

## Open Letter to BBC about Trawlersmen and Sustainability

### **BBC Series *Trawlersmen: Hunting the Catch* misses opportunity to explore urgent sustainability issues within fishing industry**

Dear Director General Tim Davie CBE and Chief Content Officer Charlotte Moore,

As a coalition of 135 organisations who share a deep concern for the health of our marine environment we question the commissioning process underpinning the BBC series *Trawlersmen Hunting the Catch*<sup>1</sup>, recently aired on prime-time TV. We suggest this popular programme has missed a vital opportunity to explore urgent sustainability issues, as well as failing to reflect the important diversity of the fishing industry.

A year ago alongside 11 other broadcasters, the BBC signed up to the Climate Content Pledge<sup>2</sup>, acknowledging their “*crucial responsibility*” to act on climate change and vowing - while the world looked on during COP26 - to generate content that “*inspires their audiences to make greener choices.*” *Trawlersmen Hunting the Catch*, a high-budget series that charts the fortunes of dozens of fishing businesses around the UK, failed to mention, even briefly, the sustainability and climate change challenge faced by this sector of the fishing industry.

The series is without doubt an eye-opening portrait of the perils of working on a trawl vessel, skilfully documenting the bravery of fishing crew with both spectacular and honest, unscripted scenes that show impressive film-making craft. One moment viewers are following a boat steaming into the middle of the North Sea, the next alongside crew in the hold of a whitefish trawler, sorting, icing and boxing fish during a force eight gale while the boat is rolling at 45 degrees on a heavy ocean swell, in the middle of the night. All the while, the cameras reveal the camaraderie, trust and necessary good humour that develops between crew in these conditions; bonds of mutualism and support that are increasingly missing from many workplaces and communities.

There is absolutely no disputing the skill, courage, ingenuity and grit of those who work on these fishing vessels. However, with each dramatic episode, a singular editorial focus persists: the pursuit of profit. “*If the boat can be first to the grounds, they could be in for a big payday*”. The episodes titles - ‘*The Gamble*’, ‘*The Price Crash*’, ‘*The Race*’, ‘*The Million Pound Catch*’ - all paint the picture of an occupation more interested in making money, than the health of the public fishery they rely upon. The life in our sea is characterised as a fully commodified resource.

The series is undeniably informative: reflecting the pressures within the trawl sector – the uncompromising finances involved and the massive pressures on skippers and crew to pay wages (or the bank) and meet market demand.

But there are two fundamental things missing from the programme.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001csmc>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://wearealbert.org/2021/11/03/broadcasters-and-streamers-sign-up-to-the-climate-content-pledge/>

The first is context: bottom-trawling is just one method of fishing and it is not the most popular, though it does have the most impact. The vast majority of Scotland's fishermen (70%) work inshore using 'static' fishing methods such as creeling, which involves laying fleets of pots on the seabed. In the main, these are day boats, operating a more selective method of fishing, and yet only a few 'potters' featured amongst over a dozen trawl boats. *Trawlermen* is the equivalent of a documentary on livestock farming and interviewing mainly intensive pig farming businesses. Where is the routine, big budget investment in documentaries following the lives of smaller-scale fishermen using lower-impact methods such as creeling, line-fishing or diving?

The second big editorial gap is sustainability. Many sequences in *Trawlermen* show boat decks writhing with marine life - fish and other marine biodiversity that has just been hauled aboard in bulging trawl nets, in addition to the target catch. Sponges, starfish, dogfish, undersized crabs and even a Blue Shark, listed as 'Near Threatened' on the IUCN Red List, can be seen squashed amongst this 'bycatch'. A huge amount of the bycatch is then dumped back into the sea, dead. Trawling is globally one of the most environmentally damaging methods of fishing. And this is true of bottom-trawling in particular, a method which sees nets or dredges towed across the seafloor to catch fish swimming near the bottom, or shellfish living within the seabed. This method is often indiscriminate, catching large volumes of other sea life at the same time, as well as destroying marine habitats. *Trawlermen* presents this waste as a normal, acceptable by-product of fishing.

The European seabed is the most bottom-trawled in the world. Between 50 and 80% of Europe's continental shelf is regularly impacted, with estimates that millions of hours of bottom-trawling occur *inside* Marine Protected Areas across Europe on an annual basis. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bottom-trawling was argued by fishermen to be so damaging that it was banned within three nautical miles of Scotland's coastline. After rampant overfishing this protective law was stripped back in 1984 and the [www.ourseas.scot](http://www.ourseas.scot) coalition now campaigns to reinstate an inshore limit to safeguard inshore fisheries and the environment. Some fishing districts in England and Wales already ban scallop dredging within their inshore zone. In recent years, there is a growing body of evidence that the seafloor itself is a vast store of carbon – our seabed sequesters three times as much carbon as our forests. And yet bottom-trawling can disrupt and damage these carbon-rich habitats and sediments – with studies suggesting that bottom-trawling the ocean floor could be a significant contributor to global carbon emissions. It means that where and how we choose to fish must play a major role in our fight against climate change.

This environmental and carbon footprint of trawling is therefore a massive challenge for the viability of the industry. And yet the BBC's *Trawlermen: Hunting the Catch* series fails to explore this theme, suggesting that it has been deliberately ignored and that the makers of *Trawlermen*, filmed just a few months after COP26, have not implemented the actions within the Climate Content Pledge.

For the past few decades, the fishing industry has presided over a hugely wasteful chapter in overfishing largely because of poor governmental regulation. Scotland alone is estimated to have allocated 1.2 million tonnes of fishing quota above scientific advice from 2001-2020<sup>3</sup>. Some fish populations, like west coast cod, remain in a near constant state of collapse and the rising price of fish has in some cases compensated for the decline in stocks and catches.

---

3

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scotland-named-one-of-europes-worst-countries-for-overfishing-x8wfbnk7g>

The series begs so many questions: if these stocks were managed better, would trawlermen have to so frequently endure harsh and dangerous conditions to land their catches? What about the fishermen who are not taking part in these increasingly industrial fisheries? Are they being impacted by them?

We recognise the BBC's guidelines for impartiality that requires its output "*as a whole*" to include the breadth of opinion to ensure that "*no significant strand of thought is.. omitted.*"<sup>4</sup> For over 16 years, the BBC has commissioned *Trawlermen* documentaries and while we respect the series' efforts to reflect the reality of trawling, as alarming as that might be for some audiences, we question whether the BBC is adequately reflecting our fishing industry as a whole, and its potential. Series like '*This Fishing Life*' have explored important issues in Cornwall, but where are the BBC's documentaries about the impact of bottom-trawling and overfishing on both the environment and those communities where fishing used to thrive?

Some within our coalition are old enough to remember times when the fish in our sea were more abundant. As a coalition of fishers and environmental groups, we are not anti-fishing: we want a healthy, thriving and resilient fishing industry for the future that supports coastal communities. But without a healthy seabed, the future of the fishing industry is not secure. The BBC's content and programming should help explore the vital sustainability challenges of our day, not unquestioningly validate an industrial fishing system that has led to a history of environmental decline.

Yours sincerely,

The 135 members of the Our Seas coalition [www.ourseas.scot](http://www.ourseas.scot) ,

<https://ourseasscotland.eaction.org.uk/bring-back-the-fish>

**Aberdeen Diving Services, Angling Trust, Argaty Red Kites, Argyll District Salmon Fishery Board, Argyll Fisheries Trust, Arran EcoSavvy, Atlantic Diving Services, Aquatic Life Institute, Ayr Angling Club, Beaulieu District Fisheries Board, Belfast Lough Sea Angling and Conservation Club, Berwickshire Marine Reserve, Black House WaterSports Tiree, Blue Marine Foundation, Blue Planet Society, Blue Ventures, Carna Conservation Initiative, Cast Away with Katie Tunn, Centre for Human Ecology, Clean Sailors, Click Book Stay, Clyde Porpoise, Coastal Connection, Coast to Coast Surf School, Community Association of Lochs and Sounds (CAOLAS), Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST), Conor Ryan Photography, Craignish Restoration of Marine and Coastal Habitat (CROMACH), Dive and Sea the Hebrides, East Neuk Seaweeds, Eigg Environmental Action Group, Ellon Sub Aqua Club, Esk Rivers and Fisheries Trust, Ethical Seafood Research, Ethical Shellfish Company, Fairlie Coastal Trust, Fauna & Flora International, Findhorn District Salmon Fisheries Board, Findhorn Nairn and Lossie Fisheries Trust, 58°North Scottish Seaweed, Firth of Forth Lobster Hatchery, Fish Legal, Freedom Diving, Friends of Dumbarton Foreshore, Friends of the Sound of Jura, Frogfish Photography, GalGael Trust, Heart of Argyll Wildlife, Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation, Isle Martin Trust, James Curley Fly Fishing, Johnson and Loftus Boat Builders, Kayak Summer Isles, Kilchoan Estate, Kilmarnock Sub Aqua Club, Knoydart Foundation Ranger Service, Little Loch Broom Marine Life, Loch Laxford Shellfish Ltd, Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association, Loch Visions, Lochaber Environmental Group, Lochnell Oysters, Low Impact Fishers of Europe, Mara Fish Restaurant and Deli, Marine Concern, Marine Conservation Northern Ireland, Mikietyntyn Ltd Shellfish Merchants, Mull Charters, The**

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/editorial-standards/#introduction>

Nature Library, Narwhal Expeditions, National Trust for Scotland, Northern Ireland Federation of Sea Anglers, Nourish Scotland, Oceana, Ocean Gives, Ockran Oysters, Oban Sea School, Open Seas, Orkney Skate Trust, Otter Lodge B and B, Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust, Patagonia, Phyllis restaurant, Plastic at Bay, Project Baseline, Project Media, Project Seagrass, Puffin Dive Centre, River Eachaig Fisheries Syndicate, Salmon Aquaculture Reform Network Scotland, Saltwater Life, Save Kintyre Seas, Scotland the Big Picture, Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, Scottish Federation of Sea Anglers, Scottish Salmon Think Tank, Scottish Scallop Divers' Association, Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network, Scottish Sub Aqua Club, Sea Change, Sea Kayak Argyll and Bute, SeaDog Charters, Sea the Change, Sea Freedom Kayaks, Sealife Adventures, Sea Shepherd UK, Seatrek Scotland, Seawilding, Shark Guardian, Shark and Skate Citizen Science Scotland, Shellfish Safaris, Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum, Skye Communities for Natural Heritage, Skye Scallop Divers, Snorkel Wild, South Skye Seas initiative, Staunch Industries, SubSeaTV, Sunny Side Ocean Defenders, Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust, Terra Mare, That's Yer Dinner, The Ullapool Sea Savers, The Wilderness Foundation UK, University of Stirling Marine Conservation Society, Ullapool Charters, Ullapool OutDoors, Ullapool Seasavers, West Coast Matters, Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board (WRASFB), West Sutherland Fisheries Trust, Wild Argyll, WildFish, Wild Rose Escapes, Wreckpeditions