

A MANIFESTO FOR UK SEAS: PROTECTING THE FUTURE OF OUR OCEAN NATION

Surrounded by sea, the UK is an ocean nation. Our rich marine ecosystems have provided prosperity, food and a deep connection to nature for millennia.

UK seas and their astounding array of wildlife – from centuries-old cold-water corals to magnificent minke whales – support coastal businesses; protect us from climate change by absorbing CO₂ and excess heat; and provide a vital store of blue carbon.

Yet the UK's seas are now at breaking point under relentless pressure from overfishing, the climate crisis, pollution and fossil fuel extraction.

Today, 57% of government catch limits are set too high, 34% of fish populations are overfished and destructive bottom trawling takes place in over 90% of our offshore marine protected areas. Our 'protected' areas are also used for more than 170 oil and gas developments.

All this exacerbates the climate and nature crises.

Without urgent political action now, the UK's seas will become lifeless and polluted. For too long we have been focussed on relentless extraction. This is a dangerous false economy. Overfishing and destroying marine habitats will decimate coastal economies and livelihoods. **Protecting our seas will safeguard wondrous wildlife and flourishing fisheries, support thriving livelihoods and protect us all.**

Ahead of the next general election, Oceana UK calls on all political parties to commit to urgent action to save our seas. We must:

- End new offshore oil and gas drilling and accelerate a just transition to renewable energy.
- Ban bottom trawling in marine protected areas and within three nautical miles of the coast.
- End overfishing by committing to catch quotas in line with scientific advice.

Together, these actions provide a comparatively low-cost means of putting the UK on course to meet its domestic and international climate and nature commitments, protect marine life, enhance energy security and create stable jobs.

80% of the UK public believe **our ocean protection laws must be strengthened – it's time to deliver action.**

The Oceana logo features a stylized blue wave icon to the left of the word "OCEANA" in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font.



END NEW OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENTS:

A fair energy transition to protect marine life, enhance energy security and create stable jobs.

The scientific evidence is clear: unless we end fossil fuel extraction, we cannot avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis. New oil and gas developments also have a deeply destructive impact on UK sea life. We need a fair transition to renewable energy to protect marine life, enhance energy security, lower bills and create stable jobs.

The UK has an enviable abundance of opportunities for generating renewable energy, and while the EU, China and the US are rapidly gearing up their capacities in green technology, there is still a clear chance for the UK to be a world leader. This will also help prevent hostile regimes from using oil and gas supplies as an economic weapon.

Any new fossil fuel extraction will exacerbate the destructive impacts of the climate crisis that we are already suffering. Extreme flooding, heatwaves and sea-level rise are increasingly putting citizens across the UK at risk. In the ocean, rising temperatures and acidification are affecting marine ecosystems and fish populations in a multitude of ways, pushing some species to the edge of their resilience.

Offshore oil and gas exploitation has immediate repercussions for sea life. Alongside catastrophic large oil spills, smaller, routine spillages from these developments can, and do, pollute the UK's seas on a daily basis. Whales, dolphins and seabirds – including some of Britain's most endangered species and habitats – are subject to a constant flow of this 'chronic oiling'.

Oil and gas developments also release a variety of pollutants. Toxic chemicals and microplastics are ingested by animals up and down the food chain. Over 100 tonnes of microplastics were released into the North Sea by oil and gas operations in 2016 alone, estimates suggest.

In addition, seismic airgun surveys – used almost exclusively in offshore oil and gas exploration – emit an ear-splitting noise that is 100,000 times more intense than a jet engine. These blasts, which affect commercially important fish species and other wildlife, can cause feeding disruption and even death.

The UK's seafloor is home to some extraordinarily rare and diverse habitats, such as deep-sea sponge communities and cold-water corals. These habitats, which would be destroyed or severely damaged by oil and gas developments, are critical to the healthy functioning of marine ecosystems and provide vital fish spawning grounds.

At present, 352 of the nearly 900 locations being offered for licensing overlap with marine protected areas (MPAs), making a mockery of the concept of MPAs at its most basic level.

All this is devastating for our seas, but also for the communities who depend on them. From fishers and tourism operators to divers, surfers, and wildlife watchers – our connection with, and reliance on, the ocean is often understated. Ultimately, more oil and gas will only lock us into a declining and damaging industry.

We must invest in our ocean and our future.

DELIVER REAL MARINE PROTECTION:

End destructive fishing in 'protected' areas.

A ban on bottom trawling and dredging in all our marine protected areas (MPAs), as well as within three nautical miles of the coast, is essential to restore and protect the UK's marine ecosystems and safeguard coastal communities.

There is strong scientific evidence to show that properly protected areas are good for both marine wildlife and local livelihoods. One analysis, which collated the results of multiple studies, found that the total weight of fish found in protected areas was on average 343% higher than surrounding areas.

This abundance has positive knock-on effects. Off the Isle of Arran in Scotland, for instance, fishers are catching more and larger lobsters near a highly protected area which acts as a much-needed haven for wildlife. A similar effect for lobster fishers has been seen near the no-take zone around the island of Lundy, and tourism has also flourished here, with a boat-chartering business that serves divers, anglers and sightseers doubling its capacity.

Yet in many of our MPAs, bottom trawlers and dredgers are permitted to drag heavy metal gear and nets, which can be as large as a football field and weigh several tonnes, across the seafloor scooping up all sea life.

These fishing practices are akin to bulldozing on land, and seabed habitats from reefs to seagrass can be destroyed in minutes, often never to recover. These habitats provide food and shelter for a wide variety of marine life and form the infrastructure of sustainable, low-impact fisheries that many local coastal people rely on. They also store 'blue carbon' and provide natural sea defences.

Despite the destructive impacts and the proven benefits of protection, over 90% of offshore MPAs and most inshore MPAs are still being dredged and trawled.

Over 136,000 hours of industrial fishing – which adds up to over 15 years – took place in the UK's MPAs in 2022. At least 7,000 hours of this, but likely much more, was identified as bottom trawling.

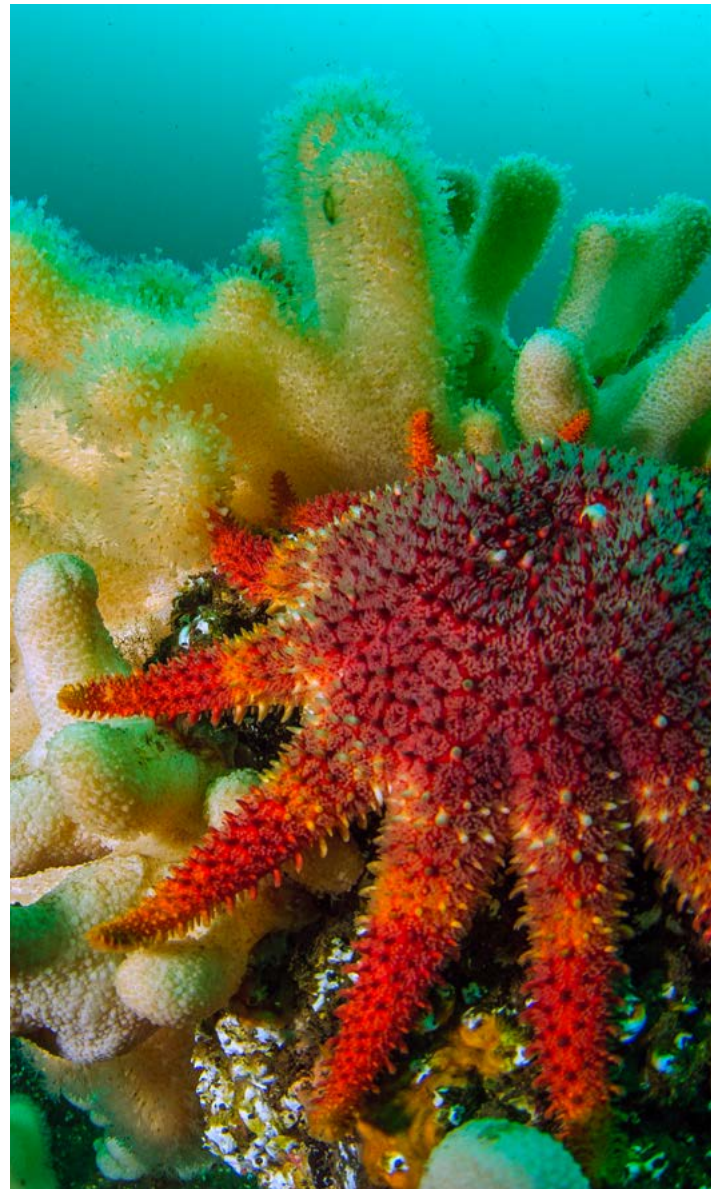
This leaves our so-called protected areas little more than 'paper parks' – and voters know it. Over three-quarters of the British public agree that bottom trawling in MPAs should be banned.

Banning bottom trawling in MPAs could deliver benefits worth between £2.57 billion and £3.5 billion to the UK economy over a 20-year period. The protection for carbon stores and biodiversity along with enhanced recreation

opportunities would provide an economic boost, recent research has found. Crucially, the economic gains would be felt rapidly, potentially within two to four years of a ban coming into force.

As well as MPAs, our inshore waters within three nautical miles of the coast – where low-impact, local fishers should take precedence – must be protected from destructive trawling and dredging. The Sussex and Northumberland Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities are ahead of the rest of the nation on this and introduced inshore trawl bans in 2022. Already they are seeing kelp forests return and fish populations recovering.

The UK's seas are the jewel in our nation's crown. **Properly protecting 30% of our seas for nature is a small investment that will pay us back many times over.**



END OVERFISHING:

Following the science will protect nature and livelihoods.

Overfished stocks have one thing in common: they are on course for collapse – and the livelihoods and ecosystems they support will go with them. All political parties should urgently commit to setting catch quotas in line with scientific advice at sustainable limits.

In the UK, 57% of catch limits were above sustainable levels. In 2023, only 40% of catch limits for the UK's main fish stocks were set in line with scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea; a worrying 57% were still set too high according to the UK government's own report.

This has led to 34% of stocks being overfished, including some of our most prized, such as mackerel and West of Scotland cod.

The UK government already has a legal obligation to maintain or restore fish populations in line with scientific advice, keeping them flourishing and productive for the future. We now need a clear political commitment to this, and a strategy for achieving it.

Good fisheries management is not an academic exercise: it has significant consequences for our nation. The UK's fishing industry has been in decline for decades because of overfishing, and effective ocean protection that includes sustainable regulation is its only hope for the future.

Recovered fish populations also mean recovered marine ecosystems where other sea life can thrive, in turn building blue carbon storage and supporting a range of coastal livelihoods from water sports to wildlife tourism.

Put simply: if we protect our ocean, it will protect us.



The UK's policy and legal commitments to ocean action

- Under the Paris climate agreement, the UK government has committed to making a fair and ambitious contribution to global action to limit global heating to well below a 2°C increase from pre-industrial temperatures.
- Under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the UK government has committed to protecting 30% of land and sea by 2030.
- The UK government is legally obliged to protect MPAs from bottom trawling and other damaging activities under the following laws: Marine Act 2009, Offshore Habitat Regulations 2017, the Fisheries Act 2020, and Marine Strategy Regulations.
- Under the 2020 UK Fisheries Act and the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the UK government has committed to ensuring that fishing activities are sustainable and contribute to restoring and maintaining fish populations above scientifically defined reference points, as well as important climate, ecosystem and bycatch objectives.
- Marine Strategy Regulations include commitments to fish sustainably and conserve UK biodiversity, as well as an obligation to achieve 'good environmental status'.
- The UK is committed to fishing sustainably under multiple international laws including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and UN Sustainable Development Goal 14.8. All required fishing to be at sustainable levels by 2020 – a deadline missed by the UK.

For further information or meetings about the UK Ocean Manifesto please contact:

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