# Scotland’s marine protected areas criticised as trawling damages seabeds despite legal protections



Marine conservation has surged to the forefront of public discourse, particularly in the context of Scotland's rich marine environment. A recent report by the charity Open Seas has sharpened this focus, alleging that destructive fishing practices continue unabated in the country’s Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), raising alarm bells over the ecological health of these regions. The findings claim a dire reality: Scotland’s MPAs are, in many cases, little more than “lines on a map”, a critique that structures the very foundation of Scotland's marine conservation efforts.

Open Seas, in conjunction with Greenpeace UK, conducted over 300 seabed surveys to assess the state of Scotland's marine ecosystems. Their Ocean Witness report indicates alarming trends, with significant degradation of essential habitats such as maerl beds and seagrass meadows. These environments are not only biodiversity hotspots but also vital for the ecological balance of marine life. However, according to the report, activities like bottom trawling and scallop dredging persist within these protected areas, undermining their intended conservation goals. In areas like Papa Westray in Orkney, the absence of restrictions against such destructive practices exemplifies the ineffective management of MPAs, with the area remaining vulnerable to ongoing exploitation.

Despite the Marine Scotland Act of 2010, designed to enhance and protect marine habitats, critics argue that progress has been disheartening. A previous assessment from 2020 highlighted that a staggering 17 out of 31 MPAs received inadequate fisheries management, directly jeopardising conservation initiatives. Open Seas has been vocal about the Scottish Government's apparent disregard for its legal obligations under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. Phil Taylor, the charity's director, described the situation as a "national scandal," emphasising that these failures are not mere oversights but deliberate policy choices. He remarked, “Scotland likes to be seen as a leader on the environment. But, as this report shows, we are still dragging our heels while the seabed is being dragged into decline.”

Legal ramifications are also intertwined with this narrative. A court ruling in 2023 determined that the Scottish Government has a legal duty to protect the seabed from harmful fishing practices, following a judicial review from Open Seas. This judgment underscores the significant gaps in policy enforcement, as the government continues to approve fishing licences without adhering to the National Marine Plan. Consequently, marine ecosystems are left vulnerable to habitat degradation and biodiversity loss, raising questions about the Scottish Government's commitment to marine conservation.

In response to these criticisms, a spokesperson from the Scottish Government asserted that management measures for the most vulnerable sites within the MPA network were implemented in 2016. The government has pledged to prioritise the development of further fisheries management measures for offshore and inshore sites by 2025. However, many sceptics have raised concerns that such timelines are insufficient given the urgency of the ecological crisis.

The conversation around Scotland’s marine conservation is not solely a local issue; it transcends borders and echoes across the United Kingdom. Will McCallum, co-executive director of Greenpeace UK, pointed out that the lessons learned in Scotland should extend to all UK waters. He stated, “Allowing destructive industrial fishing practices like bottom trawling in marine protected areas is causing damage to fragile marine ecosystems.” Nonetheless, he also highlighted a glimmer of hope: areas that are effectively protected can witness the resurgence of marine life, showcasing the potential for recovery when meaningful conservation measures are enacted.

As the UN Ocean Conference in Nice approaches, the calls for reform in Scotland's marine policies have never been more urgent. While the government claims progress, the stark realities outlined by marine conservationists paint a picture of an ecosystem at risk, invoking a sense of collective responsibility to rectify these oversights. The future of Scotland's marine habitats ultimately hangs in the balance, dependent on the political will to enforce genuine protective measures and restore the health of our seas.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/marine-conservation-group-claims-damage-to-seabeds-is-a-national-scandal-L7TA2BNLSBJJHHHNAFZJZOJ6WI/), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/may/20/scotland-vulnerable-marine-protection-areas)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/marine-conservation-group-claims-damage-to-seabeds-is-a-national-scandal-L7TA2BNLSBJJHHHNAFZJZOJ6WI/), [[2]](https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/documenting-a-decade-of-decline-in-scotlands-seas/), [[4]](https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/why-the-scottish-governments-marine-plan-proposals-put-our-seas-at-risk/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/scottish-government-is-still-breaking-the-law-and-harming-our-seas/), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/13/scottish-government-duty-to-protect-seabed-from-harmful-fishing-says-court)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/marine-conservation-group-claims-damage-to-seabeds-is-a-national-scandal-L7TA2BNLSBJJHHHNAFZJZOJ6WI/), [[5]](https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/did-scottish-ministers-act-illegally-by-allowing-trawling-to-resume-in-the-west-shetland-shelf-mpa-probably/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/scottish-government-is-still-breaking-the-law-and-harming-our-seas/), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/may/20/scotland-vulnerable-marine-protection-areas)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/marine-conservation-group-claims-damage-to-seabeds-is-a-national-scandal-L7TA2BNLSBJJHHHNAFZJZOJ6WI/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/documenting-a-decade-of-decline-in-scotlands-seas/> - Open Seas' 2020 assessment reveals that Scotland's marine environment continues to deteriorate, with declines in biogenic seabed habitats and fish populations like cod, whiting, and herring. Despite the Marine Scotland Act 2010 aiming to protect and enhance seas, the assessment highlights insufficient progress, with 17 of 31 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) lacking fisheries management measures, undermining conservation objectives.
3. <https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/scottish-government-is-still-breaking-the-law-and-harming-our-seas/> - Open Seas highlights the Scottish Government's unlawful actions, including approving scallop dredge license transfers without adhering to the National Marine Plan. This oversight permits damaging activities in sensitive marine ecosystems, such as Soay Sound, where scallop dredging continues despite recommendations for protection, leading to environmental degradation.
4. <https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/why-the-scottish-governments-marine-plan-proposals-put-our-seas-at-risk/> - Open Seas critiques the Scottish Government's proposed revisions to the National Marine Plan, expressing concerns that removing key policies and fisheries objectives could weaken environmental protections. The charity emphasizes the need for robust measures to safeguard marine habitats and ensure sustainable use of marine resources.
5. <https://www.openseas.org.uk/news/did-scottish-ministers-act-illegally-by-allowing-trawling-to-resume-in-the-west-shetland-shelf-mpa-probably/> - Open Seas discusses the resumption of bottom trawling in the West Shetland Shelf MPA, questioning the legality of Scottish Ministers' decision to allow this activity. The article highlights the lack of effective management measures in MPAs, leading to potential breaches of conservation objectives and environmental harm.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/may/20/scotland-vulnerable-marine-protection-areas> - The Guardian reports on Open Seas' findings that Scotland's Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are failing to protect vulnerable marine life. The article details the lack of effective management measures, with many MPAs lacking restrictions on damaging fishing practices, leading to habitat degradation and biodiversity loss.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/13/scottish-government-duty-to-protect-seabed-from-harmful-fishing-says-court> - The Guardian reports on a court ruling that the Scottish Government has a legal duty to protect the seabed from harmful fishing practices. The decision followed a judicial review by Open Seas, which found that the government had failed to act in accordance with Scotland's National Marine Plan when approving fishing licenses.