



DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

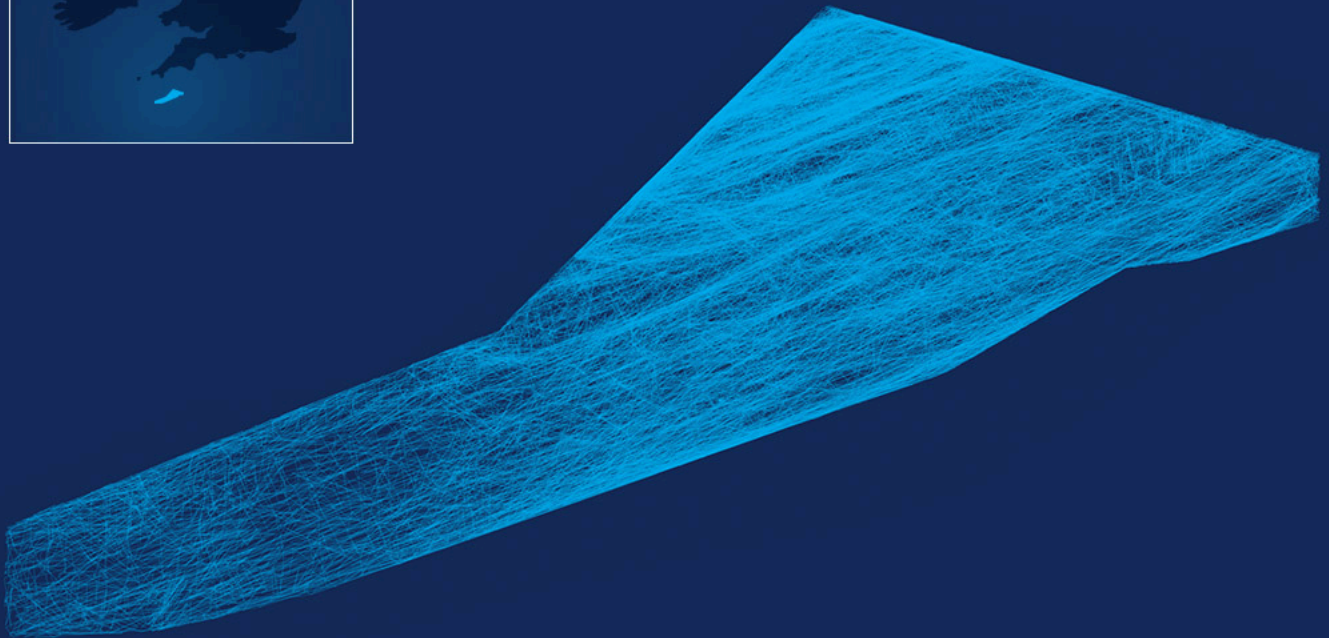
Bottom-trawl Fishing in UK Offshore
Marine Protected Areas

 OCEANA

The UK's offshore marine 'protected' areas (MPAs) were subjected to over 33,000 hours of suspected bottom trawling in 2023, analysis from Oceana UK shows. This destructive form of fishing effectively bulldozes seafloor habitats and has an extremely high rate of bycatch – indiscriminately scooping up untargeted wildlife. Despite this, it is permitted in almost all UK MPAs. These areas are designated to protect rare, threatened or important marine habitats and species to ensure healthy seas. Permitting this destructive practice undermines the credibility of those designations and puts ocean health at significant risk.

FINDINGS

- Over 100,000 hours of apparent industrial fishing took place within the UK's offshore marine protected areas in 2023 – of which **over 33,000 hours were from vessels carrying destructive bottom-towed gear**, such as bottom trawls and dredges, satellite data from Global Fishing Watch showed. This adds up to nearly four years of the harmful practice.
- **Just 10 vessels were responsible for over a quarter (27%)** of this damaging activity. None of these 10 vessels were from the UK, and just 6% of the total 33,000-plus hours of suspected bottom trawling in these MPAs was carried out by UK vessels.
- The two most heavily exploited sites were located off the coast of Cornwall – the Western Channel and the South West Deeps (East) MPAs.
- The Western Channel MPA is made up of **underwater sand dunes** that are home to wildlife ranging from the small-spotted cat shark to the angler fish. It performs a vital role by bringing nutrients from cooler, deeper waters to the surface, stimulating food chains that support an abundance of ocean life.
- The Southwest Deeps (East) is also a crucial biodiversity hotspot, boasting cuckoo rays as well as the fan mussel, one of Britain's largest and most threatened molluscs. This site also stores an estimated 1.67 megatonnes of carbon, which is equivalent to **carbon emissions from over 1 million return flights from London to Sydney**.



Tracks of vessels involved in suspected bottom trawling in 2023 in the Western Channel MPA off the south coast of Cornwall.

- The analysis was focused on 63 offshore MPAs. These sites are located beyond 12 nautical miles from the UK coast and are **designated specifically for the importance of their seabed features**. Further information on methodology can be found [here](#).

ACTION NEEDED

- Decisive political action on destructive fishing is needed and **all political parties should commit to a complete ban on bottom trawling across all MPAs**.
- The UK Government has introduced some restrictions protect certain features – such as reefs – within English offshore MPAs on a site-by-site basis, but this **limited restriction leaves the vast majority of the UK's protected areas open to this harmful practice**.
- Polling has shown that **more than three quarters of the UK public support a ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas**.

Contact: Amy Hammond | oceanauk@oceana.org