

New study shows ocean protection's worth

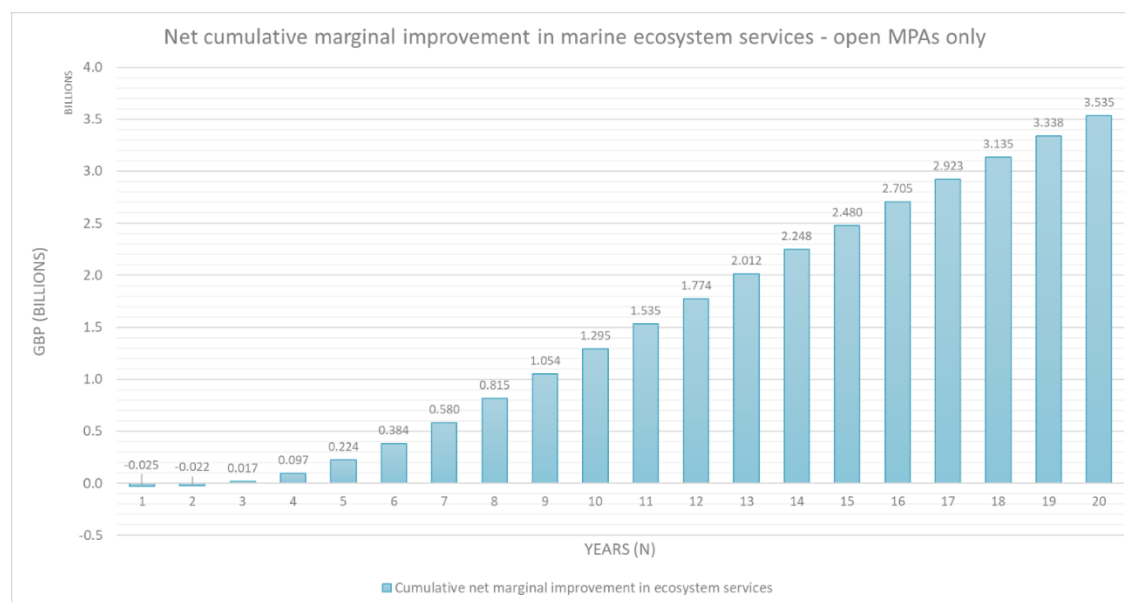
New analysis shows a bottom trawling ban in UK's offshore protected areas could be worth over three billion pounds to the UK economy

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) has calculated the cost-benefit of banning bottom-contact fishing from the UK's offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) designated to protect seabed features.

Considering the value of the services MPAs could potentially provide society, including carbon storage, removal of pollutants, nutrient cycling and recreational opportunities, the charity found that, if protected from all damaging activities, the overall net benefit could amount to between £2.57 billion and £3.5 billion over a 20-year period.

The analysis shows that initially, costs outweigh the economic gains of banning bottom-contact fishing gear. These costs can be attributed to the loss of earnings by fishers, and the setting up and enforcement of the ban. However, these costs are quickly surpassed after 2-4 years, and then are comprehensively outweighed by the gains achieved over the mid- to long-term.

The cumulative impact becomes positive after 3 – 6 years of ecosystem recovery and continues to rise over a 20-year period. The initial net costs are in the order of tens of millions versus several billions in net benefits achieved over a longer period.



The net marginal improvement in ecosystem services following a bottom-contact fishing ban in the UK offshore seabed MPA network, considering only the costs of closing areas of the network that are currently open to bottom-towed gear. Values are shown in £ billions.

When the seabed is left to recover, biodiversity increases, as does the richness and complexity of the seafloor. Improvements in biodiversity lead to more productive seas.

Richard Hill, MPA Policy Officer at the Marine Conservation Society, said, "A rich seabed that is rich in wildlife is vital for absorbing and storing carbon, buffering the effects of climate change, and supporting biodiversity.

"Continuing to allow abrasive, heavy fishing gear, like bottom trawls and dredges, in our MPAs makes them obsolete. It prevents the recovery of ecosystems already lost to decades of exploitation and limits the seabed's ability to store carbon and combat the effects of the climate crisis."

A more productive sea provides ecosystems which support all of us with provision of more secure fish stocks, minimising climate change, and enjoyment such as wildlife watching.

An undisturbed seabed stores tonnes of carbon, particularly when sequestered into the living biomass of animals and plants. This latest report by the Marine Conservation Society demonstrates how all of these have a positive effect on the UK economy over a mid- to long-term time frame.

In 2021, the Marine Conservation Society reported that **bottom-contact fishing is taking place in 98% of the UK's offshore MPAs**. Allowing destructive activity within MPAs undermines the purpose for which they were created and reduces their benefit to society. The UK Government has committed to banning bottom-contact fishing in all offshore seabed MPAs by the end of 2024, but currently bottom trawling is permitted in 31 of the 36 sites, with 9 currently being consulted on.

It is not only banning bottom trawling that could provide economic benefits to society, preventing other damaging activities within MPAs is required to harness the full economic potential of these areas. The charity's report suggests that removing all stressors that impact the marine environment, such as chemical pollution and construction of offshore infrastructure, are vital for this. The analysis reveals that the benefits of a bottom-contact fishing ban in MPAs would be diminished if other damaging activities were allowed to continue or were to be introduced.

Socioeconomic analysis and natural capital valuations in management decisions of the UK's MPA network.

James Merchant, Marine Natural Capital Analyst at the Marine Conservation Society, said, "Our research shows that Marine Protected Areas are not only important for marine life and carbon storage, but the seabed offers us huge economic value and investment opportunities - many of which are currently untapped. This has huge

potential to mobilise the blue economy, but we must see these areas genuinely protected.

“By trawling in protected areas and polluting our waters we are robbing ourselves of the benefits a healthy ocean and decreasing the value of our marine environment. On the flip side, we stand to gain massively if we allow these ecosystems to recover. The UK Government must be ambitious with its ocean protection targets.”

The marine environment has huge value to societies and economies around the world, supporting our basic existence and long-term survival. This extends from providing food for local communities to generating oxygen, absorbing carbon dioxide emissions, and mitigating global warming. The benefits that are derived from nature are described as *ecosystem services* and these are delivered by assets of *natural capital*.

The UK Government has committed to protecting 30% of our seas by 2030 as part of the landmark Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework agreed at the UN Biodiversity conference (COP15) in December 2022. Targets such as this not only wield international significance in terms of ocean protection but can also offer individual nations economic benefits. The charity is raising awareness of the economic opportunities of protecting the seabed and maximise potential natural capital.

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Images and report

Please find the **full report** and a [summary of the report saved here](#).

Notes to editors

How value of cost per hectare of MPA was calculated:

A yearly cost per hectare of €4.86 was adopted from Davies *et al.* (2021) who deduced the figure from the UN's [Catalysing Ocean Finance](#) report (Hudson and Glemarec, 2012) using their reported annual operational costs of \$21,191,857,538 for protecting 10% of the world's oceans. If 10% of the world's oceans equates to 3,611 million hectares, this breaks down to an operation cost of \$5.87 per hectare (€4.86 per hectare) per annum.

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is the UK's leading ocean charity, fighting for cleaner, better-protected, healthier seas. The charity works to highlight the importance of our ocean, and the life within it, through working with government, industry and education, to take action to restore and protect the marine environment.