Inshore Marine Protected Area and Priority Marine Features Consultation

Manual

11/11/2026

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Introduction

After almost a decade of delay, the Scottish Government has finally launched its consultation on the future protection of inshore marine habitats and species. You can view it here.

The Our Seas Coalition is an alliance of over 170 organisations all campaigning for stronger protections for Scotland's inshore waters, specifically calling for 30% of Scotland's inshore to be protected from bottom trawling and scallop dredging elicited via a just transition to lower impact more sustainable fishing practices.

Our Seas have created this briefing manual to support our members and the wider public in responding to the consultation, which closes on the **18th of January 2027.** It contains information on the consultation itself, Our Seas position, the history of the problem and more! Feel free to skip through to sections relevant to you.

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Website & social media

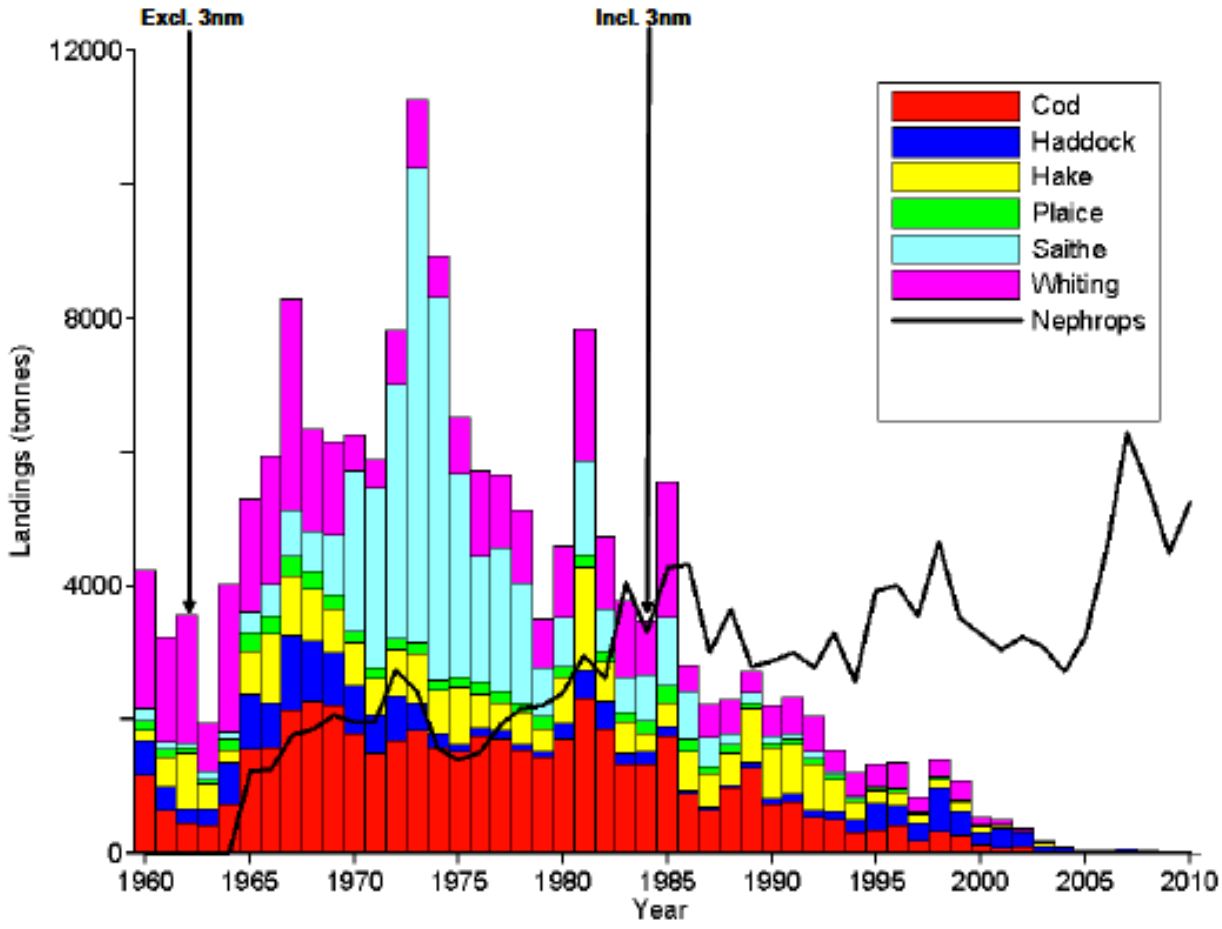
Website: ourseas.scot

What is the problem?

Within Scotland, our inshore, coastal environment is of the utmost importance and it is **declining.**

Marine seagrass meadows have reduced by 90%, native oyster reefs which once covered vast areas of our seabed have gone extinct, seabird populations have been declining since 1986 and some fish populations such as cod, herring, flounder and haddock have been driven commercially extinct.

Many different pressures have caused these declines, from climate change to pollution, however scientific evidence supports that it is the poor governance of our fish stocks which has lead to overfishing and *chronic damage to the seabed.*



Decline of demersal fish landings over time in the Clyde Sea (Heath and Speirs, 2011)

How did we get here?

Then

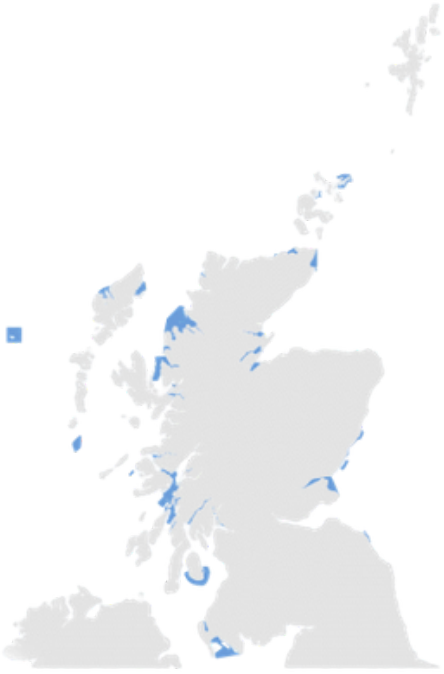
Scotland's coastline was once a vibrant and productive marine habitat, protected by a **three nautical mile limit. This meant that scallop dredging and prawn trawling could not take place within 3 nautical miles of the coast**, safeguarding fish stocks and the livelihoods of inshore fishermen from expanding industrial fishing.



The three mile limit around Scotland, displayed in dark blue

Now

Following the decline of finfish stocks the three mile limit was removed in 1984 to allow fishermen access to the more productive inshore waters, taking with it the protection of Scotland's inshore environment. With the removal, bottom trawling and scallop dredging could now occur in the vast majority of Scotland's waters with only a few areas closed for protection.



Areas now fully closed to bottom trawling and dredging, displayed in light blue

What is the threat from bottom towed gear?

Bottom towed fishing practices like trawling and **dredging** are among the **biggest threats** to Scotland's inshore environment by causing severe disruption to the seafloor. The former involves dragging heavy weighted nets along the seafloor to catch shellfish while the latter uses large steel teeth to rake up the seafloor for shellfish.

The target species for these practices are typically scallops and prawns, however, other species are often unable to escape the mouth of a trawl or dredge making them collateral damage. The practice has been equated to *"cutting down a rainforest to catch a parrot".*



📷*Howard Wood - COAST: The resulting impacts of a bottom trawl in the sea off of the Isle of Arran*

An Introduction to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

Marine Protected Areas, or MPAs, are one of the world's most widely used marine conservation tools.

They are designated areas where human activities are restricted by legislation to protect important habitats and species. Often multiple protected areas are designated to create a wider network of MPAs.

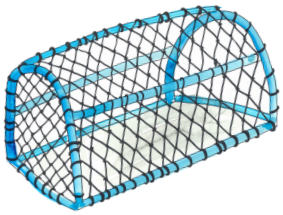
By restricting activities that can damage marine habitats and species, MPAs can give marine ecosystems the space to **recover, live and thrive.**

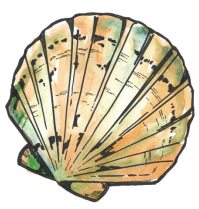
When MPAs are properly managed they can deliver amazing results. Countries including Mexico, Indonesia, Australia the USA have established MPA networks that have been shown to **increase fish abundance and biomass, while supporting healthier and more biodiverse marine ecosystems.**

And it's not just marine life that benefits. **MPAs benefit everyone** — from the fish living within them to the coastal communities around them.



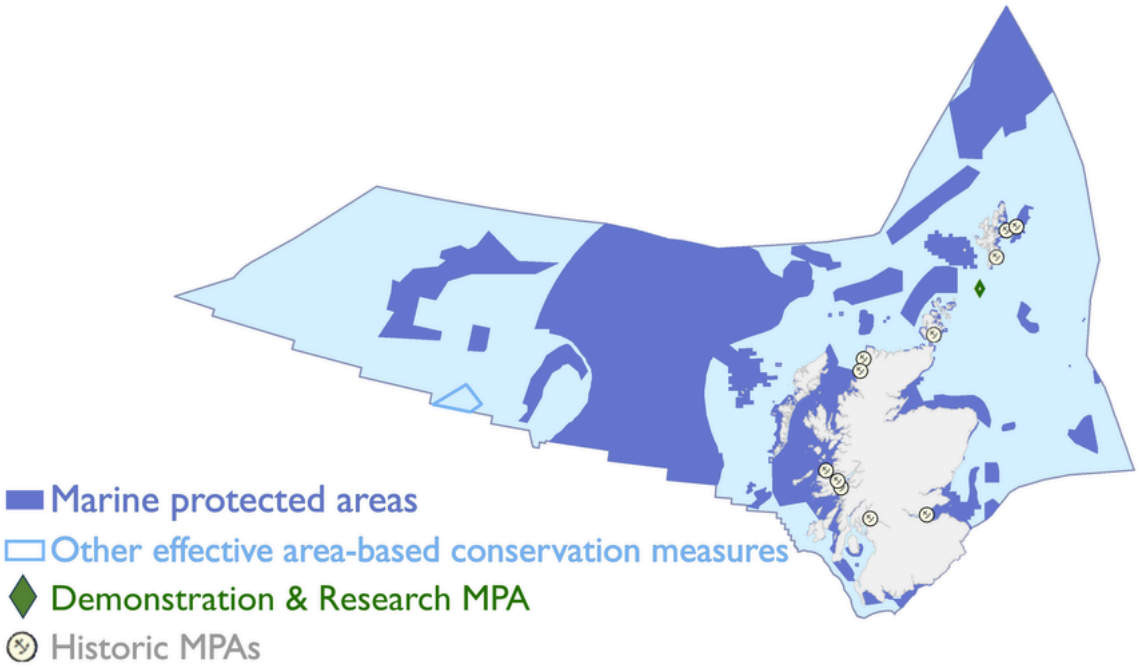






The MPA Network in Scotland

In 2014 the Scottish Government designated a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Scottish waters.



These MPAs were broadly celebrated as a major step towards halting the unsustainable exploitation of our marine environment and the beginning to recovering some of what has been lost from our seas. However, most of the Marine "Protected" Areas have since remained designations without any real protection in law, **making them protected in name only.**

We need legislation implemented for protection to become real. This must include setting out what types of fishing can take place where, and when. Different sites within the network will require differences measures based on the features the site is designated to protect. This consultation will decide the legisltation for the currently unprotected inshore MPAs.

Priority Marine Features

When creating a MPA network, there are two approaches that can be used;

Ecosystem-based approach

Which looks at the whole marine environment

Feature-based approach

Which focuses on specific habitats, species or ecological features that are important or vulnerable.

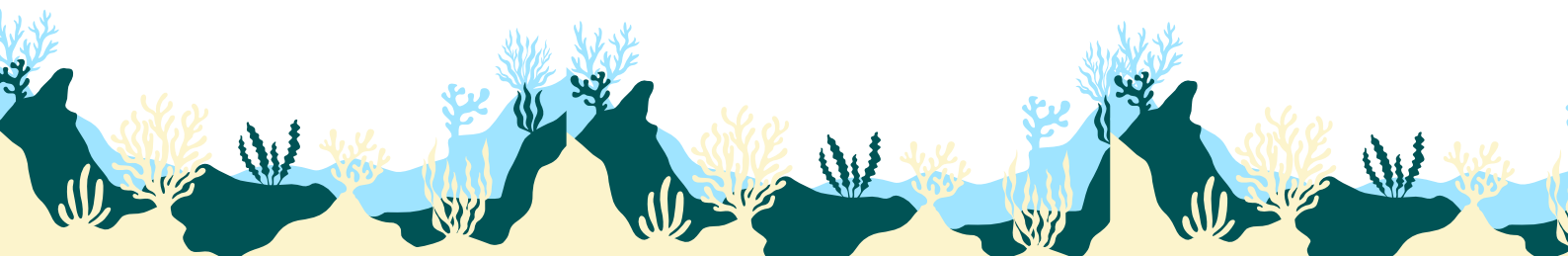
Scotland's MPA Network uses a **feature-based approach**. In 2014, the Scottish Government identified **81 Priority Marine Features (PMFs)**.

PMFs are habitats and species considered important for conservation in Scotland's seas.

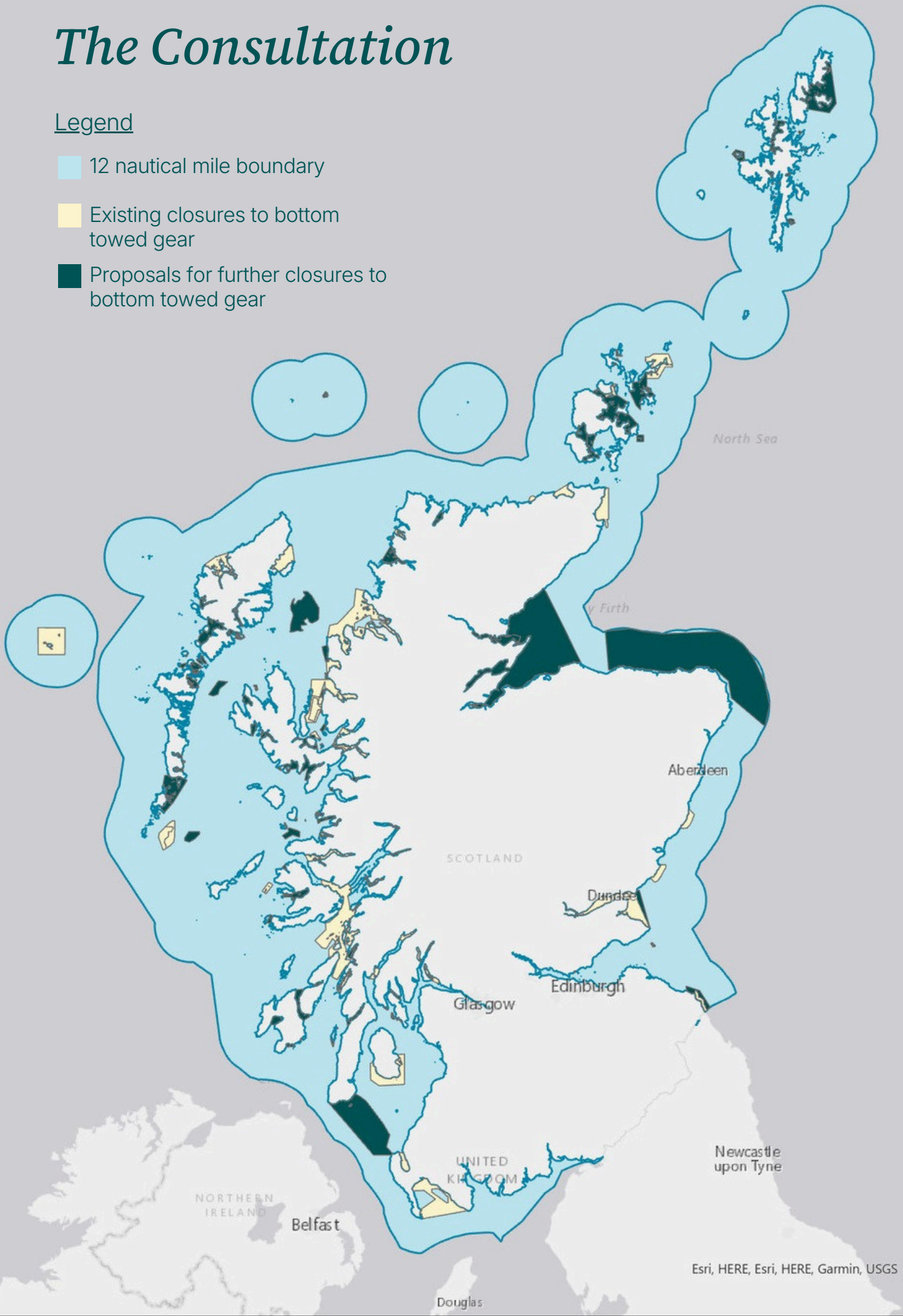
In 2018, the Scottish Government identified 11 PMFs that are particularly **vulnerable to bottom-towed fishing practises**. These features were singled out for additional protection. Click here to read about the 11 PMFs!

Where populations of these species are found outside the existing Marine Protected Area (MPA) network, additional protection will be introduced through site-specific fisheries management measures. These measures are being consulted on in this consultation.

The Scottish Government are yet to state what will happen to the remaining 70 PMFs that are not being consulted on.



The Consultation



Proposed Options

For the majority of both **MPA sites and PMF areas**, 2 options will be proposed. In some cases, only 1 option is proposed due to the conservation objectives of that site.

MPA Sites:

Option 1 - Zonal measures: Rules for specific fishing gears that may apply seasonally or to vessels above a certain engine power.

Option 2 - Full site measures: Rules on specific fishing gears that apply across the whole site all year round.

Other: If you disagree with both options, you can select 'Other' and explain your reasons in the comments box.

PMF Areas:

Both options restrict bottom-towed fishing gear. The consultation is about the size of the area where these restrictions will apply.

Option 1 - Smaller protected area

Option 2 – Larger protected area: Includes a buffer around the PMF, although the difference from Option 1 is small.

Other: If you disagree with both options, you can select 'Other' and explain your reasons in the comments box.

The Our Seas Coalition

The Our Seas coalition represents over 170 organisations, each with its own voice for the sea. We are united by a shared vision of greater protection for Scotland's inshore environment, however, individual members bring their own regional knowledge, priorities and perspectives on what that protection should look like. Consequently, our members will have their own individual views on the options presented within the consultation.

Our Seas encourage you to reach out to members in your area to learn more about their individual position.

Click here to be taken to the Members Directory!



Our Seas Coalition's Position

MPAs

Protect all seabed MPAs from bottom trawling and dredging to support healthy marine ecosystems, coastal communities and sustainable livelihoods.

If you agree, Our Seas suggest you submit a response, as follows;

- Support **Option 2** for all the MPA seabed sites that propose a **full site closure to all bottom towed fishing gear**. This would mean that more damaging fishing practices such as bottom trawling and scallop dredging will not be allowed in sites designated to protect the seabed, allowing seabed habitats to recover.

- There are 3 sites that have a seabed feature designated which do not propose full site closure to all bottom towed gear, and Our Seas will be calling for stronger protections for these sites in the form of full site closure to all bottom towed gear. These are, Clyde Sea Sill NCMPA, Moine Mhor SAC and North East Lewis NCMPA.

Why...

Because the sedbed should be protected. Bottom trawling and dredging physically disturb the seabed, damaging species and reducing the abundance and diversity of marine life. Closing seabed MPAs to bottom-towed fishing allows seabed habitats to recover and provides the **strongest protection** for the features the MPAs were designated to conserve.

What protection can look like...

On the Isle of Arran, Scotland's only No Take Zone and wider South Arran MPA show how effective marine protection can be, with bottom trawling and dredging restrictions helping to protect and restore the seabed.

Research has found increases in king scallop and lobster numbers, greater marine biodiversity and healthier habitats, while supporting local communities through activities such as diving, snorkelling and commercial scallop diving. Go to COAST's website to read more.



📷*Howard Wood - COAST: A before and after of the seabed once protection came into place*

Our Seas Coalition's Position PMFs

Neither of the proposed PMF options will provide sufficient protections; they do not go far enough to help restore the seabed, allow marine ecosystems to recover or to support sustainable fisheries. Our Seas believe at least 30% of Scotland's inshore should be protected from more damaging fishing activities like bottom trawling and dredging.

If you agree, Our Seas suggest you submit a response, as follows;

- Call for the **strongest protections being offered (Option 2) at a minimum.** Our Seas then encourage you to also ask for at least 30% of Scotland's inshore waters to be protected from the more damaging fishing activities like bottom trawling and dredging.

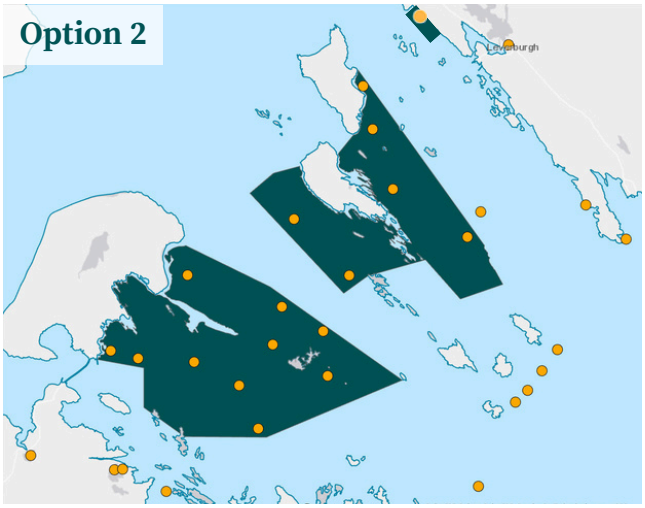
- If you want to go into more detail, as part of those 30% protections, and in line with the Coalition's PMF Policy Position, you could ask for;
    - In the West Highlands Marine Region no dredging or trawling within 3 nautical miles of shore.
    - In the Outer Hebrides Marine Region no dredging or trawling within 1 nautical mile of shore.
    - As Shetland has it's own Regulatory Order, leave it to to resolve it's own protection.
    - Throughout the rest of the Scottish Marine Regions, no dredging or trawling within 1 nautical mile or waters shallower than 45/50m.

Why are the proposed PMF options not adequate?

Both proposed options are not adequate because:

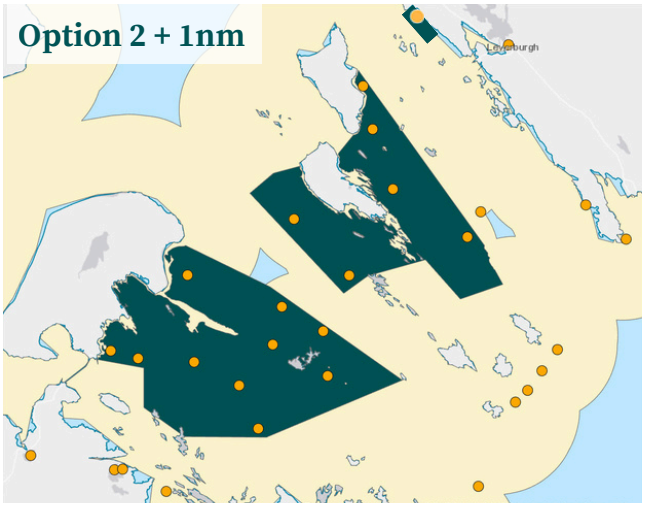
- The areas are **not large enough** to provide real protection that is truly enforceable.
- Many populations of the 11 PMFs are **found outwith the proposed areas and therefore have no protection.**

Sound of Harris - 3 PMF areas



Under the proposed option

You can clearly see in the Sound of Harris there are dots that are simply not protected.



Under Our Seas Coalition's suggestion of a 1 nautical mile limit:

All PMFs in this area are protected from more damaging fishing practises such as bottom trawling and dredging.

Legend

- Priority Marine Features (PMFs)
- PMF site proposal areas
- 1 nautical mile inshore limit

What next?

The main goal of Our Seas throughout the consultation period is to encourage and support as many people as possible to respond to it. Therefore, we have set up two main methods to do so, one faster action and one longer more substantive action. We encourage those who can to submit a longer more in depth response.

View the Our Seas Response guide and evidence brief in our Resource Hub

Click here to be taken the the Our Seas 15 minute action

This consultation is our first and best chance in a long time to make real change for Scotland's coastal seas. If you have any questions or would like help with your response, please feel free to get in touch.

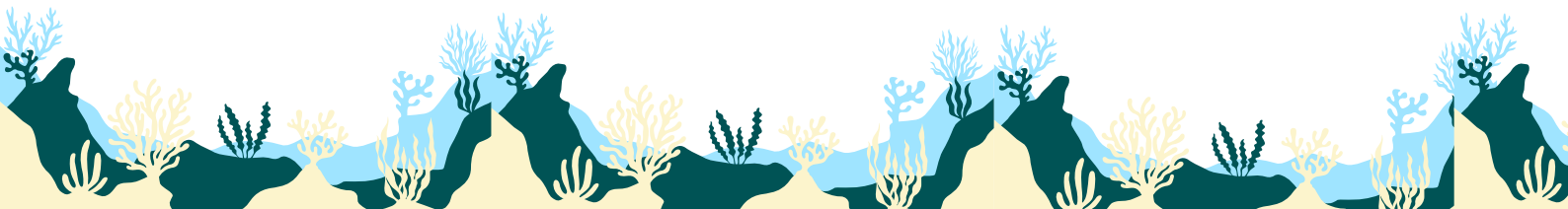
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To email the Campaign steering group: campaign-group@ourseas.scot



Regional Members List

Aberdeenshire
- Ellon Sub Aqua Club
- OpenRoad Ltd
- Project Media
- Saltwater Life
- Shark and Skate Scotland

Angus
- Esk Rivers and Fisheries Trust

Argyll & Bute
- Argyll District Salmon Fishery Board
- Argyll Fisheries Trust
- Carna Coast and Communities
- Coastal Connection
- Community Association of Lochs and Sounds (CAOLAS)
- Conor Ryan Photography
- Craignish Restoration of Marine and Coastal Habitat (CROMACH)
- Eda Frandsen Sailing Ltd.
- Friends of the Sound of Jura
- Heart of Argyll Wildlife
- Kilchoan Estate
- Kyles Coastal Community
- Loch Visions
- Lochaber Sub Aqua Club
- Lochnell Oysters
- Majestic Line
- Mull Charters
- Oban Sea School
- Ocean Gives
- Puffin Divers
- Save Kintyre Seas
- Sea Freedom Kayaks
- Sea Kayak Argyll and Bute
- SeaTrek Scotland
- SeaWilding
- Sealife Adventures
- Tighnabruaich Sailing School
- Wild Argyll
- Wreckspeditions

Arran and Ayrshire
- Arran Eco Savvy
- Ayr Sea Angling Club
- Clyde Porpoise
- Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST)
- Fairlie Coastal Trust
- Kilmarnock Sub Aqua Club
- Mara Deli and Fish Restaurant
- Nature Library
- River Eachaig Syndicate
- Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network
- Terra Mare

Berwickshire
- Berwickshire Marine Reserve
- Firth of Forth Lobster Hatchery
- Sea The Change
- Snorkel Wild
- The Scottish Coastal Cleanup

East Lothian
- Coast to Coast Surf School
- Lawson Wood Photography
- Ocean Vertical

Edinburgh
- Black House Water Sports
- Blue Marine Foundation
- Cycle For The Seas
- Earth in Common
- Fauna & Flora
- Fish Legal
- National Trust for Scotland
- Nourish Scotland
- Open Seas
- Pam van de Brug
- Project Seagrass
- Scotland The Big Picture
- Scottish Sub Aqua Club
- Staunch Industries
- Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust
- Young Sea Changers Scotland

Fife
- East Neuk Seaweed
- Scottish Federation of Sea Anglers

Glasgow & Inverclyde
- Centre for Human Ecology
- Click Book Stay
- Clyde Charters
- Ecodrama
- Ethical Seafood Research
- Friends of Dumbarton Foreshore
- GalGael Trust
- Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association
- Sunny Side Ocean Defenders
- That's Yer Dinner

Inverness
- Beauly District Fisheries Board
- Heavy Metal Munchies
- Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation
- Keltic Seafare
- Lochaber Environment Group
- Old Town Fish & Chips
- Sauna Ostara
- Wild Rose Escapes
- WildFish

Moray
- Burghead Sub Aqua Club
- Findhorn District Salmon Fisheries Board
- Findhorn Nairn and Lossie Fisheries Trust
- Gordon Castle
- Spey Fishery Board

Orkney
- Kraken Diving
- Orkney Skate Trust

Outer Hebrides
- MARA
- Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust
- Wild Harris

Perth
- Morven Stewart

Skye and Lochalsh
- All Things Cuillin
- Cast Away with Katie Tunn
- Dive and Sea the Hebrides
- Hayley Wolcott Art
- Islandeering
- Knoydart Foundation Ranger Service
- Raasay House
- Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation
- Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum
- Skye and Lochalsh Rivers Trust
- Skye Communities for Natural Heritage
- Skye Scallop Divers
- Skye Seas Survey Initiative
- Skye to Sea

Stirling
- Argaty Red Kites
- Freedom Diving

Wester Ross
- 58° North Seaweeds
- Ali Mac Candles
- Applecross Sea Rangers
- Atlantic Diving Services
- Isle Martin Trust
- James Curley Fly Fishing
- Johnston and Loftus Boat Builders
- Kayak Summer Isles
- Little Loch Broom Marine Life
- Loch Laxford Shellfish
- Mikytin Ltd
- Ockran Oysters
- Plastic at Bay
- Seaful
- Sea Change
- Shellfish Safaris
- Ullapool Charters
- Ullapool Outdoors
- Ullapool Sea Savers
- West Sutherland Fisheries Trust
- Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board

Outside Scotland

England
- Angling Trust
- Blue Ventures
- ClientEarth
- Frogfish Photography
- Maryport Coast Aquarium
- Oceana UK
- Patagonia
- Project Baseline
- Sea-Changers
- Shark Guardian
- Source to Sea
- SubSeaTV
- Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition
- Wilderness Foundation

Northern Ireland
- Belfast Lough Sea Angling and Conservation Club
- Marine Conservation Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Federation of Sea Anglers
- Northern Ireland Fly Fishing Association

International
- Aquatic Life Institute
- Blue Planet Society
- Captain Paul Watson Foundation UK
- Clean Sailors
- Low Impact Fishers of Europe

