We call on the UK Government to:

- Utilise our renewed powers as an independent coastal nation, and act now to end bottom trawling in the offshore English MPAs designated to protect the seabed.
- Roll-out Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras on all larger vessels (+ high risk smaller vessels) fishing in English waters to ensure the end of bottom-trawling in MPAs can be efficiently enforced.
- Lead ocean-based climate solutions as President of COP26 and develop a ‘Blue Carbon Strategy’ for the UK

Summary: To help fight the climate crisis Marine Protected Areas must protect the seabed

- Bottom-towed trawling is taking place in 98% of the UK’s offshore Marine Protected Areas intended to protect vital seabed habitats.
- In the UK, 220 million tonnes of carbon is stored in our coastal and marine habitats. Yet, repeated bottom trawling can reduce the carbon stored there by up to 52%.
- For both nature and climate our offshore Marine Protected Areas must be put on the road to recovery.

The Marine unProtected Areas report, by scientists at the Marine Conservation Society, clearly highlights the unsustainable pressures threatening the UK’s seabed. Launched on 6 January, the report received significant media attention, with 201 pieces of coverage and a reach of over 346 million.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are intended to be ocean sanctuaries for the UK’s iconic wildlife and fragile ecosystems but only 5% of these currently ban bottom trawling. The seabed also captures and holds carbon, so may play an important role in the fight against climate change. Bottom-towed trawling damages the seabed – destroying habitat and releasing carbon.

The report shows that bottom-towed trawling is taking place in 98% of MPAs that were designated to protect the seabed. In fact, bottom trawl and dredge vessels spent at least 89,894 hours fishing the seabed inside MPAs between 2015 and 2018. UK fishing boats were responsible for 43% of bottom trawling in offshore Marine Protected Areas between 2015 and 2018 (the remaining 57% of fishing was conducted by EU fleets). The mitigation of carbon emissions released by seabed trawling within offshore MPAs could cost the UK economy approximately £980 million over 25-years, or around £40 million per year.
Addressing the problem

Our seas are a vital resource for the UK economy and strong leadership is needed to safeguard the marine environment and the communities that depend upon it.

1. Utilise our renewed powers as an independent coastal nation, and act now to end bottom trawling in the offshore English MPAs designated to protect the seabed.

Although 36% of UK waters are classified as protected, just 5% currently ban bottom trawling. Post-Brexit, and through the new Fisheries Act, the UK Government has the powers to prevent bottom-trawling in offshore MPAs. A commitment should be made this year to end this damaging practice in the offshore MPAs which have been designated to protect the seabed.

2. Roll-out Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras on all larger vessels (+ high risk smaller vessels) fishing in English waters to ensure the end of bottom-trawling in MPAs can be efficiently enforced.

The government supports the effective use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) as a part of the solution to better monitor and manage our waters. The Secretary of State, George Eustice, commented, "REM is the most effective way to be able to monitor what is happening with the catches." UK supermarkets have also shared their support for REM to assure seafood supply chains, and UK consumers, that the fish caught in English waters is sustainable. The recent call for evidence on REM is welcome, but a clear plan of action must follow. A full roll-out of REM with cameras on all larger vessels (+ high risk smaller vessels) fishing in English waters, will take us one step closer towards successfully delivering on a new era for fisheries management. Full documentation of fishing activity is needed within Marine Protected Areas to understand impacts, improve management strategies and recover these vital marine areas.

3. Lead ocean-based climate solutions as President of COP26 and develop a ‘Blue Carbon Strategy’ for the UK.

If we want to make real progress to halt climate change and meet our legislated commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, we must recognise the important role of our seas. Currently the UK Government does not have a ‘Blue Carbon Strategy’, which is a necessary step to address the climate crisis and safeguard the future of our Marine Protected Areas. MCS calls for a plan to end bottom trawling to be announced ahead of COP26 in November 2021.
The role of Parliamentarians

Cross-party action over the next decade will be critical to address the twin climate change and nature crises. The development of new domestic legislation (The Fisheries Act 2020, Environment Bill) and the upcoming COP26 conference provides a window of opportunity for the UK to showcase new powers as an independent coastal state and fully manage bottom trawling in offshore Marine Protected Areas. 2021 is set to be the UK’s ‘marine super year’ and the 30by30 marine protection target showcases the government’s ambition. However, this global ambition must be met with domestic action in our own waters.

To future-proof our Marine Protected Areas and our coastal communities, we must act now.

As a Parliamentarian you can:

1. Contact the Marine Conservation Society to find out more about how you can speak up for our seas in Parliament and in the media - we welcome your support in raising the report’s findings in parliamentary debates, questions and urge you to raise awareness with colleagues and contact the Secretary of State for the Environment.

2. Support the call to roll-out Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras on all larger vessels (+ high risk smaller vessels) fishing in English waters, to successfully enforce the end to bottom-trawling in MPAs.

3. Call on the UK Government to show international leadership by presenting a Blue Carbon Strategy at the COP26 conference this year - with ambitious policies to end destructive fishing practices in Marine Protected Areas.

To find out more about this issue, read our summary report here. You can read the full technical report here.

Our MPA Reality Check website shows you where England’s Marine Protected Areas are, and what’s happening to them.

Contact

For more information on the report’s findings, or if you would like to find out more about any aspect of the Marine Conservation Society’s work, please contact our public affairs manager Anna Gelderd anna.gelder@mcsuk.org

If you are interested in raising the report’s finding in the press, please contact our press manager victoria.riglen@mcsuk.org

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