# David Attenborough warns bottom trawling is destroying oceans and accelerating climate change



David Attenborough has issued a stark warning about the devastating effects of bottom trawling on marine ecosystems, a fishing practice that indiscriminately destroys the seabed in pursuit of catch. In his latest documentary, *Ocean*, which coincides with the UN Ocean Conference in France, Attenborough underscores the urgent need for re-evaluation and reformation of global fishing practices. The film features striking visuals, including the first-ever footage of bottom trawling, showcasing its horrific impacts. Don MacNeish, a long-time diver and conservationist, has voiced his shock at witnessing the destruction first-hand. He describes encountering a once-vibrant underwater environment reduced to a graveyard of marine life: “It was like swimming over the Garden of Eden during a nuclear winter,” he lamented.

The technique of bottom trawling involves dragging a heavy metal frame across the ocean floor, obliterating everything in its path to capture fish. As documented by Attenborough, this practice not only devastates marine habitats but also results in significant bycatch—over three-quarters of a bottom trawler’s haul can be discarded as waste. This not only contributes to the degradation of marine ecosystems but also releases substantial quantities of CO2 into the atmosphere from disturbed seabeds, further exacerbating climate change. In illustrating the gravity of the situation, Attenborough remarked, “Some $20 billion is spent every year supporting overfishing on an industrial scale.”

Recent evidence further corroborates these claims. A study found that areas subjected to chronic bottom trawling can experience 52% reductions in organic matter and devastations in biodiversity, highlighting irreversible alterations to delicate deep-sea ecosystems. The cumulative effects of such practices are increasingly alarming, leading to not only habitat loss but also a drastic decline in marine biodiversity, particularly affecting predator species like sharks and rays.

In response to the escalating crisis, the UK government is taking proactive steps by proposing an expansion of the ban on bottom trawling. This plan would increase protected areas from 18,000 to approximately 30,000 square kilometres across 41 Marine Protected Areas. Environment Minister Steve Reed stated that the government is acting urgently to prevent irreversible damage to vital marine ecosystems, a sentiment echoed by Attenborough during the documentary’s launch.

As advocates and environmental leaders call for increased marine protections, the documentary *Ocean* seeks to galvanise public sentiment towards safeguarding our oceans. While some speculate about the sustainability of current practices, the documentary argues that, as our oceans dwindle in fish populations, the methods employed to maintain the industry are unsustainable and may threaten the very foundations of marine ecosystems. The documentary not only illustrates the pressing challenges but also offers a glimpse of hope through examples of successful marine conservation efforts.

At 99, Attenborough remains a poignant figure in the fight for environmental protection. He implores viewers to reflect on the stark reality of how human activities threaten the world's oceans and calls for immediate action. With only 2.7% of oceans effectively protected, achieving the global goal of protecting 30% by 2030 appears more pressing than ever, as the health of our seas is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the planet and future generations.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2065221/one-thing-david-attenborough-says), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/848a65883fc1ec2601550d3cbfb0e36a)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2065221/one-thing-david-attenborough-says), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/uk-seeks-extend-ban-bottom-trawling-fishing-english-seas-2025-06-08/), [[4]](https://www.su.se/stockholm-university-baltic-sea-centre/policy-analysis/policy-briefs-and-fact-sheets/bottom-trawling-threatens-european-marine-ecosystems-1.590195)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1405454111), [[6]](https://www.usgs.gov/programs/cmhrp/news/what-drag-global-impact-bottom-trawling)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/uk-seeks-extend-ban-bottom-trawling-fishing-english-seas-2025-06-08/), [[5]](https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1405454111)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/848a65883fc1ec2601550d3cbfb0e36a), [[6]](https://www.usgs.gov/programs/cmhrp/news/what-drag-global-impact-bottom-trawling)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2065221/one-thing-david-attenborough-says> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/uk-seeks-extend-ban-bottom-trawling-fishing-english-seas-2025-06-08/> - The UK government plans to expand the ban on bottom trawling—a fishing method involving dragging heavy nets across the sea floor—to protect marine ecosystems. The proposed ban would cover approximately 30,000 square kilometers of English seas across 41 Marine Protected Areas, up from the current 18,000 square kilometers. Environment Minister Steve Reed emphasized the urgency of action to prevent irreversible damage to ocean environments, which support vital species such as lobsters, clams, and soft corals. The proposal arrives during the United Nations Ocean Conference in France, aiming to advance global ocean protection policies. Prominent figures, including Prince William and naturalist David Attenborough, have vocalized support for stronger marine protections. Prince William urged leaders to act decisively, while Attenborough criticized the devastation caused by bottom trawling, comparing it to unthinkable damage if done on land. The proposed UK policy will undergo industry consultation before implementation.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/848a65883fc1ec2601550d3cbfb0e36a> - David Attenborough's latest documentary, 'Ocean,' is a compelling and urgent portrayal of the beauty and fragility of marine ecosystems. The film, released to coincide with World Oceans Day and the U.N. Ocean Conference in Nice, blends stunning visuals of underwater life with a searing indictment of industrial practices like bottom trawling, which wreak havoc on ocean habitats. At age 99, Attenborough offers a poignant reflection on the importance of ocean conservation, stating the sea is the most crucial place on Earth. Highlighting rarely seen footage of mass coral bleaching, dwindling fish populations, and widespread bycatch, the film reveals the hidden costs of industrial fishing. Director Colin Butfield emphasizes how bottom trawling, though highly damaging, remains legal and often subsidized. Yet, 'Ocean' is not without hope; it showcases marine recovery through protected areas and successful conservation efforts, such as Hawaii's thriving albatross colony. With just 2.7% of oceans effectively protected, the documentary underscores the urgency of achieving the global goal to safeguard 30% by 2030. 'Ocean' is both a wake-up call and a call to action, urging viewers to advocate for stronger marine protections and a sustainable future.
4. <https://www.su.se/stockholm-university-baltic-sea-centre/policy-analysis/policy-briefs-and-fact-sheets/bottom-trawling-threatens-european-marine-ecosystems-1.590195> - Bottom trawling, a fishing method involving dragging heavy nets across the sea floor, has significant detrimental effects on marine ecosystems. It leads to the suspension of seabed sediment, increasing water turbidity and negatively impacting marine organisms. The suspended particles can clog fish gills, reduce light penetration affecting plant and algae growth, and disrupt biogeochemical processes in sediments. Additionally, bottom trawling can release hazardous substances from sediments, making them bioavailable to organisms. The cumulative impact of these disturbances poses a major threat to the integrity of deep-sea ecosystems and the services they provide.
5. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1405454111> - A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences examines the impact of chronic bottom trawling on deep-sea ecosystems along the north-western Mediterranean Sea. The research found significant decreases in organic matter content (up to 52%), slower organic carbon turnover (approximately 37%), and reduced meiofauna abundance (80%) in trawled areas compared to untrawled ones. The study estimates that the organic carbon removed daily by trawling in the region represents as much as 60–100% of the input flux. These findings highlight the severe degradation of deep-sea sedimentary habitats and the loss of biodiversity due to bottom trawling activities.
6. <https://www.usgs.gov/programs/cmhrp/news/what-drag-global-impact-bottom-trawling> - Bottom trawling, a fishing method involving dragging heavy nets across the sea floor, has significant detrimental effects on marine ecosystems. It leads to the suspension of seabed sediment, increasing water turbidity and negatively impacting marine organisms. The suspended particles can clog fish gills, reduce light penetration affecting plant and algae growth, and disrupt biogeochemical processes in sediments. Additionally, bottom trawling can release hazardous substances from sediments, making them bioavailable to organisms. The cumulative impact of these disturbances poses a major threat to the integrity of deep-sea ecosystems and the services they provide.
7. <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2023/03/23/the-impacts-of-bottom-trawling-in-marine-protected-areas/> - Bottom trawling, a non-selective fishing method, has significant negative impacts on marine protected areas (MPAs). It leads to food depletion by catching a high proportion of forage fish species, reducing the availability of prey for marine predators. The practice also results in bycatch of sensitive species, including sharks, rays, sea turtles, cetaceans, and seabirds, weakening entire ecosystems. Additionally, bottom trawling contributes to climate change by releasing large amounts of carbon stored in marine sediments, further driving the loss of marine biodiversity. These effects underscore the need for stronger protections and sustainable fishing practices within MPAs.