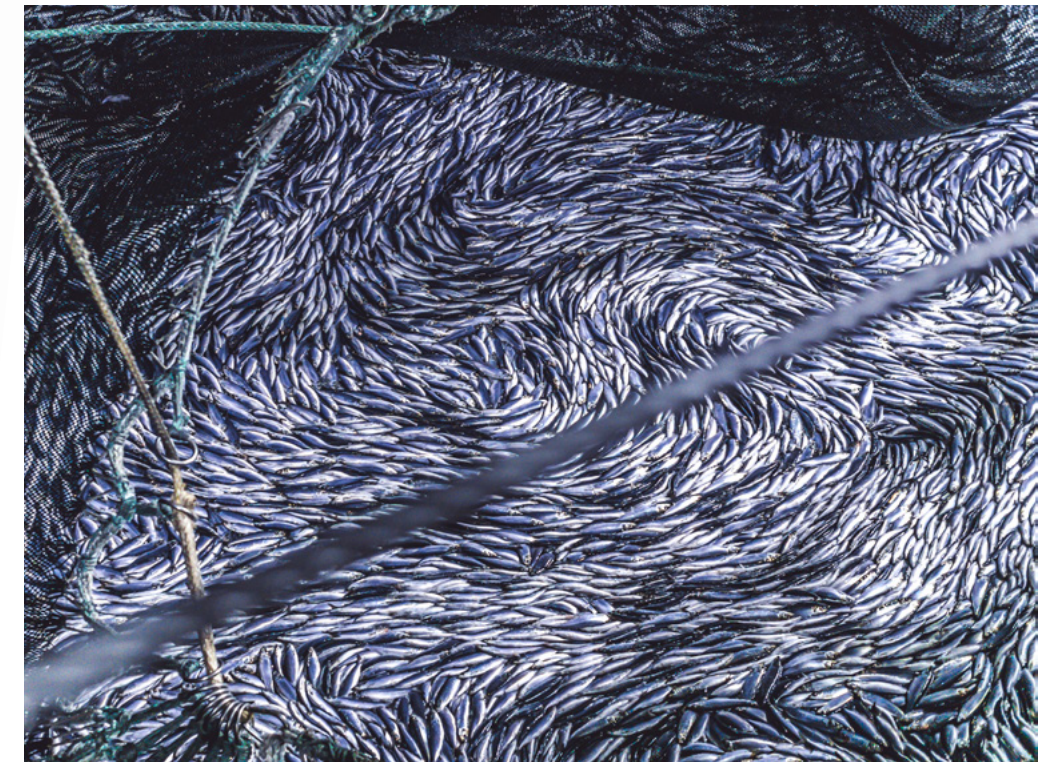
The current state of UK waters is a crisis born from decades of industrial exploitation stretching back over the last 200 years. These seas, now some of the most heavily industrialised in the world, once

7. 2025. Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture. Assessing the sustainability of fisheries catch limits negotiated by the UK for 2025

8. 2007. Roberts, Callum. "The unnatural history of the sea". Island Press



© Paolo Cipriani
Industrial fishing in action:
herrings caught in the net



supported an almost unimaginable abundance of life. This historical context reveals the phenomenon of "shifting baselines," where each new generation accepts a more depleted ocean as normal, forgetting the richness that existed before.

With a clear view of history and the depth of scientific knowledge that we now have available, it is extraordinary that the UK remains unable to take the straightforward steps necessary to put an end to the overfishing of iconic species like mackerel and cod. The flagship law in this area is the Fisheries Act 2020, which was intended to ensure that fish populations are managed sustainably, but a High Court challenge brought by Blue Marine earlier this year showed there are potential flaws in the legislation. The Act gives Ministers the discretion to prioritise short-term commercial interests over long-term sustainability, and the Court ruled that, as the law currently stands, a minister can know-

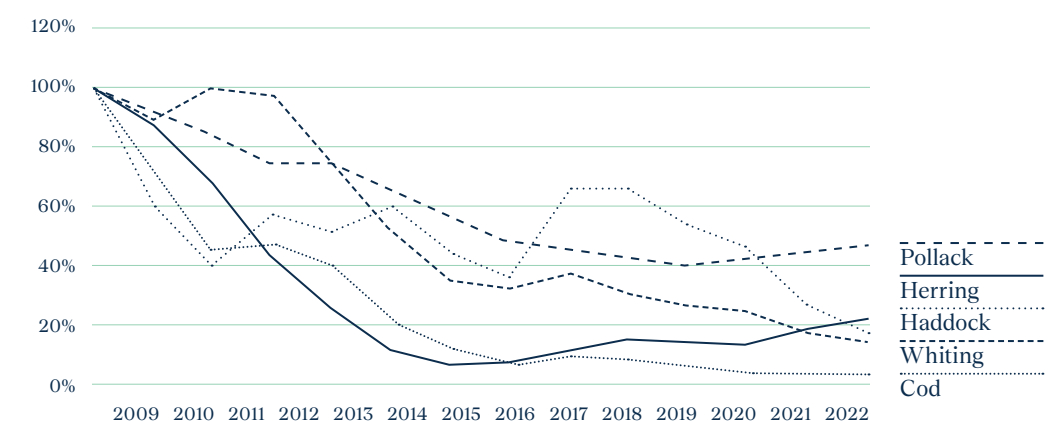
ingly and legally approve the very overfishing the Act was designed to prevent.

If Ministers follow the science, it will generate multiple benefits for the UK: Setting UK catch limits strictly within scientific advice offers a clear path to long-term prosperity and environmental security.

Marine protected areas present no threat to the livelihoods of fishers but dwindling fish populations are an existential concern.

Ending overfishing would allow these populations to recover, leading to larger, more stable catches in the future. A healthier ocean can support a more profitable and sustainable fishing industry, enhance our national food security, and strengthen the coastal communities that have been so damaged by the decline of these vital stocks.

Figure 1
Changes in Celtic Sea fish populations (2012-2025)





Horseman Three: INEQUITABLE QUOTAS

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Bally Philp
Isle of Skye Fisherman, Scottish
Creel Fishermen's
Federation

You know, we could have thriving coastal communities with 1% more quota or 2% more quota, yet they fight you tooth and nail to guard that quota with their life. They'd rather see their coastal communities die than give up 1% of the monopoly they have.

As fish populations are driven down by overfishing, who stands to benefit? There were nearly 5,500 fishing vessels registered in the UK in 2023, and together they landed fish worth £1.1 billion.⁹ Remarkably, a tiny handful of those 5,500 vessels account for an enormous portion of this value. This is due to a system of profound inequity in the UK fishing industry, which is a bad deal for fishers and a bad deal for fish.

The UK's fish catch is divided into two groups: quota and non-quota species. While non-quota species can generally be caught without a restriction on volume, quota species are tightly controlled. The quota system was conceived as a conservation measure - an attempt to stop a fishing free-for-all by only allowing vessels holding quota to catch a percentage of a government-determined catch limit. Unfortunately, the government regularly sets those catch limits much higher than scientists are calling for.

While a quota system has been in use since the 1980s, the UK's current Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) system was formalised in 1999, which distributed quota based on historical catch records.¹⁰ From its inception, under-10m boats owned by small-scale fishers were heavily disadvantaged, as historically they did not have to provide these records, resulting in them being allocated little or no quota and forced to rely on shellfish and other non-quota species.¹¹ A lack of sufficient quota undermines the diversification and economic viability for the small-scale fleet.

Subsequent practice to separate quota units from their original vessel and make them transferable effectively created an informal opaque market for these rights. This has had several disastrous consequences for UK fishers, the central problem being that quota has become concentrated into fewer and fewer hands.

90%

Well over 90% of the quota for mackerel, herring, and blue whiting is held by just 20 companies.

70%

More than 70% of the value of sole and plaice landings is controlled by only 20 quota holders.

60%

More than 60% of the landed value of cod, pollack and saithe sits in the hands of just 20 holders.

Mackerel Millionaires

The surest path to making massive profits in the UK fishing industry is by catching big volumes of small fish. In 2023, over 400,000 tonnes of mackerel, herring, and blue whiting were caught by UK vessels, with a landed value of £380 million—accounting for over a third of the total value and half the total weight of all UK landings.¹²

Well over 90% of the quota for these species is in the hands of just 20 companies

and some of their most recent accounts have reported profit margins and dividend payments of millions of pounds. In a recent court case, a judge described these companies' profits as "super-normal".¹³

The pelagic (mid-water trawl) fleet is the most extreme example of concentrated quota value, but the pattern is repeated across other fisheries, including some of the iconic whitefish species: over 70% of the landed value of sole and plaice is in the hands of just 20 holders, while it's over 60% for pollack, cod and saithe. Several quota species have their catch limits set far above sustainable limits, and this dynamic is playing out for the benefit of quota holders who are among the richest people in Britain.¹⁴ This has all the hallmarks of market failure, where monopolistic practices are starting to squeeze out competition.

The commodification of Fixed Quota Allocation has created a system where the price of entry has become prohibitive, effectively barring new



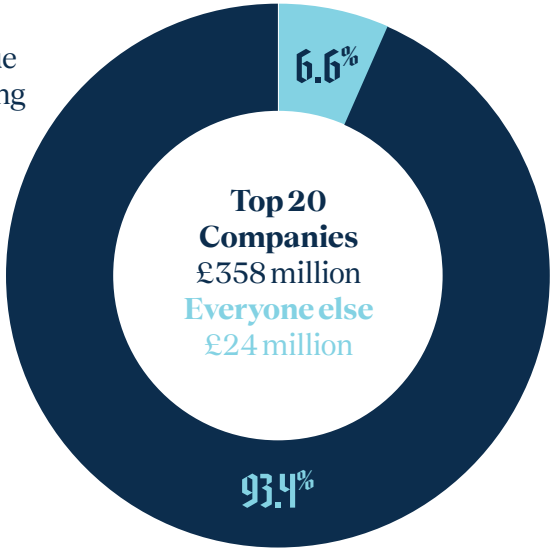
generations from the industry. Quota, originally intended as a tool for conservation, is now a multi-million-pound asset traded between powerful companies. This dynamic has rigged the system against the UK's inshore fleet and independent fishers. Without the capital to buy into this market, they are forced to lease quota at exorbitant rates from so-called "slipper skippers", who hold quota but often have no other connection to the fishing industry, turning active fishermen into little more than tenants on their own seas and hollowing out the coastal communities that depend on them.¹⁵

The UK's failure to properly manage its public fishery has enabled what is tantamount to a massive squatting claim on the seas.¹⁶ A public asset, conservatively valued at over a billion pounds has been gifted to private interests based on little more than their fishing activity in the mid-1990s. This informal and poorly regulated process stands in stark contrast to how virtually every other public asset is managed. It has created a legal and economic mess that dispossesses the most sustainable fishers and their communities, stifles opportunities for new fishers, and fails in its fundamental duty to manage our shared marine environment for the benefit of all citizens.

A fundamental reset is required in how fishing rights are viewed and managed. Instead of treating quota as a private commodity, the UK must reclaim it as a public resource to be allocated in the public interest.

The new system should be designed to reward sustainable fishing practices, guarantee access for the inshore fleet, and ensure the economic benefits of our seas flow back to the British public, not just to the highest bidder.

Figure 2
2023 Landed Value
of Mackerel, Herring
& Blue Whiting.



9. 2025. Marine Management Organisation. Official Statistics: Section 2 - Landings
10. 2025. Scottish Government. Fishing quotas - Scottish additional quota allocation from 2024: consultation.
11. 2017. Griffin Carpenter and Richard Kleinjans. Who gets to fish? The allocation of fishing opportunities in EU member states. New Economics Foundation
12. 2025. Marine Management Organisation. Official Statistics, Section 2 - Landings

13. 2025. Fishing News. Scotland's Pelagic fishing industry taking government to court.
14. 2018. Crispin Dowler. Revealed: the millionaires hoarding UK fishing rights. Crispin Dowler. Greenpeace
15. 2011. Phil Scullion. 'Slipper skippers' threaten fishing industry. politics.co.uk
16. 2016. Appleby, T. van der Werf, Y. and Williams, C. "The management of the UK's public fishery: A large squatting claim? Working Paper." University of the West of England.



Horseman four: HARMFUL SUBSIDIES



Jerry Percy
Former Director
Under Ten Metres
Fishing Association

The opportunities for improvement rely almost entirely on government, the government being proactive and recognizing the value of that small scale coastal fleet.

Harmful fishing subsidies are a global paradox, with billions in public money funding the very practices that are driving the decline of our shared ocean. The UK provides a clear example of this damaging logic in action. Here, the problem mani-

festes primarily through a system of fuel tax concessions that funnels support to the most powerful fishing fleets and props up destructive practices that would otherwise be unprofitable.

The Global Picture

Governments continue to provide billions of dollars in tax breaks and subsidies for activities that are exacerbating the climate and biodiversity crises. For the ocean, damaging or ‘harmful’ subsidies are provided to the fishing industry at the scale of US\$22 billion every year.¹⁷ Harmful fisheries subsidies are defined as subsidies that are capacity-enhancing and directly contribute to overfishing. These subsidies support the unsustainable use of our shared ocean, working directly against global goals set out in the 2015 Paris climate agreement to

curb emissions and the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Specifically, Target 18 within the Framework requires that countries ‘reduce harmful incentives by at least \$500 billion per year and scale up positive incentives for biodiversity’.¹⁸ Target 18 also requires countries to identify and quantify the scale of the subsidies provided that are harmful to biodiversity by 2025, a deadline rapidly approaching.

17. 2019. Sumaila, U. Rashid, et al. "Updated estimates and analysis of global fisheries subsidies." *Marine Policy*
18. 2022. Global Biodiversity Framework. Target 18.
19. 2025. WTO. WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies
20. The UK submitted their instruments of acceptance on the 15th of December 2023.

21. 2020. Schuhbauer, Anna, et al. "The global fisheries subsidies divide between small- and large- scale fisheries." *Frontiers in Marine Science*
22. *ibid*
23. 2025. Vaughan, Duncan, et al. "Revisiting fuel tax concessions (FTCs): The economic implications of fuel subsidies for the commercial fishing fleet of the United Kingdom." *Marine Policy*
24. *ibid*

The World Trade Organization Agreement

On September 15th, 2025, after over 20 years of negotiations, a landmark World Trade Organization Fisheries Subsidies Agreement to try and curb the provision of harmful fisheries subsidies came into force. This is a first of its kind, legally binding agreement, whose primary purpose is environmental sustainability. The agreement when implemented will prohibit subsidies for:¹⁹

1. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing;
2. Fishing overexploited stocks where there are no measures in place to rebuild them;
3. Unregulated fishing on the high seas.

Members of the WTO that have ratified the agreement, including some of the biggest providers of these subsidies such as China and the EU, will need to begin taking significant steps to

remove the provision of these harmful subsidies. These include those supporting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and fisheries working the high seas in the regulatory gaps such as those off Alaska, Argentina and in the Indian Ocean. However, important details and additional rules on point (2) regarding subsidies that drive overfishing more broadly still need to be negotiated and concluded.²⁰

It is important to note that the subsidies which are funding overfishing are not uniformly distributed across the sector and are skewed toward favouring large industrial fleets, exacerbating inequity in the sector. In fact, globally, the small-scale fleet received only 16% of subsidies in 2020, while 90% of capacity enhancing subsidies, which contribute directly to overfishing, were allocated exclusively to large-scale fisheries.²¹

Subsidies in the UK

The UK ratified the subsidies agreement in 2024, and its impact on the fisheries sector is yet to be seen. The government has also yet to meet its obligation to report on the exact amount of harmful subsidies being provided to the fisheries sector, as agreed under the Global Biodiversity Framework. However, a report published in 2020 estimated that, of the harmful fisheries subsidies provided by the UK Government, nearly 75% go toward decreasing fuel costs in the form of fuel tax concessions and only 12% of all subsidies are allocated to small-scale fishers.²²

In the UK, fuel subsidies are provided through fuel tax concessions. The fuel tax concessions consist of a ‘red diesel rebate’ and the ‘marine voyages – relief from fuel duty’, which allow most commercial marine vessels, including UK fishing vessels and foreign-owned fishing vessels refuelling in the UK, to pay a reduced price for fuel.²³ These concessions reduced the fishing industry’s costs through tax relief schemes of around £150-180 million per year between 2009 and 2019, supporting a fleet that generated just under £1 billion annually. It turns out the UK fishing fleet is not as profitable as it seems. Strip away the government’s fuel tax concessions, and for most of the decade between 2009 and 2019,

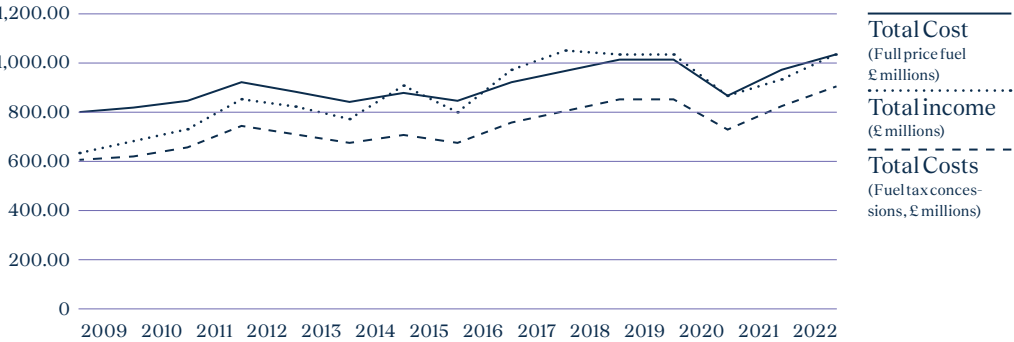
the costs outweighed the revenue (see Figure 3). In other words, without taxpayer help, the industry was barely breaking even.

This is particularly true for many of the fisheries using the most damaging gear. This includes the beam trawling, nephrops trawling, and dredging vessels – of which the majority make a financial loss after the removal of the fuel tax concessions.²⁴

The pelagic sector, a fleet segment that has ‘super-normal’ profits, also receives fuel tax concessions.

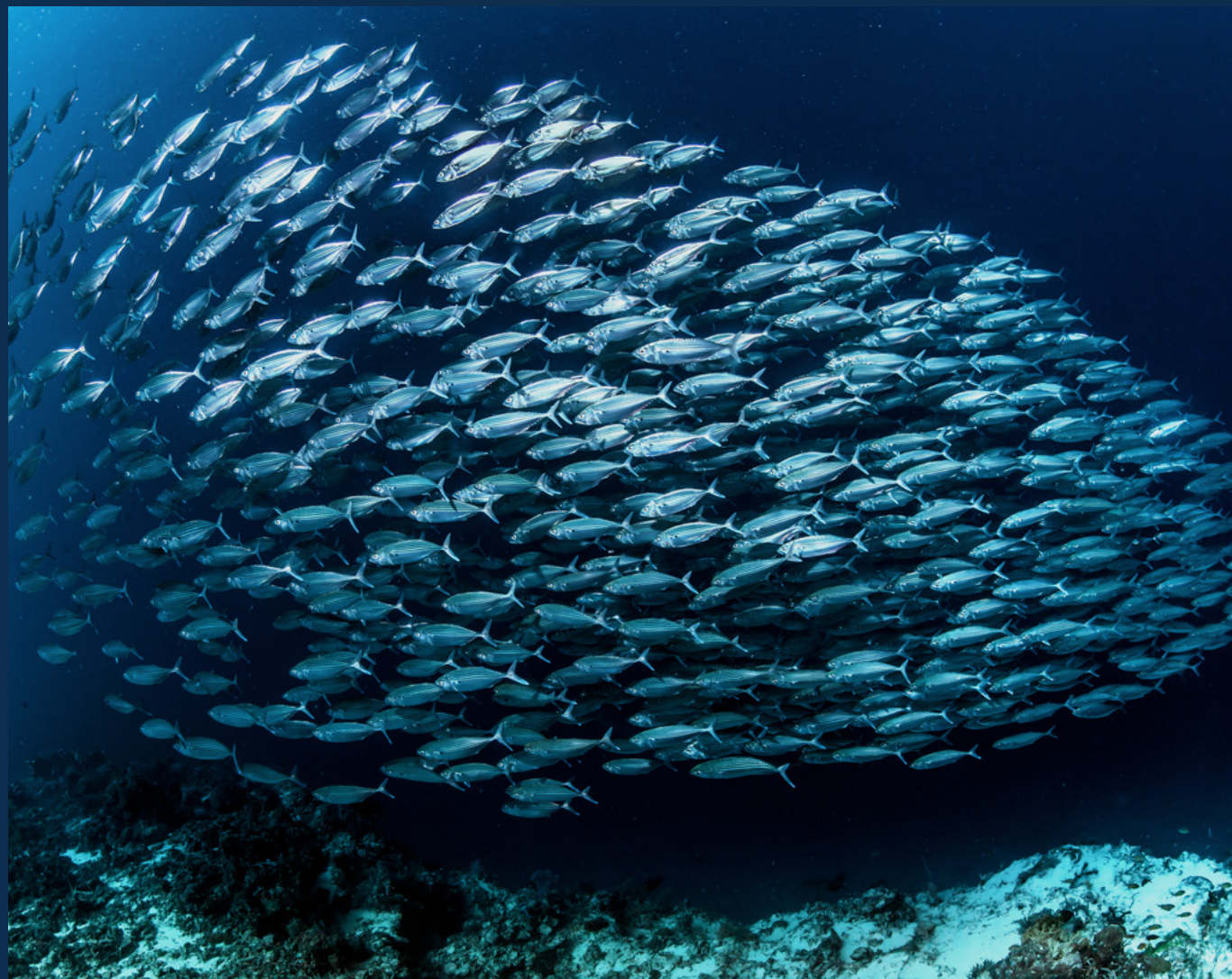
This highlights the absurdity of the provision of subsidies not only to support fisheries fishing for overfished stocks, and within protected areas, but to fisheries whose profit margins don’t need them. Under these global frameworks, the UK has both the opportunity and the obligation to begin phasing out the provision of harmful subsidies and instead repurposing them to build more sustainable and resilient fisheries. A review of existing policies to phase out harmful subsidies under World Trade Organization guidance should begin with the provision of public money to the wealthiest fishing sector.

Figure 3
The financial performance of the UK fishing fleet 2009-2022





FENDING OFF THE APOCALYPSE



© Paul Cowell
Large school of mackerel

A Sustainable Future for UK Marine Ecosystems

The UK can protect its critical marine habitats, avert the collapse of key fish populations and redress inequity through a better controlled quota distribution system. And it can save public money by not funding exploitative fishing. Instead of presiding over the decline of our seas, the government should be leading the effort to protect and rebuild them for the benefit of

nature, climate and people.

The following recommendations outline a clear path to do so. They detail how the UK can manage its ocean to restore a healthy, thriving ecosystem and support a sustainable fishing industry for generations to come.

To deliver this, Blue Marine recommends that the UK Government:

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Remove destructive fishing gear from all UK marine protected areas (MPAs).

England and Scotland should proceed with plans to remove bottom trawling from offshore MPAs, and the Secretary of State should urgently sign off the byelaws proposed for inshore MPAs in England.

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Set all catch limits below scientific advice.

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THE SEA IS CENTRAL TO LIFE IN THE BRITISH ISLES.

The recommendations in this report present a clear choice: to preside over a continued decline or take action to restore our marine environment. With the right steps, our coasts could support thriving wildlife, sustainable

fishing, and stronger local economies. This is more than a policy objective — it's an opportunity to reinvigorate our coastal communities and ensure a healthier, more productive sea for future generations.



