

BRIEFING FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

BANNING BOTTOM TRAWLING IN UK MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

MARCH 2024

33,000
HOURSOR FOUR
YEARS'
WORTH

A shocking **33,000** hours, adding up to nearly **four years'** worth, of apparent fishing by vessels equipped with destructive bottom-towed fishing gear* took place in marine protected areas in UK offshore waters in 2023 alone, satellite track analysis by Oceana has shown.

*Any and all references to “fishing” or “apparent fishing effort” should be understood in the context of Global Fishing Watch’s fishing detection algorithm. For more information, please see the methodologies and disclaimers in our press release: <https://uk.oceana.org/press-releases/10-fishing-vessels-cause-a-quarter-of-suspected-bottom-trawling-in-uk-offshore-mpas/>

Summary: Urgent and ambitious action needed to protect key underwater habitats

- More than 35% of the UK’s seas are protected on paper. However, destructive fishing, such as bottom trawling and dredging, is still allowed in the vast majority of these marine protected areas (MPAs). This undermines their credibility and puts marine wildlife and their habitats at significant risk on a regular basis.
- Newly published Oceana analysis of 2023 data from Global Fishing Watch found over 100,000 hours of apparent industrial fishing activity* took place within the UK’s 63 offshore MPAs in 2023 alone. Benthic MPAs are those designated specifically for the importance of their seabed features ranging from rare reef formations to ocean quahog clams which can live for hundreds of years.
- This activity included **33,000 hours of apparent fishing by vessels carrying destructive bottom-towed gear types,*** such as bottom trawls and dredges, which are extremely harmful to the seabed ecosystems which benthic MPAs are intended to protect.
- Over a quarter (27%) of that potential bottom-towed fishing activity was conducted by **just 10 vessels**, all of which were flagged to non-UK European countries. Overall, **just 6% of possible bottom-towed gear fishing activity identified within UK offshore MPAs was carried out by UK vessels.**
- **Western Channel** and **South-West Deeps (East)** were the offshore MPAs with the most visible apparent fishing activity by vessels equipped with destructive bottom-towed fishing gear - almost 6500 hours and about 5200 hours respectively.
- The UK’s seas have been pushed to breaking point. **34% of fish populations are now overfished.** Nonetheless, recovery of our marine life is still possible - but **it will require urgent political action to be taken now.** Parliamentarians can play a vitally important role in securing meaningful marine protection, for the benefit of both wildlife and coastal communities, by **urging the government to issue a complete ban on the use of bottom-towed fishing gear (bottom trawls and dredges) across all MPAs.**

Trawling in UK marine protected areas (MPAs)

38% of UK waters are designated as MPAs. However, in the majority of UK MPAs, [bottom trawlers](#) and dredgers are still permitted to drag heavy metal gear and nets across the seafloor, scooping up all sea life in their path. These practices are akin to bulldozing on land, destroying seabed habitats, wildlife and carbon stores in minutes, often never to recover.

New Oceana data reveals scale of trawling in UK MPAs

In 2023 alone the UK's offshore benthic MPAs - sites located beyond 12 nautical miles from our coast and designated specifically for the importance of their seabed habitats - were subjected to [over 33,000 hours of apparent fishing by vessels equipped with damaging bottom-towed fishing gear](#), Oceana's [analysis of Global Fishing Watch](#) data has revealed. [27% of that fishing activity was carried out by just 10 vessels](#), all of which were flagged to non-UK European countries.

Why bottom trawling should be banned from MPAs

[Oceana UK is calling on all political parties](#) to commit to banning the use of bottom-towed fishing gear across all MPAs. More than three quarters of the UK public support such a ban, [Oceana polling](#) has shown.

There is strong scientific evidence to show that [properly protected areas are good for both marine wildlife and local livelihoods](#). [One analysis](#) of MPAs around the world showed that the total weight of fish found in fully protected areas was on average [over 300% higher](#) than surrounding areas. This can lead to better catches for local fishers due to 'spillover' from protected sites. Permitting fishing vessels to bottom trawl and dredge in MPAs makes a mockery of the concept of protected areas. It is also a breach of various nature laws, including the Offshore Habitats Regulations and the Fisheries Act, according to Oceana's analysis.

Progress towards banning bottom-towed fishing gear in MPAs - and action still needed

The Government has committed to restricting the use of bottom-towed fishing gear in England's offshore MPAs by the end of 2024 - the Scottish Government is also considering similar measures. Rather than taking the more efficient route of issuing a condition on all fishing vessel licences to prohibit bottom trawling and dredging in MPAs, the Government is considering byelaws to restrict these activities on a site-by-site basis. So far, it has issued byelaws relating to 17 MPAs. Consultation on the next tranche of sites (Stage 3) is expected imminently: [with more than 33,000 hours of possible bottom-towed fishing activity taking place across these sites in 2023 alone, their full protection is an urgent necessity](#). Another substantial flaw in the government's current approach is that these byelaws protect specific designated 'features', such as a reef, within a given MPA and therefore in most cases do not ban bottom-towed fishing gear from across the whole site. This approach undermines the intention of MPAs: the interlinked nature of marine ecosystems means damaging activity anywhere within the site impacts the whole.

[How you can help](#)

We would be very grateful for your support in making parliamentary interventions on this topic, such as tabling questions, sponsoring a debate or holding a committee inquiry, or in raising the profile of this issue with your colleagues directly or through media and social media channels. If we can assist with any of the above, if you have any further questions, or if you would like to discuss this issue in more detail, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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