

Scotland's Seas: An Environmental and Economic Opportunity

POLICY BRIEFING

Scotland's seas are six times larger than our land area and among the most ecologically important in the world. They support internationally important marine wildlife, globally significant ecosystems and the coastal economies that depend upon them.

Healthy seas underpin climate resilience, food security and economic prosperity. Delivering effective marine management now is essential to restore nature, mitigate climate change and secure long-term benefits for Scotland's coastal communities.

We need urgent action in Scotland to safeguard our seas, including to:

- Stop damaging methods of fishing within our Marine Protected Areas
- Support sustainable fishing and equitable use of our seas
- Protect and restore Scotland's blue carbon ecosystems



Photo Jim Greenfield, www.oceaneyephoto.com, Crab Edible

With decisive action, Scotland's seas can recover, supporting resilient marine ecosystems, sustainable fisheries and thriving coastal communities.

BLUE MARINE'S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect Our Seas

- Remove bottom trawling and dredging from all inshore MPAs (0–12nm).
- Protect Priority Marine Features (PMFs) outside the Marine Protected Area (MPA) network.
- Publish a consultation on measures to end damaging fishing in inshore MPAs and PMFs.
- Reinstate a coastal limit protecting at least 30 per cent of inshore waters.

Support Sustainable Fisheries

- Set catch limits in line with scientific advice.
- Require effective vessel monitoring systems, including onboard cameras, starting with bottom-trawl vessels.
- Introduce statutory regional inshore fisheries management.
- Address inequitable quota distribution and support lower-impact, small-scale fisheries.

Protect and Restore Blue Carbon Ecosystems

- Effectively protect inshore blue carbon habitats.
- Restore at least 30% of degraded marine habitat.
- Set clear targets for active restoration of degraded blue carbon ecosystems.

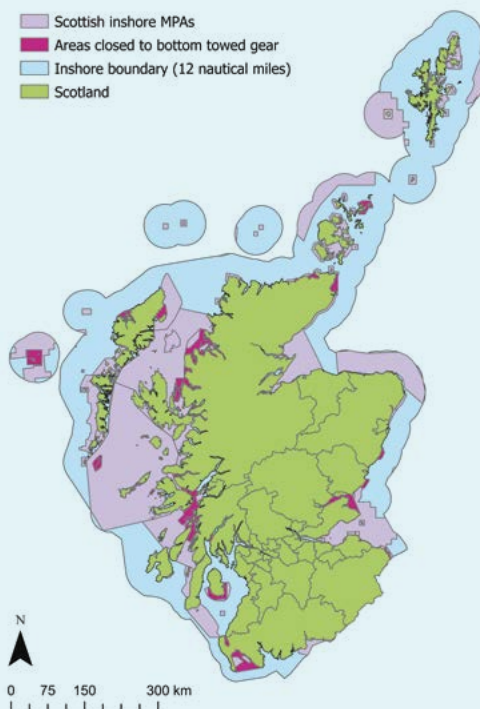
Photo Matt Jarvis, Seagrass, Arran

Effective Protection for Our Seas

Bottom trawling and dredging remain the main cause of seabed disturbance in Scotland's waters. The Scottish Government has already taken positive action to introduce protective measures in offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). However, destructive bottom towed fishing gears still operate in the vast majority of our inshore MPAs.

Less than 10 per cent of inshore MPAs are protected from bottom trawling and dredging. Priority Marine Features outside the MPA network also remain at risk.

For our nature, our people, our economy and our future, we ask the new Government to address the ongoing risk to nationally important habitats and species as a priority after the election and publish the consultation on measures to end damaging fishing affecting inshore MPAs and PMFs.



A Blue Marine commissioned study highlighted that protecting Scotland's inshore waters (out to three nautical miles) from bottom-towed fishing could deliver a five-fold increase in net societal benefits over 20 years – rising from a net loss under current management to an estimated £3.6 billion in net gain.

Protect and Restore Scotland's Blue Carbon Ecosystems

Scotland's marine sediments, seagrass meadows, kelp forests and sea lochs store substantial carbon reserves of national and global importance. Marine sediments alone store more carbon than Scotland's peatlands and soils combined.

These habitats are a critical climate asset, yet remain vulnerable to damaging activities, including bottom-towed fishing.

Clear protection and restoration targets, integrated into marine planning and supported by scientific guidance, are necessary to safeguard natural carbon storage and contribute meaningfully to Scotland's climate objectives.

Blue carbon habitats within Scotland's MPAs hold an estimated 76 Mt of organic carbon and 510 Mt of inorganic carbon, representing 50% of total organic and 36% of total inorganic carbon stored in the top 10 cm of sediments.

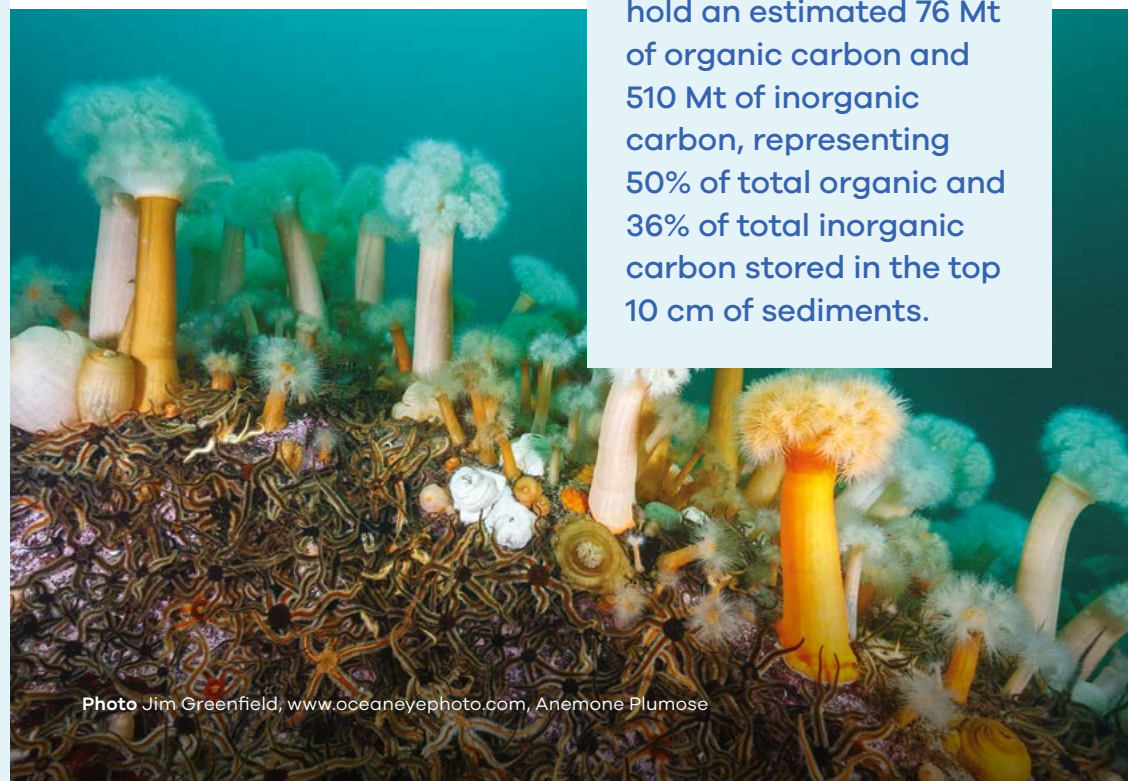


Photo Jim Greenfield, www.oceaneyephoto.com, Anemone Plumose

Support Sustainable Fishing and Equitable Use of the Sea

Fishing above the levels indicated by scientific advice has driven stocks into significant decline, risking both marine ecosystems and fishing livelihoods. Recent assessments show that catch limits for more than half of UK fish stocks continue to exceed scientific advice.

Rebuilding fish stocks would deliver significant economic and social benefits, particularly given Scotland contributes 61 per cent of the UK fishing industry's economic output.

Science-led catch limits, effective vessel monitoring and fairer allocation of fishing opportunities, particularly for lower-impact small-scale fishers, are essential to secure a sustainable and equitable future for the sector.

Adopt a Regional Approach to Inshore Fisheries Management

The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 committed to regional marine planning, yet progress has been limited and fisheries management has often been excluded.

Introducing statutory regional governance based on local democracy and collaborative management would support sustainable, ecosystem-based management of Scotland's fisheries, balancing social and economic benefits with the protection and recovery of the marine environment.

Regional management can strengthen compliance, improve certainty for marine users and balance environmental recovery with social and economic priorities across Scotland's inshore waters.

Protect Scotland coastal waters and the livelihoods that depend on them

Scotland's seas were once protected by a coastal limit that safeguarded our most sensitive waters from trawling. Since its removal in 1984, many once-productive whitefish stocks have collapsed and habitat degradation has intensified.

Today, over 95 per cent of Scotland's inshore waters remain open to bottom trawling and dredging.

Reinstating a modern coastal limit covering at least 30 per cent of inshore waters would support stock recovery, restore marine ecosystems and increase the long-term resilience of Scotland's inshore fleet and coastal communities.



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Photo Graeme Bruce, Octopus

Find out more – Blue Marine would be delighted to provide you with any further information you may need. Please contact Scotland Project Manager, Joe Richards at Joe@bluemarinefoundation.com

Blue Marine Foundation is a UK ocean conservation charity set up in 2010 by some of the team behind the award-winning documentary film 'The End of the Line'. Blue Marine is dedicated to addressing overfishing, one of the world's biggest environmental problems and aims to restore life in the ocean by protecting and restoring marine environments. Its mission is to ensure the effective protection of at least 30 per cent of the ocean by 2030 and the sustainable management of the whole ocean. We have been working with partners, local communities and fishermen in Scotland for over a decade.

Evidence and references available on request.



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