

**Mairi Gougeon**

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform & Islands,  
Scottish Government  
The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

24 April 2024

**Urgent protection of Gairloch herring spawning habitat from scallop dredging - open letter**

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Our Seas is a coalition of over 130 coastal businesses, community groups, fishermen's organisations and environmental NGOs with an interest in the condition and management of Scotland's inshore waters. We would like to make representations regarding the protection of vital North West herring spawning grounds from the impacts of bottom-towed fishing. As you are aware, considerable herring spawning was recorded on a large area of seabed adjacent to the North Erradale shore on 12 March during a seabed survey carried out by Little Loch Broom Marine Life, the Wester Ross Fishery Trust, Edinburgh Napier University and local volunteers<sup>1</sup>.

Shoals of spring spawning herring have been observed along Gairloch's coastline since 2018<sup>2</sup>, but this is the first time spawning has been recorded in this area of seabed off North Erradale for decades and is significant for the future of west coast herring.

Maerl, on which herring spawn, is a Priority Marine Feature<sup>3</sup>, a UK BAP habitat<sup>4</sup> and an OSPAR threatened and declining habitat<sup>5</sup>. Herring spawning grounds are an essential fish habitat and there is scientific consensus that protecting these habitats from disturbance has both a biodiversity and sustainable fisheries rationale. According to ICES advice, "*activities that have a negative*

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<sup>1</sup> [Wester Ross Fisheries Trust Report 21/03/24](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Wester Ross spring spawning herring feature on BBC Blue Planet UK](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Nature Scot, Priority Marine Features in Scotland's Seas](#)

<sup>4</sup> [UK BAP Priority Habitats | JNCC - Adviser to Government on Nature Conservation](#)

<sup>5</sup> [List of Threatened and/or Declining Species & Habitats | OSPAR Commission](#)

*impact on the spawning of herring should not occur, unless the effects of these activities have been assessed and shown not to be detrimental to the productivity of the stock (ICES, 2003, 2015a)*<sup>6</sup>. NatureScot also *"support the rationale for protecting herring spawning grounds from disturbance that would adversely affect the ability of habitat to support spawning"*<sup>7</sup>. Protecting habitats like this is strategic for the recovery of our herring stocks and we believe it will reinforce the growing evidence base that environmental action for our seas can deliver net economic benefits for our communities.

Maerl gravel along the Gairloch coast is routinely dredged by mobile scallop dredge vessels. Allowing this fishing method to occur in known herring spawning habitats goes against ICES advice as scallop dredging involves raking the top layer of seabed<sup>8</sup>. Maerl is especially vulnerable to scallop dredging; 70% can be removed from an area by a single dredge tow<sup>9</sup> with recovery taking many decades<sup>10</sup>.

The Scottish Government identified this sea area as one deserving protection for seagrass and maerl, having held a number of stakeholder meetings where protections for this area have been discussed.<sup>11</sup> Since 2018, the local community and creel sector have also requested fishing restrictions in these areas in line with ICES advice that herring spawning grounds should not be disturbed by bottom-towed fishing gear. These calls for action continue today<sup>12</sup>.

The Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation relayed the issue of lack of Scottish Government action around herring spawning in a 2022 Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee hearing<sup>13</sup>

*"In several instances, we have written to the IFG and asked it to recommend something. For example, we wanted the closure of the herring spawning ground that had been identified north of Gairloch—it was on "Blue Planet" and it was a big thing. We said, "ICES has advised us that we should protect the spawning habitat of the herring where it has been identified." There was no consensus in the IFG. The ICES advice said that we should close it to mobile gear, but the mobile gear sector said, "We are willing to agree to that only if the static gear sector is also excluded." One, that is outwith the scientific advice and, two, the static gear community is far more*

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<sup>6</sup> [Herring \(Clupea harengus\) in divisions 6.a and 7.b–c \(West of Scotland, West of Ireland\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Correspondence from David Donnan, Marine Sustainability Manager of NatureScot, to Peter Cunningham, biologist at Wester Ross Fishery Trust, 12/04/24

<sup>8</sup> [DRB - Scallop Dredge | Gear | Seafish Fishing Gear Database](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Scallop dredging has profound, long-term impacts on maerl habitats | ICES Journal of Marine Science | Oxford Academic](#)

<sup>10</sup> [NatureScot Commissioned Report 771: A review of the recovery potential and influencing factors of relevance to the management of habitats and species within Marine Protected Areas around Scotland](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Phase 2 MPA measures and PMF review: minutes of stakeholder meetings](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Gairloch campaigners urge Scottish Government to protect 'first herring eggs in decades'](#)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=13951>

*dependent on the area than the mobile gear community, which visits it infrequently. Because there was no consensus, we asked Marine Scotland to make a determination, but it has not done so. That is one example out of many."*

Given the scientific evidence and wide local support, we are calling for immediate year round protection of these vital herring spawning grounds in line with ICES advice which will not negatively affect low-impact static fishers. We understand that this can be accomplished as an interim measure through variations in licence conditions which would prohibit Scottish bottom-towed vessels from operating in this area (with concomitant changes to conditions from all other UK administrations to ensure protections are not undermined by itinerant vessels). This was the approach adopted to protect benthic habitats in Lochs Duich, Long, and Alsh in 2014. This approach would afford the site some protection whilst the Scottish government explore and consult on more permanent measures, such as the option of a Marine Conservation Order or extending the adjacent Priority Marine Feature management proposal, ensuring the long-term protection of these important spawning grounds. In the meantime we are keen to be apprised of what measures the Scottish Government are considering to protect these spawning grounds.

Given the ongoing vulnerability of this area of seabed to scallop dredging, we would be grateful for a response at the earliest available opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Hayley Wolcott

Coordinator,

Our Seas Coalition

On behalf of the 138 members of the Our Seas Coalition

1. Aberdeen Diving Services
2. Angling Trust
3. Argaty Red Kites
4. Argyll District Salmon Fishery Board
5. Argyll Fisheries Trust
6. Arran EcoSavvy
7. Atlantic Diving Services
8. Aquatic Life Institute

9. Ayr Angling Club
10. Beaulieu District Fisheries Board
11. Belfast Lough Sea Angling and Conservation Club
12. Berwickshire Marine Reserve
13. Black House WaterSports Tiree
14. Blue Marine Foundation
15. Blue Planet Society
16. Blue Ventures
17. Captain Paul Watson Foundation
18. Carna Conservation Initiative
19. Cast Away with Katie Tunn
20. Centre for Human Ecology
21. Clean Sailors
22. Click Book Stay
23. Clyde Porpoise
24. Coastal Connection
25. Coast to Coast Surf School
26. Community Association of Lochs and Sounds (CAOLAS)
27. Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST)
28. Conor Ryan Photography
29. Craignish Restoration of Marine and Coastal Habitat (CROMACH)
30. Dive and Sea the Hebrides
31. Earth in Common
32. East Neuk Seaweeds
33. Eigg Environmental Action Group
34. Ellon Sub Aqua Club
35. Esk Rivers and Fisheries Trust
36. Ethical Seafood Research
37. Fairlie Coastal Trust
38. Fauna & Flora International
39. 58°North Scottish Seaweed
40. Findhorn District Salmon Fisheries Board
41. Findhorn Nairn and Lossie Fisheries Trust
42. Firth of Forth Lobster Hatchery
43. Fish Legal
44. Freedom Diving
45. Friends of Dumbarton Foreshore
46. Friends of the Sound of Jura
47. Frogfish Photography
48. GalGael Trust
49. Gordon Castle Fishings
50. Heart of Argyll Wildlife

51. Hebrides Cruises
52. Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation
53. Isle Martin Trust
54. James Curley Fly Fishing
55. Johnson and Loftus Boat Builders
56. Kayak Summer Isles
57. Kilchoan Estate
58. Kilmarnock Sub Aqua Club
59. Knoydart Foundation Ranger Service
60. Little Loch Broom Marine Life
61. Loch Laxford Shellfish Ltd
62. Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association
63. Loch Visions
64. Lochaber Environmental Group
65. Lochnell Oysters
66. Low Impact Fishers of Europe
67. Mara Fish Restaurant and Deli
68. Marine Conservation Northern Ireland
69. Mikiety Ltd Shellfish Merchants
70. Mull Charters
71. Narwhal Expeditions
72. National Trust for Scotland
73. The Nature Library
74. Northern Ireland Federation of Sea Anglers
75. Northern Ireland Fly Fishing Association
76. Nourish Scotland
77. Oban Sea School
78. Oceana
79. Ocean Breeze Marine Services
80. Ocean Gives
81. Ockran Oysters
82. Open Seas
83. Orkney Skate Trust
84. Otter Lodge B and B
85. Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust
86. Pam van de Brug
87. Patagonia
88. Phyllis restaurant
89. Plastic at Bay
90. Project Baseline
91. Project Media
92. Project Seagrass

93. Puffin Dive Centre
94. River Eachaig Fisheries Syndicate
95. Salmon Aquaculture Reform Network Scotland
96. Saltwater Life
97. Save Kintyre Seas
98. Scotland the Big Picture
99. Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation
100. Scottish Federation of Sea Anglers
101. Scottish Salmon Think Tank
102. Scottish Scallop Divers' Association
103. Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network
104. Scottish Sub Aqua Club
105. Sealife Adventures
106. Seawilding
107. Sea Change
108. SeaDog Charters
109. Sea Freedom Kayaks
110. Sea Kayak Argyll and Bute
111. Sea the Change
112. Shark Guardian
113. Shark and Skate Citizen Science Scotland
114. Shellfish Safaris
115. Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum
116. Skye Communities for Natural Heritage ]
117. Skye Scallop Divers
118. Snorkel Wild
119. South Skye Seas initiative
120. Staunch Industries
121. SubSeaTV
122. Sunny Side Ocean Defenders
123. Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust
124. Terra Mare
125. That's Yer Dinner
126. The Majestic Line
127. The Ullapool Sea Savers
128. The Wilderness Foundation UK
129. University of Stirling Marine Conservation Society
130. Ullapool Charters
131. Ullapool Outdoors
132. West Coast Matters
133. West Sutherland Fisheries trust
134. Wild Argyll

- 135. WildFish
- 136. Wild Rose Escapes
- 137. Wreckspeditions
- 138. WRASFB - Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board