

MISSION REGENERATION:
A ROADMAP TO END
OVERFISHING AND RESTORE
LIFE TO UK SEAS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oceana is calling on the UK Government to urgently publish and implement a properly funded and enforced strategy to end overfishing and give life back to our seas. This should be backed by a new time-bound legal duty to end overfishing, once and for all.

By defining an ambitious vision for thriving UK seas and working strategically to achieve it, the government has a major opportunity to deliver key priorities of restoring nature, building resilience to the climate crisis, supporting a just transition for coastal communities, and demonstrating global environmental leadership.



PRINCIPLE 1: SCIENCE

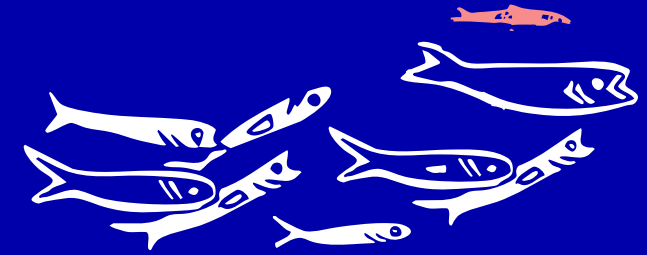
The management of fisheries should move beyond Maximum Sustainable Yield to integrate the wider needs of healthy marine ecosystems.

Introduce a new timebound legally binding commitment to end overfishing and restore fishing to sustainable levels

Implement catch limits based on scientific advice, using Maximum Sustainable Yield as a maximum threshold where relevant, with trigger points and buffers to support stock recovery

Publish an annual audit on the health and management of all commercial fish stocks to be scrutinised by Parliament

Integrate fisheries into wider marine spatial planning and prioritisation programmes



PRINCIPLE 2: FAIRNESS

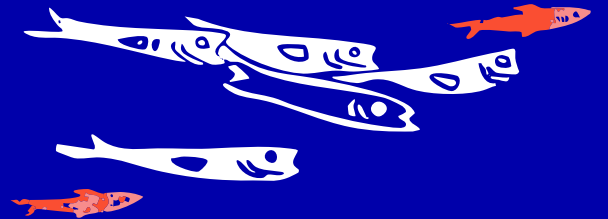
Fisheries should aim to deliver long-term environmental and social equity and fairness, including in the face of the climate crisis.



Allocate quota and taxpayer money into fisheries that deliver public good, based on the ability to deliver environmental and social outcomes

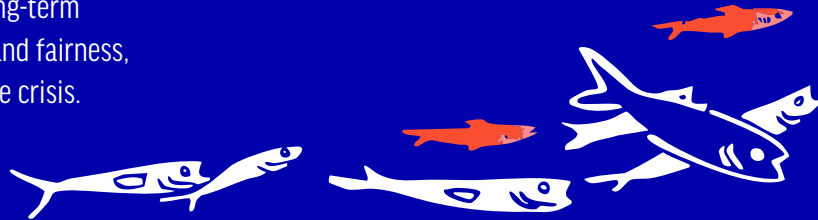
Introduce a fully funded just transition and skills programme for the fishing sector

Introduce a scrappage scheme and skills programme to support eligible fishers to scrap or adapt bottom towed vessels for alternative uses



PRINCIPLE 3: RESILIENCE

Fisheries should protect the diversity of marine life and safeguard key areas for ecosystem recovery and carbon storage.



Remove destructive bottom-towed fishing inside marine protected areas and blue carbon hotspots on a whole-site basis

Incorporate ecosystem-based management into all existing and new Fisheries Management Plans, tailored to local contexts

Introduce effort restrictions across UK waters to ensure fishing activity is compatible with thriving marine ecosystems, starting with bans to fly-shooting and large 'supertrawlers' over 100 metres in length

Extend the remit of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities to 12 nautical miles



PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSPARENCY

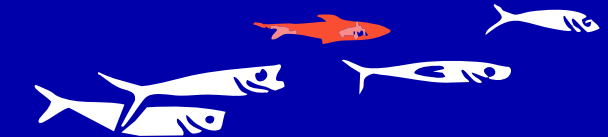
Fisheries and seafood should be fully documented from boat to plate alongside transparent ownership of quota and vessels.

Roll out the mandatory use of remote electronic monitoring as a condition of fishing in English waters - for priority sectors and over 10m vessels.

Introduce a due diligence supply chain obligation for seafood to set legally binding minimum environmental, social and safety standards

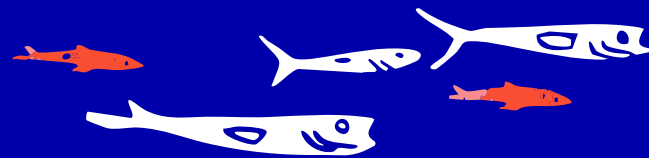
Roll out the mandatory use of remote electronic monitoring as a condition of fishing in English waters - for all remaining vessels.

Make public all information on vessel ownership, licenses, quota holdings, authorisations and previous sanctions



PRINCIPLE 5: RESPECT

All those working in fisheries should be treated with respect, be paid fairly, and be entitled to a safe, legal and abuse-free working environment.



Strengthen visa protections and minimum salary requirements for fisheries workers and close loopholes that facilitate abuses of safety and human rights

Introduce tougher sanctions and penalties for abuses of safety and human rights

Improve legally binding minimum labour standards for the fishing industry

This roadmap sets out Oceana's call to action for ending overfishing in UK waters, by building a 'regenerative' approach to the way the UK treats and manages its fisheries.

First, it presents a set of foundational principles we have developed for what a regenerative approach means for fisheries management. At its heart, a regenerative fishing sector, similar to that emerging in UK agriculture,¹ is one that places science, fairness, resilience, transparency and respect at its core, rather than pollution, destruction, inequity and greed. We need to fish less, and fish better.

Second, each principle is backed by a set of time-bound policy recommendations for government. These range from reallocating quota and banning bottom trawling within our havens for nature, to supporting a safe and dignified working environment for all fisheries workers.

Third, we set out what needs to change within government itself, so that nature-friendly, low-impact fishers are properly represented, that taxpayers' money only funds fishing that can demonstrate these principles in action, and that government and industry alike are held properly to account.

The new Labour government has the chance to deliver across its shared agenda by making overfishing a thing of the past: tackling the climate and nature crisis, restoring coastal prosperity and transitioning the fishing industry to a more sustainable and resilient future. Transformational action is possible, if the political will is there.

THERE'S NO TIME TO WASTE.



INTRODUCTION

FAILURE TO DELIVER

Overfishing in UK waters, and the destruction of marine wildlife it drives, is fundamentally a political decision by the UK Government. Throughout the debates during the Brexit period, we were repeatedly promised a new era of 'gold standard' fisheries management for the UK. In reality, however, that rhetoric has not translated into concrete actions and has left both conservationists and fishers bitterly disappointed.

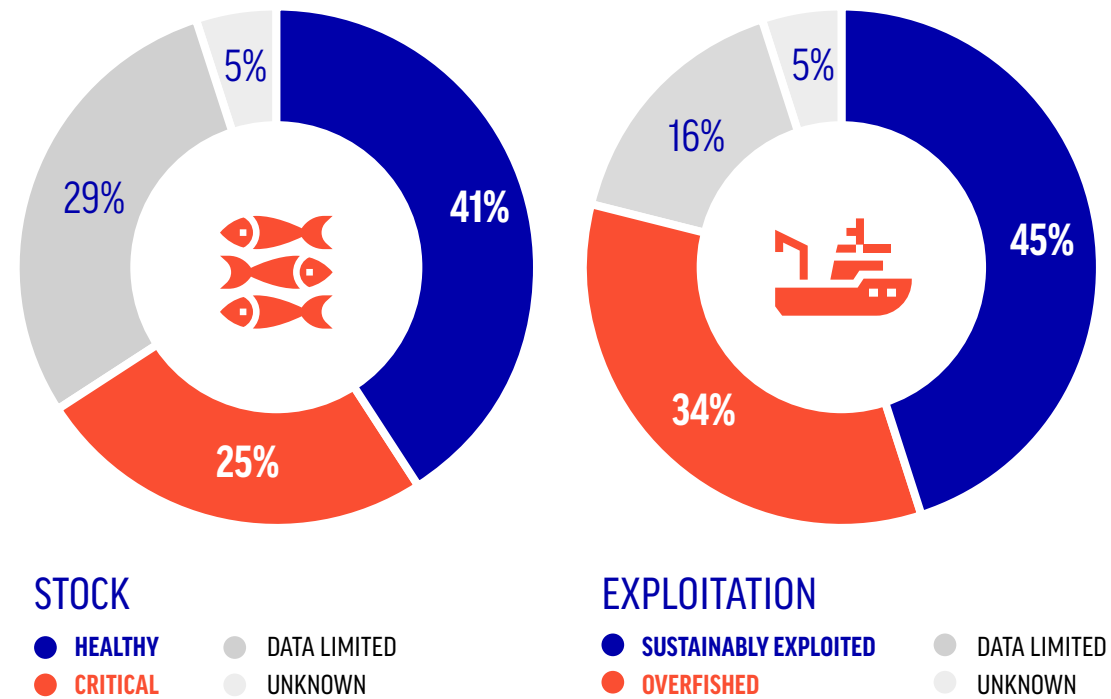
We are now four years on from the UK's latest failed deadline to end overfishing by 2020.² Oceana analysis in 2023 found that over a third of 104 stocks in UK waters were being overfished, and a quarter had been depleted to critically low population sizes - of the 'top ten' stocks on which the UK fishing industry relies, half are being overfished or their population size is critically low.³ Yet despite this, 52% of 2024 catch limits were still set too high to be sustainable, according to analysis by the government's own advisors.⁴ Destructive fishing practices like bottom trawling still take place even in areas supposedly protected for nature. Fishing quota is increasingly consolidated in the hands of a small number of large-scale industrial operators,⁵ while those that fish in less environmentally damaging ways find it ever harder to make a living as fish populations dwindle. All this amounts to a serious crisis, even before factoring in the compounding effects of pollution and the climate crisis on fish populations.

“ When the Fisheries Bill was published, it was a massive opportunity to improve the sustainability of our fisheries, but the problem with it was unfortunately it doesn't seem to translate into the reality of what's actually happening and there's too many barriers still remaining to achieving sustainable fisheries. ” EMMA CRANE

We can, and must, do better. As the new government in Westminster sets out its plans, with a record number of coastal Labour members of parliament elected, it has a major decision to make when it comes to fisheries management. The government must decide whether it is happy to maintain the flawed status quo it has inherited – where government decisions and public money fuel the destruction of the natural environment and the decline of our coastal communities – or whether it will seize a critical opportunity to deliver real change.

STOCK STATUS AND EXPLOITATION STATUS

104 STOCKS FISHED BY UK VESSELS
OCEANA: TAKING STOCK 2023



A FRESH APPROACH

A better future is possible. Protecting nature and safeguarding sustainable livelihoods go hand-in-hand: by supporting those who fish in harmony with nature, while exposing and holding destructive parts of the industry to account, the government can not only allow our seas to heal and wildlife to return, but also provide sustainable fishers with long-term security and give coastal communities the confidence to look back out to sea.

The demand for that change is there. New polling commissioned by Oceana found 77% of respondents are concerned about declining fish populations in UK waters, 80% feel government has a duty to prevent decline of fish populations and impacts on ocean health, and 78% support proposals that the Government introduce stricter limits on how many fish can be caught in UK seas.⁶ The People's Plan for Nature,⁷ the result of a comprehensive public assembly on nature, was clear in its calls for a new approach to managing fisheries, including reallocating quota, redirecting financial support towards those who fish sustainably and banning the most destructive forms of fishing.

Additionally, in expert interviews we carried out while writing this report (see report methodology box for more details), two common messages resonated across those we spoke to:

- The existing management of fish populations and fishing fleets is not acceptable, not just for nature but for fishers and communities, and
- Bold political leadership and a cross-government approach are needed but lacking.

REAL RENEWAL

Maintaining the current unjust and unsustainable situation would run contrary to Labour values of community and justice. Continuing to spend public money on the destruction of public resources is unjustifiable. But there is an alternative.

There is enormous potential for a bold and mission-driven new government to put improved fisheries management at the heart of real renewal for our seas and coasts. This new approach must be geared towards allowing our incredible marine wildlife to flourish again, safeguarding the future of low-impact fishers, and restoring hope and opportunity to those coastal towns and villages currently facing an uncertain future.

The dire state of nature in UK waters demonstrates the urgent need for radical and holistic reform of how we manage our seas. Making nature-friendly fisheries the economic as well as environmental choice lies at the heart of this mission, ensuring that those fishers who operate in a socially and environmentally responsible way are rewarded for it through policy, quota, investment and regulation. Crucially, the cost of change must not be borne by those who have the least to fall back on. We must deliver a just transition for fisheries workers away from destructive forms of fishing towards a fair, sustainable and regenerative future.

“ We are really at the edge of this precipice. In fact, I think we've fallen over it to be honest. So anything that happens needs to be radical and revolutionary. ” JERRY PERCY

REPORT METHODOLOGY

In this report we set out a roadmap for that reform with the aim of kickstarting a fresh discussion on how to tackle the overfishing crisis and restore life to our waters.

A literature review of peer-reviewed and technical reports was conducted to provide support for the development of the foundational principles. We also interviewed almost thirty individuals, including small-scale fishers, academics and environmentalists (see Annex). While interviewees were not representative of all stakeholder groups involved in this debate, they collectively brought a great wealth of knowledge and experience to the development of this report.

We are hugely grateful to all interviewees for their valuable input; however, the report presents Oceana's opinions and recommendations, and may not reflect the views of or be endorsed by consulted parties.

For the purposes of this report, we use the below terms as follows:

FISHERY: A defined unit engaged in catching fish, which is characterised by the people involved, the species and populations harvested, the area fished, the method of fishing and the purpose of the activity.

OVERFISHING: When fishing removes more fish from a population than can be replaced each year through growth and natural survival.

OVERFISHED: A stock is considered overfished when its size is below a prescribed biomass threshold, regardless of the causes.

MAXIMUM SUSTAINABLE YIELD: the maximum catch that can be extracted from a fish population in the long term.



THE UK'S OVERFISHING PROBLEM

“ You speak to some of the older guys and they say ‘oh you should have seen it in my day, you know where all the cod was being landed. The fish market was full of fish.’ But then there’s their grandads. The real old boys say ‘oh that was nothing. You should have seen it when the herring was landed, you know the whole town was full of fish’. It’s the impact of shifting baseline. ”

JOE REDFERN

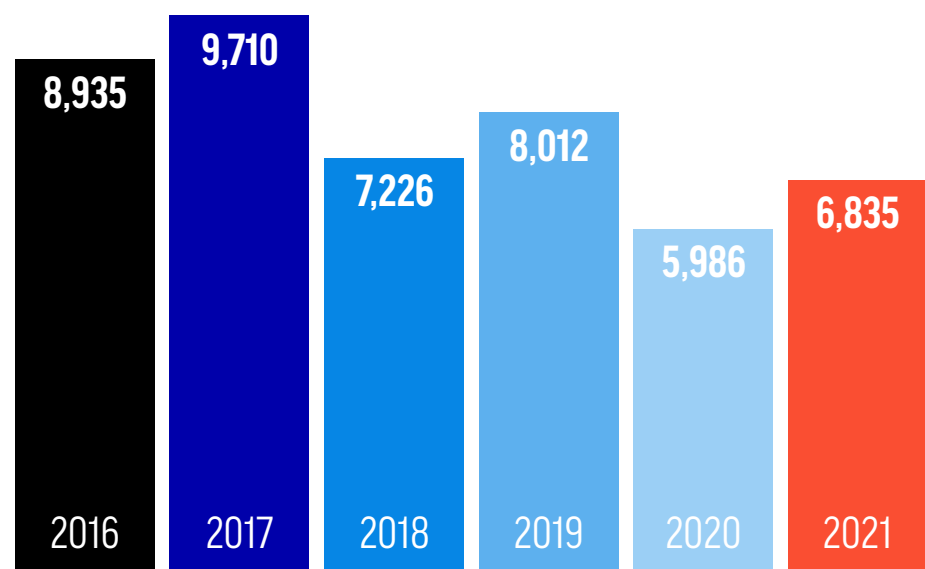
COASTAL DECLINE AND INSECURITY

The combination of overfishing, the climate crisis and wider lack of investment in public services has hit coastal communities disproportionately hard. This is reflected in the number of people choosing or being forced to leave the fishing sector. Even in the period since the Brexit referendum, jobs in the UK fishing industry have fallen from 8,935 in 2016 to 6,557 in 2022,⁸ with losses mostly from the inshore sector. This marks a substantial decline from around 20,000 in the mid-1990s.⁹

“ I see pictures of my dad's boat, knee deep in cod of a decent size. Cod like that would make the front page of newspapers now, and that change has happened in just one generation. ” **BALLY PHILP**

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT JOBS IN THE UK FISHING FLEET

SEAFISH: ECONOMICS OF THE UK FISHING FLEET



The decline of a once-reliable source of employment, along with the rich heritage that came with it, is not the only cause of the comparatively high deprivation and low levels of wellbeing common to many of the UK's coastal towns, but undoubtedly forms a component of it. Several stakeholders we consulted expressed concern about the impact of overfishing on the wellbeing and mental health of fishers who are witnessing the decline of the fish populations which underpin their livelihoods and in many cases are integral to their identity.

As the climate crisis intensifies, the urgency of maintaining fish populations also becomes ever greater. Warming seas, ocean acidification, and changes in salinity are affecting marine ecosystems now, with species already stressed by overfishing less resilient to these changes,^{10,11} accelerating decline and increasing potential for collapse.

As overfishing exacerbates uncertainty in fish population sizes and dynamics, catch limits and quotas fluctuate year-on-year, increasing uncertainty for fishers. For example, in December 2023 the total allowable catch (TAC) for pollack, which many inshore fishers depend heavily on,¹² dropped suddenly to zero, three months before a compensation scheme was in place. All of this adds up to create a specific kind of employment insecurity and economic instability which undoubtedly contributes to heightened stress.

“ It seems to be around Brexit time when the stories started changing from ‘we don't have enough quota’ to ‘there aren't enough fish in the sea’. ” **CAROLINE BENNETT**

This vicious cycle, whereby declining fish populations lead to declining profit and a quest to extract what remains at any cost, is leading some within the industry to resort to cheaper labour and worsening working conditions. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, recent reports have highlighted appalling cases of modern slavery within the UK fishing industry.¹³

UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD

Overfishing by industrial fleets not only threatens wildlife but also squeezes out the small-scale fleet, commonly defined as vessels under 10 metres in length, fishing largely in inshore waters within 12 nautical miles of the coast.

A number of interviewees highlighted how small-scale inshore fishers have found themselves on the frontline of fisheries decline. In the context of an ever-dwindling supply of fish, everything from quota allocation to subsidies to political access disproportionately favours larger industrial operators creating a vastly unequal playing field. Despite making up around 79% of the fleet by number, under-10m vessels have access overall to only 2% of the UK's fishing opportunities.¹⁴

ACCESS TO UK FISHING OPPORTUNITIES

SOURCE: KORDA ET AL. (2023)

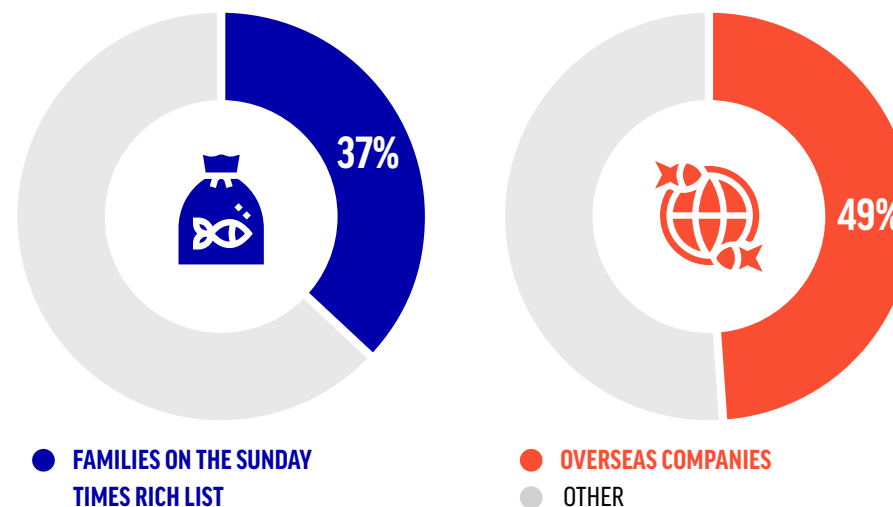


● % OF FLEET BY NUMBER <10M ● % ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

“ They [the small-scale fleet] meet roadblocks everywhere. There's no quota. Increasingly there are no fish to catch inshore. Increasingly fishers can't make a decent living. You know all these kinds of roadblocks are there and the government policies are doing nothing about those roadblocks. The government policies still very much favour the status quo - i.e. larger scale active gear fleet interests.” **BRIAN O'RIORDAN**

OWNERSHIP OF UK FIXED QUOTA ALLOCATIONS

SOURCE: GREENPEACE



In 2018, Greenpeace revealed that over a third (37%) of the UK's allocations of fixed quota were wholly or partly owned by just five families on the Sunday Times Rich List and that almost half (49%) was held by Dutch, Icelandic and Spanish companies.¹⁵

“ We've neglected what the small-scale fleet need for decades and have basically run the entire industry based on the demands of the quota owners.” **CHRIS WILLIAMS**

Operators using the most fuel-intensive industrial fishing methods such as trawling and dredging also benefit disproportionately from government subsidies in the form of fuel tax relief.¹⁶ In other words, rather than channelling its resources towards promoting socially and environmentally responsible fishing, the government is spending public money, and allocating rights to exploit common resources, in a way which is fuelling environmental destruction and consolidating power in the hands of a small elite within the industry.¹⁷

Many small-scale fishers are instead dependent on 'non-quota species': those which are managed using measures other than quotas, for example effort restrictions. One third of UK fisheries landings value comes from these non-quota species,¹⁸ yet many of these species have comparatively little data available to support management and they are vulnerable to overexploitation, particularly in the offshore area.¹⁹

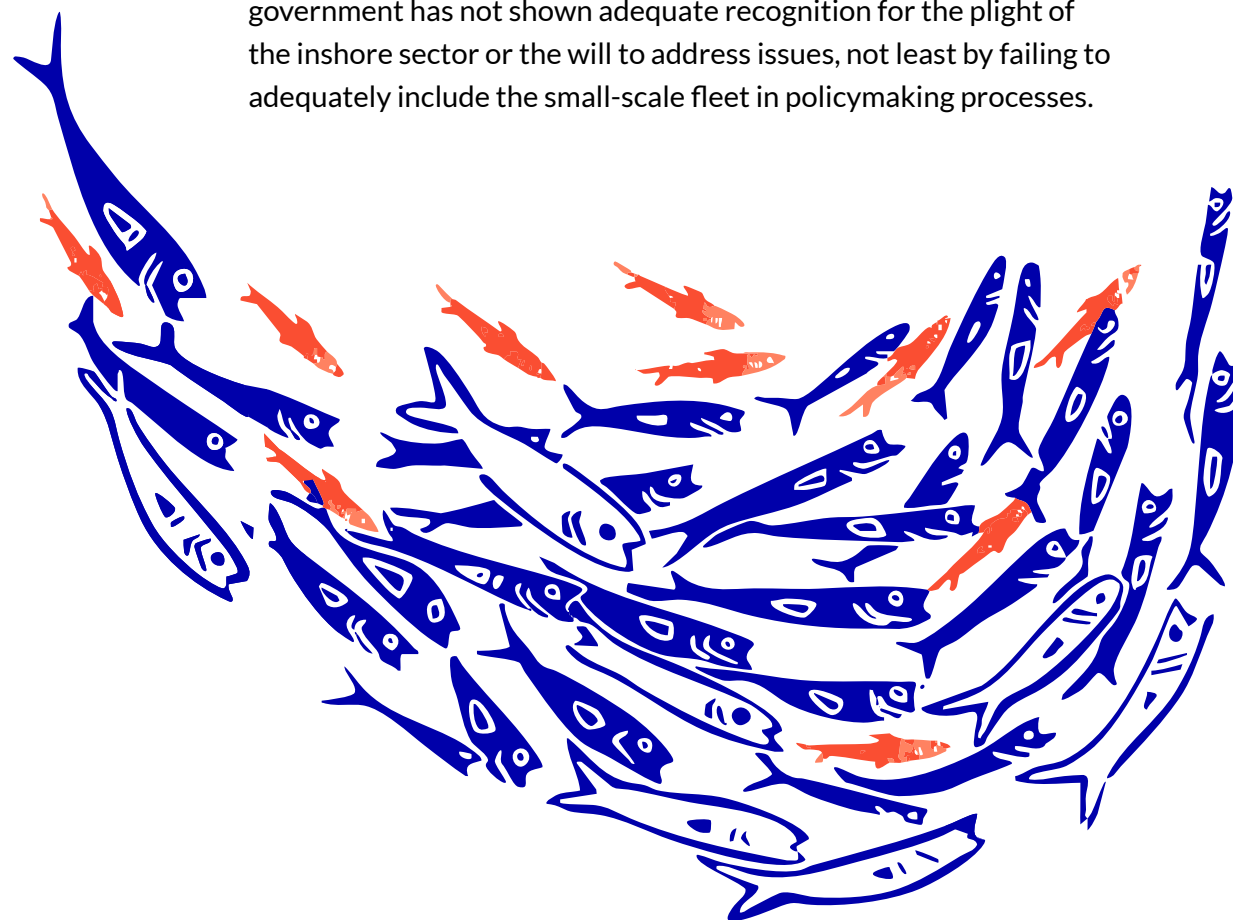
“ [T]he small-scale fishers are under a lot of pressure everywhere, mostly from industrial fisheries and poor fisheries management. One of the things that impacts quite heavily on small-scale fishers is a highly degraded ecosystem, because many small fishers are only viable in a healthy, productive ecosystem. ” BALLY PHILP

Several interviewees highlighted how inshore stocks that small-scale fishers tend to depend on are under pressure from rampant overfishing by larger vessels in offshore waters. Many stakeholders consulted for this project raised fly-shooting as a particularly insidious example. For this form of fishing, ropes weighted with lead are towed along the seabed at either end of a net that encircles shoals of fish. After fly shooters pass through, small-scale fishers can be left with nothing to catch for several weeks, several interviewees noted.

“ Significant pressure has been put on the brown crab stocks [in Devon and Cornwall] to the point where local communities are no longer able to access their resource.... You've got a small-scale local fishery in Lyme Bay and they have seen a decline in the size of sole caught and in the volume of their catches and they relate that directly to more people fishing in the area with more gear but also substantial trawling activity just outside the six mile zone. ”

EDWARD BAKER

Stakeholders emphasised that the example of fly-shooting is illustrative of ongoing imbalance between industrial and small-scale fleets, with a general sense that management favours the former and that the government has not shown adequate recognition for the plight of the inshore sector or the will to address issues, not least by failing to adequately include the small-scale fleet in policymaking processes.



POLITICAL FAILURE

A lack of political interest and will is a major barrier to ending overfishing. With the UK Government's continued facilitation of overfishing by agreeing catch limits with other nations in excess of scientific advice and by permitting hugely destructive fishing practices, it is difficult not to conclude that these decisions are made to put a sticking plaster on the problem rather than initiate serious long-term transition planning for the fishing sector.

Once heralded as one of the major opportunities of leaving the European Union, fisheries have largely slipped off the mainstream political agenda following Brexit. This has translated into a lack of clear government leadership and direction, as indicated by the notably limited references to fisheries and marine issues in 2024 general election manifestos. If the UK is to address overfishing effectively, it urgently needs a clear political strategy for doing so.

As well as not being anchored by an overarching timebound legal duty to end overfishing, the UK's current approach to fisheries management is also hampered by the lack of a single, coherent vision and pathway to resilient and thriving marine ecosystems and fishing communities.

“ If you care about ocean health, and if you want to be an ocean conservation leader domestically or internationally, it's important to look first at how human activity directly impacts ocean biodiversity. Overfishing doesn't quite get the political attention that it should do. ” DAN STEADMAN

Firstly, success is primarily judged against a metric of 'maximum sustainable yield' for single stocks, while the true cost to habitats and coastal communities is ignored.

Secondly, while the UK Fisheries Act 2020 contains welcome headline objectives relating to climate change and ecosystem health, its lack of time-bound legal duties and broad framework nature have hindered its effective translation to change on the water. For example, the first set of stock-specific Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs),²⁰ one of the main delivery mechanisms under the Act, largely do not reference those objectives or set out concrete timebound actions to meet them – not to mention that some of these recovery plans are being written by the very industries they are supposed to regulate.²¹

“ The UK Government has been unwilling to acknowledge their shortcomings with the privatisation of quota and the unintended consequences that that's had, and the same for overfishing. I think they're in denial about the state of overfishing and discarding, and I think they have spent a long time setting up talking shops about fisheries management plans that really haven't resulted in any meaningful change to date. ” CHRIS WILLIAMS

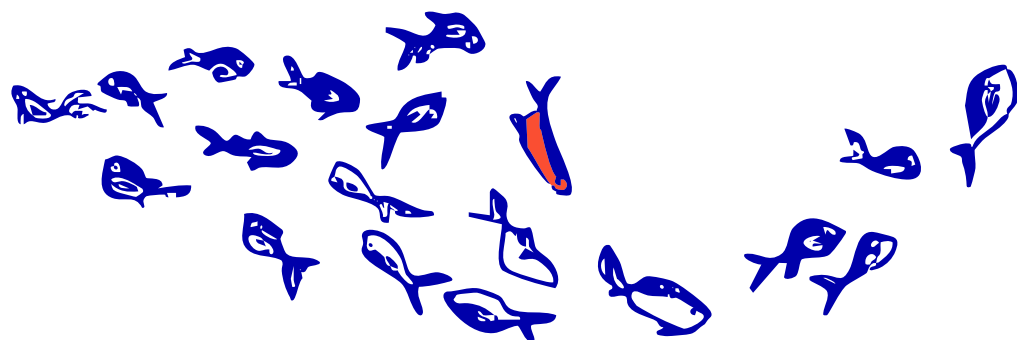
Thirdly, fisheries management is all too often treated as separate from the UK's nature commitments, including protecting 30% of its waters within a well-managed network of marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2030. Many MPAs still permit highly destructive fishing practices such as bottom trawling, as well as other damaging industrial activities such as oil and gas exploitation.

Fourth, relatively little attention is given to standards for the seafood we import, undermining domestic action. Given the high social and environmental risks associated with illegal, unregulated or unreported fishing,²² the UK must also drive international action by requiring the highest standards of the large amount of seafood it imports.

Finally, the current siloed approach taken to fisheries management fails to address the wider societal benefits of well-managed fisheries, which include access to a healthy environment and sustainably sourced seafood, increased resilience to the climate crisis, improved community wellbeing and a broader base of sustainable coastal livelihoods within and beyond the fishing industry. This therefore limits effective discussions on how to deliver a responsible transition away from destructive fishing.

“ The issue we found was there often appeared to be a prioritisation of the short-term economic benefits over and above either the societal or the environmental longer-term benefits. ”

EMMA CRANE



THE OPPORTUNITY

“ Healthy stocks and no overfishing means guaranteed jobs in the future. It means guaranteed food security. It means jobs in processing and in the wider supply chain and in transport, and it also means a healthier ecosystem. ” CHRIS WILLIAMS

We urge the government to reject the status quo, proactively define its vision for thriving UK seas free of overfishing, and set out a strategic plan to achieve that.

This approach provides clear opportunities for the government to deliver on several key priorities:

1. RESTORING NATURE. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth.²³ Yet we continue to treat our fish populations primarily as a resource to be exploited. If that mindset doesn't change, we risk leaving future generations with empty and lifeless seas. Ending overfishing is key to turning things around for our seas, meeting the UK's legal obligations to protect nature, reversing the decline in species abundance, and restoring our marine habitats and wildlife. Restricting highly damaging fishing practices such as bottom trawling and allowing fish populations the time and space to recover would create safe havens where wildlife can flourish.

“ How many more whales and dolphins could the ecosystem support? How many more fishermen could we support? ” **BALLY PHILP**

2. BUILDING RESILIENCE TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS. A thriving marine ecosystem is one of our greatest allies in the fight against climate change. More diverse and abundant ecosystems are not only more resilient to the climate crisis, but crucially are able to draw more carbon out of the atmosphere and provide 'blue carbon storage'. Transitioning away from damaging fishing practices is also a key part of tackling climate change: the use of bottom-towed fishing gear not only requires much more fuel but also disturbs seabed carbon stores. There are an estimated 244 million tonnes of organic carbon locked in the top 10cm of seabed sediments in UK waters and in coastal habitats such as saltmarsh, kelp and seagrass beds, much of which is currently vulnerable to trawling and dredging.²⁴

3. SUPPORTING COASTAL COMMUNITIES. Maintaining larger and more stable fish populations, rather than continuing the status quo of short-term exploitation and endless boom-and-bust cycles, supports greater job and food security and increases long-term profitability. Ensuring that fisheries policy favours low-impact fishers, rooted in local communities, would ensure that more value from fishing activity is retained in coastal regions rather than in multinational businesses. Restoring a healthy marine environment also supports a range of other livelihoods in coastal regions, for example in tourism and recreation, that are also dependent on thriving seas.

“ We need to re-imagine inshore fisheries so that both the people as well as the fish matter and that means seriously addressing unsustainable fishing in all its forms. ” **DR SARAH COULTHARD**

4. DEMONSTRATING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP.

At present there remains a significant gap between the UK's global rhetoric on nature and climate and the reality of overfishing and habitat destruction unfolding in our waters. There is a huge opportunity for the new government to change this and to rebuild the UK's reputation of serious environmental leadership by delivering credible ocean recovery in our own waters. Likewise, as an independent coastal state, we can aim to drive ambition and change the behaviour of other major fishing nations in international fora by demonstrating a better way of doing things ourselves. In particular, as we approach the renegotiation of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation agreement in 2026, the UK needs to enter those debates with a high level of ambition if we are to exert any serious political pressure for change.

DEFINING A UK GOVERNMENT STRATEGY TO END OVERFISHING

It is vital that the UK Government publishes and implements as soon as possible a new strategy to end overfishing and restore the health and abundance of UK seas. This should be backed by a new time-bound legal duty to end overfishing, once and for all.

“ Especially with a new government, there’s an opportunity there to really say, look, we need a root and branch review here of the whys and wherefores. ” **JERRY PERCY**

To inform such a strategy, we break the following sections of this report into three parts:

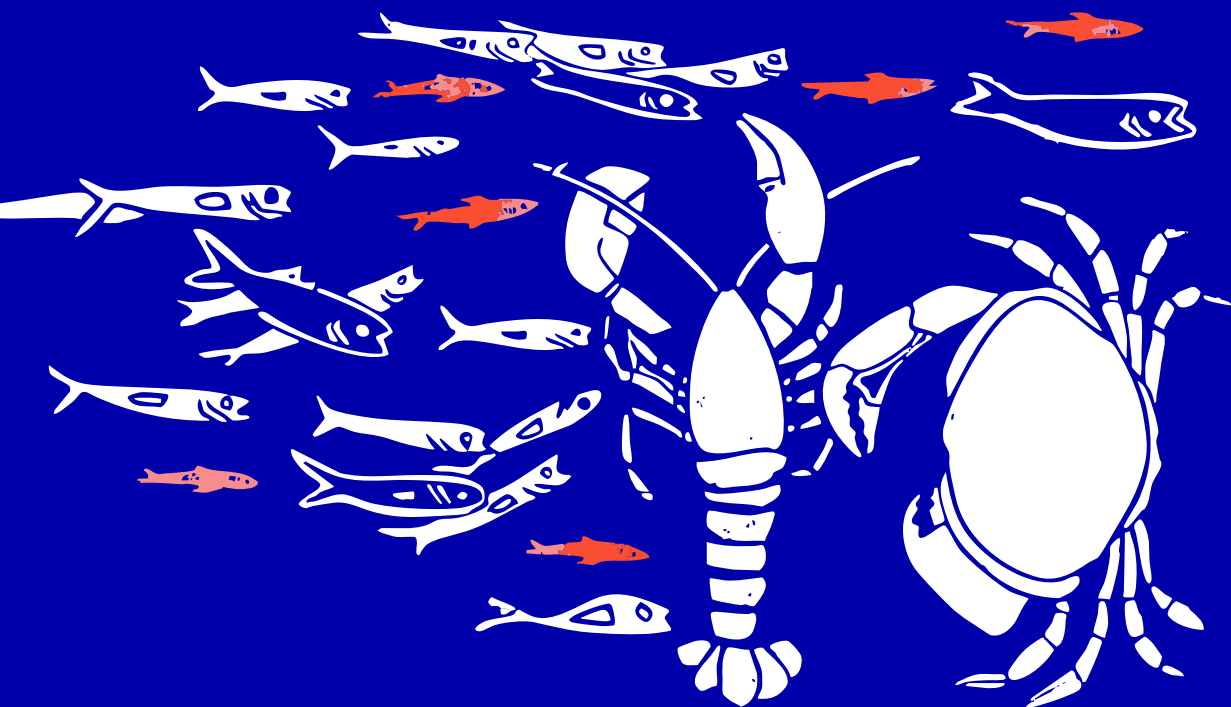
- First, we suggest **five overarching principles** for the kind of regenerative fisheries system that can end overfishing and deliver resilience, ocean recovery and social justice.
- Second, under each principle, we set a series of **time bound recommendations for action**, ranging from quota reallocation to building skills and knowledge to funding a just transition.
- Third, we set the **necessary enabling conditions** to make a strategy successful, framed around recommended principles of mission-led government²⁵, including taking a whole-of-government approach and reorientating the use of public and private finance.

While many of the recommendations focus on action in Westminster under policy relating to English waters, the principles and themes apply equally to other governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

“ Talk is cheap. You can talk about all of these things. But how you concretise these ideas into some reality which you can transition to... therein lies the challenge. ” **BRIAN O’RIORDAN**

PART ONE: SETTING THE PRINCIPLES – BUILDING A REGENERATIVE APPROACH TO FISHERIES

“ Fisheries management is not just about the environment and maintaining fish stocks. It’s all about the socio-economic benefits that fisheries produce and what they represent in terms of the cultural heritage, cultural diversity, the socioeconomic activities, jobs, employment, livelihoods, food. All of these kinds of benefits are generated by fisheries and obviously overfishing impacts all of them. ” **BRIAN O’RIORDAN**

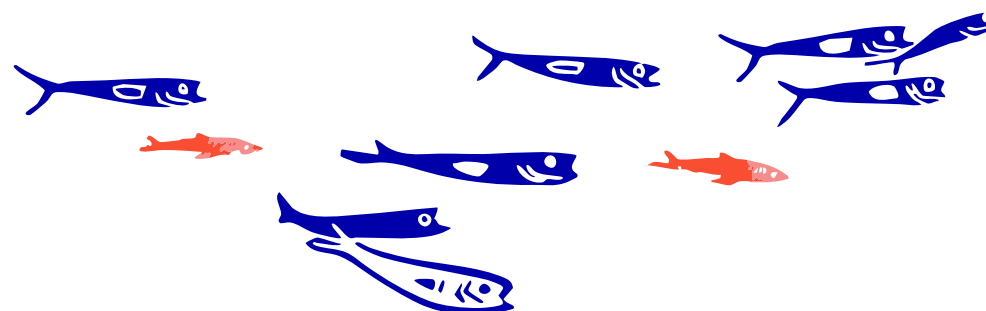


Current fishing activity, and the way that it is managed, is not working for nature or for people. It is clear that change is needed. Ending overfishing requires the UK to take a new, regenerative approach to fisheries management, ensuring that any fishing taking place in UK waters is compatible with a thriving marine environment.

In developing this roadmap to achieve this, we have taken inspiration and learnings from the growth of “regenerative agriculture” or “agroecology”, forms of farming that are rooted in principles of restoring soil and societal health. These take an inclusive, flexible and positive approach to reducing the use of expensive inputs, working with natural processes and ultimately breaking the dependence of farmers on costly and volatile inputs controlled by large agrochemical companies.

For many farmers and growers, their journey towards more regenerative approaches, has been led by the acceptance that things need to change, and that a more resilient, less stressful and more enjoyable future is possible with the right support from government and the supply chain. Success is not simply measured by the quantity of food produced, but by the quality of that food and the environmental outcomes delivered.

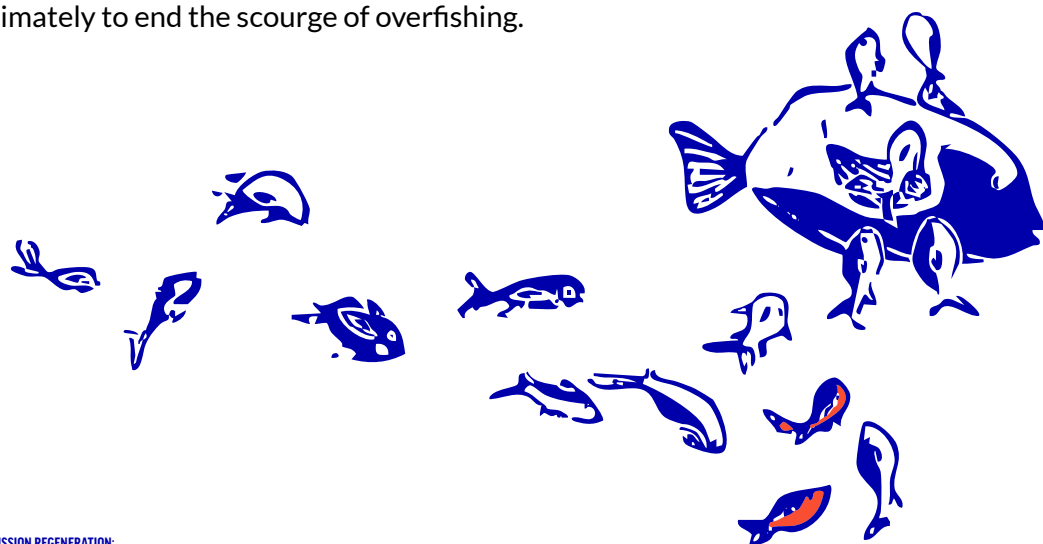
“ It’s all connected, and that’s why I think of it as that Jenga block. If you start overfishing one stock, then you increase the risk of impacting another part of the ecosystem. ” **NGO_001**



Applying this way of thinking to fisheries offers the chance to have a more fundamental discussion about what, and who, fishing is actually for. Both farming and fishing are the primary drivers of nature loss on land and at sea, driven by decades of misaligned policy and subsidies. If little value is being returned to coastal communities, vessel owners are having to travel ever further to make a living, carbon-rich seabed habitats are being damaged and seabirds have less and less food to eat, what value is fishing actually providing?

“ Many countries have already reached the point, or are on a trajectory to having no inshore small scale fishery. Is that what we as a country want to move towards? What would the impacts of that be on coastal and rural communities where many of our smaller boats are located? Questions of how people benefit from sustainable fisheries, and how those benefits should be distributed across the general public, have not been given enough consideration in government. ” DR SARAH COULTHARD

The principles we set out opposite are not designed to be prescriptive, or necessarily exhaustive, but are intended to embed both nature and community health into the fabric of UK fisheries policy and legislation – and ultimately to end the scourge of overfishing.



PRINCIPLES OF REGENERATIVE FISHERIES



PRINCIPLE 1: SCIENCE

The management of fisheries should move beyond Maximum Sustainable Yield to integrate the wider needs of healthy marine ecosystems.



PRINCIPLE 2: FAIRNESS

Fisheries should aim to deliver long-term environmental and social equity and fairness, including in the face of the climate crisis.



PRINCIPLE 3: RESILIENCE

Fisheries should protect the diversity of marine life and safeguard key areas for ecosystem recovery and carbon storage



PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSPARENCY

Fisheries and seafood should be fully documented from boat to plate alongside transparent ownership of quota and vessels.



PRINCIPLE 5: RESPECT

All those working in fisheries should be treated with respect, be paid fairly, and be entitled to a safe, legal and abuse-free working environment.

PART TWO: DEFINING THE ACTIONS – DELIVERING WITH AMBITION AND URGENCY

A radical transformation of UK fisheries management that works for both people and planet is long overdue. This transformation requires moving beyond the narrow focus on single-stock management to embrace a comprehensive, ecosystem approach that integrates habitat protection, species interactions, bycatch reductions and addresses the broader environmental, social and economic impacts and needs of the fishing industry. This is not just in the interests of rebuilding fish populations or wider ocean health, but for the future of the fishing industry and coastal communities that have been depleted by overfishing.

The following sections break down the overarching principles of regenerative fisheries into tangible and time-bound actions for governments to consider when redesigning their approach to ending overfishing. This is not a complete list: we have, for example, not examined in depth supply chain reforms, marine mammal bycatch or use of forage fish for aquaculture or livestock feed, as important as these issues are. However, they provide the starting points, or minimum changes needed, to move away from the status quo.



RECOMMENDATIONS



PRINCIPLE 1: SCIENCE

Introduce a new timebound legally binding commitment to end overfishing and restore fishing to sustainable levels. **BY END OF 2025**

Implement catch limits based on scientific advice, using Maximum Sustainable Yield as a maximum threshold where relevant, with trigger points and buffers to support stock recovery. **BY END OF 2025**

Publish an annual audit on the health and management of all commercial fish stocks to be scrutinised by Parliament. **BY END OF 2026**

Integrate fisheries into wider marine spatial planning and prioritisation programmes. **BY END OF 2026**



PRINCIPLE 2: FAIRNESS

Allocate quota and taxpayer money into fisheries that deliver public good, based on the ability to deliver environmental and social outcomes. **BY END OF 2026**

Introduce a fully funded just transition and skills programme for the fishing sector. **BY END OF 2026**

Introduce a scrappage scheme and skills programme to support eligible fishers to scrap or adapt bottom towed vessels for alternative uses. **BY END OF 2026**



PRINCIPLE 3: RESILIENCE

Remove destructive bottom-towed fishing inside marine protected areas and blue carbon hotspots on a whole-site basis). **BY END OF 2026**

Incorporate ecosystem-based management into all existing and new Fisheries Management Plans, tailored to local context. **BY END OF 2026**

Introduce effort restrictions across UK waters to ensure fishing activity is compatible with thriving marine ecosystems, starting with bans to fly-shooting and large 'supertrawlers' over 100 metres in length. **BY END OF 2027**

Extend the remit of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities to twelve nautical miles. **BY END OF 2027**



PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSPARENCY

Roll out the mandatory use of remote electronic monitoring as a condition of fishing in English waters, prioritising the most damaging vessels.

BY END OF 2025 FOR PRIORITY SECTORS AND OVER 10M VESSELS, BY END OF 2026 FOR ALL OTHER VESSELS

Introduce a due diligence supply chain obligation for seafood to set legally binding minimum environmental, social and safety standards. **BY END OF 2025**

Make public all information on vessel ownership, licenses, quota holdings, authorisations and previous sanctions. **BY END OF 2026**



PRINCIPLE 5: RESPECT

Strengthen visa protections and minimum salary requirements for fisheries workers and close loopholes that facilitate abuses of safety and human rights. **BY END OF 2026**

Introduce tougher sanctions and penalties for abuses of safety and human rights. **BY END OF 2026**

Improve legally binding minimum labour standards for the fishing industry. **BY END OF 2027**

PRINCIPLE 1: SCIENCE



RECOMMENDATIONS

BY END OF 2025

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BY END OF 2026

Publish an annual audit on the health and management of all commercial fish stocks to be scrutinised by Parliament.

BY END OF 2026

Integrate fisheries into wider marine spatial planning and prioritisation programmes.

“ The objective should be to try and fish within scientific advice. They think they're doing something remarkable when two thirds of fisheries are within. I would argue they should be firing people if 90 or 95% of fishing isn't in line with scientific advice. ” BALLY PHILP

For all the framework objectives in the Fisheries Act 2020, and while commercial fisheries are included within the aspects of Good Environmental Status required under the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, that Fisheries Act failed to include a legal duty to fish below Maximum Sustainable Yield for all stocks, or a deadline for doing so.. This lies at the heart of the continuing lack of political attention given to the issue. **A new timebound legally binding commitment to end overfishing and restore fishing to sustainable levels** would force governments to sit up and reassess the ambition and urgency of its current approach.

While a strategy for ending overfishing means more than just fishing at sustainable levels, we recognise that the use of concepts such as maximum sustainable yield (MSY) is still the basis for advice that national governments receive from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) and the process for agreeing national allocations for shared stocks. And although many interviewees questioned the true benefit of MSY as the basis for management, and the ability of existing ICES advice to deliver the kind of recovery needed (given its inherent focus on the catch potential on a stock-by-stock basis), the fundamental need to follow independent scientific advice to rebuild fish populations remains.

“ Some of the rules that we use to govern fisheries, and some of the assumptions that we make about what sustainable even is need to be rethought and need to have more ecosystem dynamics and considerations reflected in them. ” DAN STEADMAN

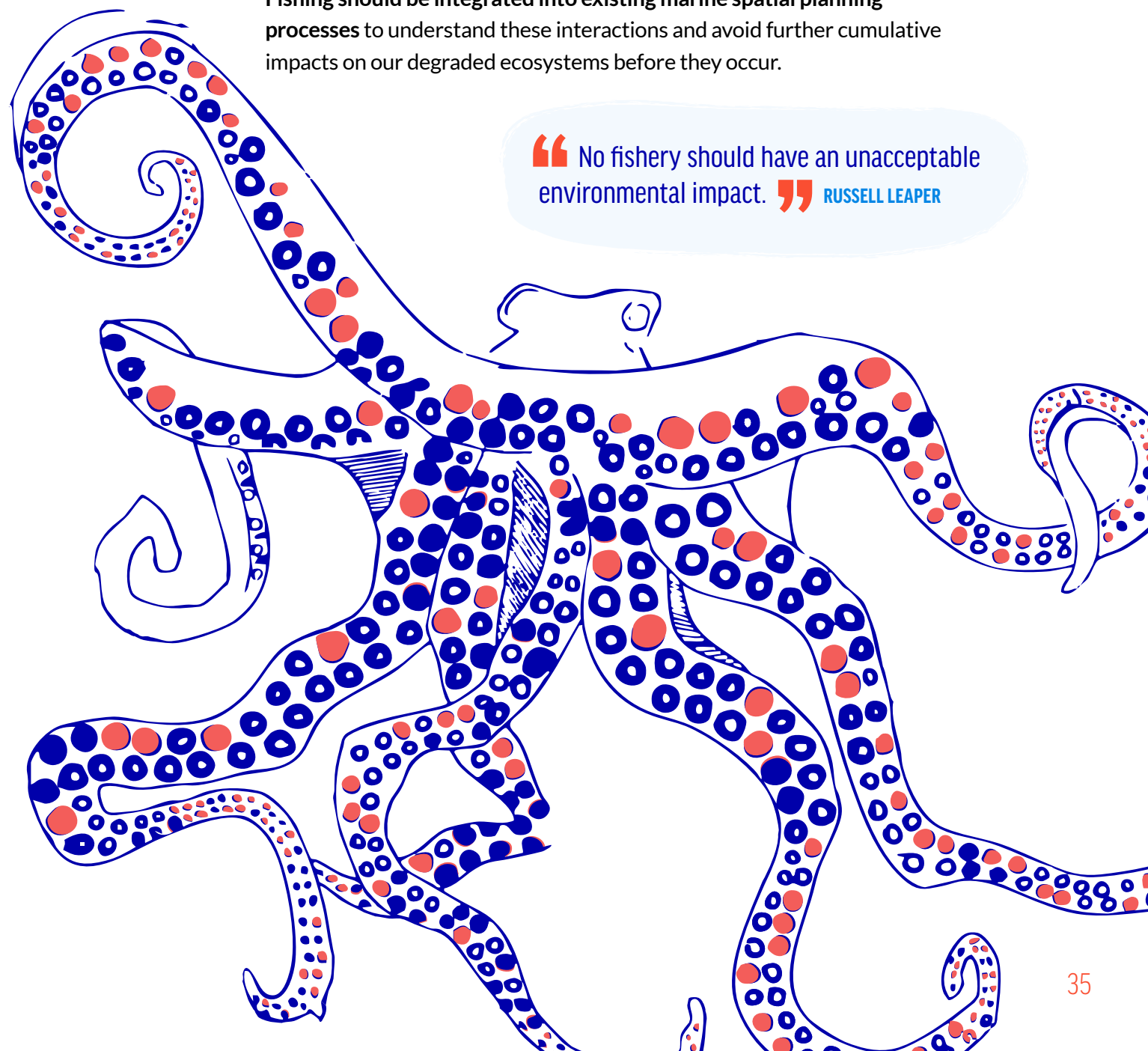
To rebuild fisheries and factor in the needs of the wider marine ecosystem, **legally binding time-bound recovery plans should be introduced**, with catch limits set well below the level of advised fishing pressure to deliver MSY, until recovery is well underway, and managed carefully on a holistic basis thereafter. The UK Government should prioritise obtaining scientific advice from ICES not just on the level of fishing pressure to deliver MSY, as happens now, but specifically aimed at the rapid recovery of fish populations, for example to rebuild and maintain populations to at least 120% of what is estimated to achieve MSY.²⁶ This precautionary approach not only supports the rebuilding of fish populations but also moves towards a multispecies management approach as more fish are available for the wider marine food web. Furthermore, it accounts for uncertainty in environmental conditions from the impacts of the climate crisis.

The UK has already trialled such approaches to manage fisheries holistically within a MSY context in considering a “third for the birds” approach to some selected fisheries, such as the cockle fisheries in the Wash, that have since been incorporated into local byelaws. A similar approach has long been proposed for forage fish species to support breeding seabird populations²⁷ and supports the UK and Scottish Governments’ recent decision to close their waters to industrial sandeel fisheries.^{28, 29}

Species that are “non-quota” but are vital for the incomes of small-scale fishers should be given special attention. These should be reflected in true ecosystem-based and mixed fishery management that protects the interests of small-scale fishers who potentially have most to lose, and directly rewards the recovery of those species.

Finally, demand for marine space among energy, fishing, aquaculture and other sectors is expected to intensify in the coming years. Heightened competition for fishing areas that are also suitable for other sectors, such as energy, risks a backlash against a clean and green ocean transition, when in reality many constraints can be avoided with strategic planning. **Fishing should be integrated into existing marine spatial planning processes** to understand these interactions and avoid further cumulative impacts on our degraded ecosystems before they occur.

“ No fishery should have an unacceptable environmental impact. ” RUSSELL LEAPER



PRINCIPLE 2: FAIRNESS



RECOMMENDATIONS

BY END OF 2026

Allocate quota and taxpayer money into fisheries that deliver public good, based on the ability to deliver environmental and social outcomes

BY END OF 2026

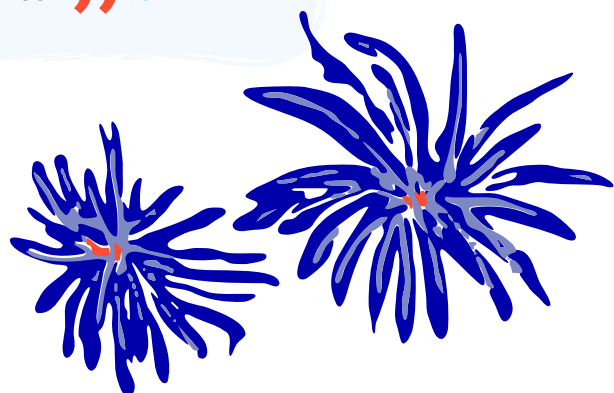
Introduce a fully funded just transition and skills programme for the fishing sector.

BY END OF 2026

Introduce a scrappage scheme and skills programme to support eligible fishers to scrap or adapt bottom towed vessels for alternative uses.

“ Fishing should provide a living for the many rather than a fortune for the few. ” JERRY PERCY

“ Some people can trace their family back 700 years of fishing. It has been part of the national identity for hundreds if not thousands of years and that is often overlooked. ” JOE REDFERN



The UK Government must manage fisheries for public and environmental good not just for the interests of the sector. For too long, the treatment of fish as a commodity to be extracted rather than as a species operating within complex marine ecosystems has underpinned an approach to fisheries management that has devastated wildlife, as well as placing lower-impact fishers at a disadvantage. Ending overfishing and building a regenerative approach to fisheries in the UK must start with tackling this inherent unfairness in the system.

This will require a fundamental **reallocation of taxpayers money**, licensing, and quota directly to those low-impact fishers who can deliver social and environmental resilience, as well as enabling fishers to transition out of the most destructive forms of fishing. Section 25 of The Fisheries Act 2020 already offers a framework for more sustainable fishing by allocating quota based on social, environmental, and economic factors, yet it is not being put into practice, meaning that quota allocation and government finance for the fishing industry, including in the form of fuel subsidies, are still tending to favour large-scale, destructive fishing methods. This is not just a perverse use of public investment in the face of the nature and climate crisis, but a missed opportunity for the government to make fisheries fairer.

“ I mean they [fish] belong to the environment. They actually don't belong to anybody. But if we are going to attribute some kind of allocation they'd belong to the public at large. They are a common resource to be managed in the interest of humanity. If we are going to allocate some kind of fishing opportunity it should be done in a way that gives the best return to the public who are sacrificing some of their fish in the sea. ” BALLY PHILP

Although such a vision of healthy UK seas supporting thriving fish populations and healthy marine ecosystems is eminently achievable, the journey to get there will bring risks and uncertainties along the way and requires political will and support, particularly for those fishers that have already been squeezed to the margins in quota allocations or have little upfront capital to invest in modernisation or gear modifications. We recognise that unless the right support is in place for such a transition to share the risk and cost of change, then even if parts of the industry want to move towards a more regenerative future, it will be unable to do so.

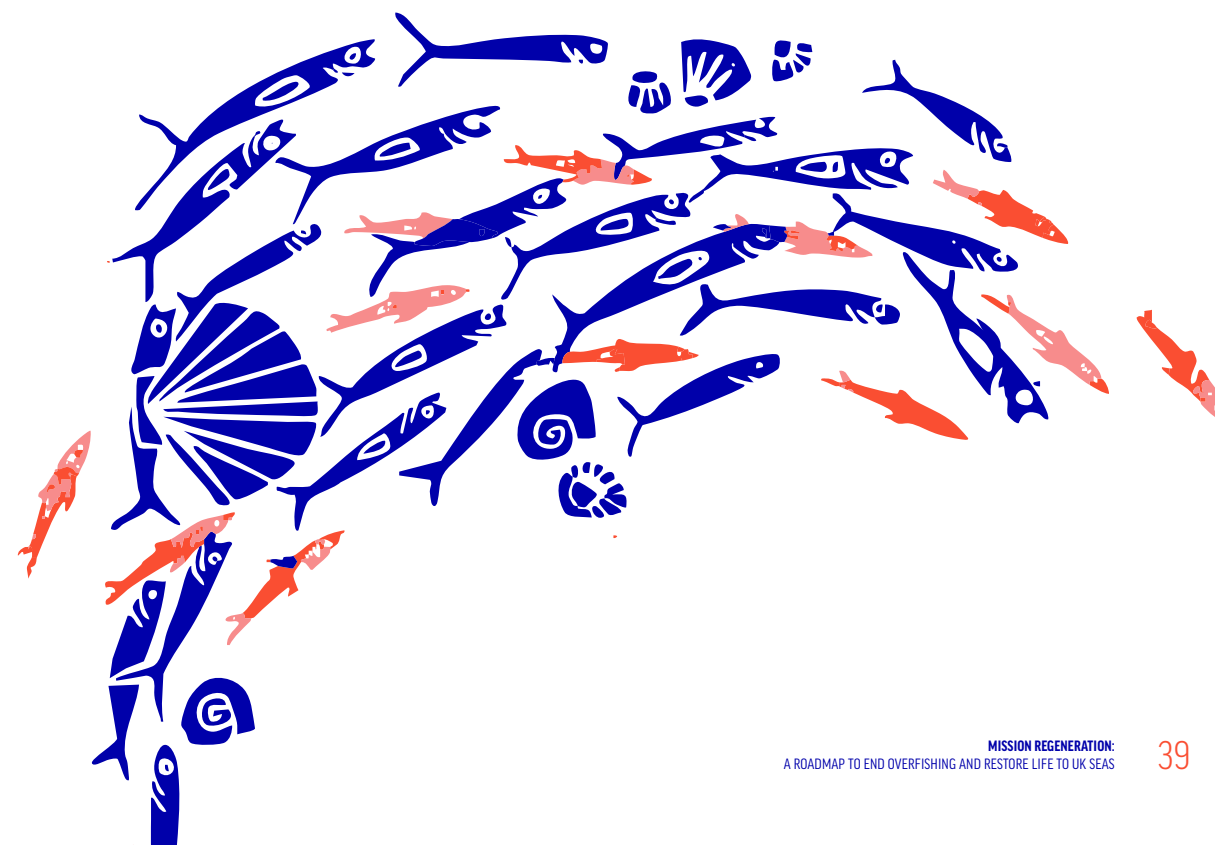
A **just transition plan** for moving those parts of the industry away from the most damaging forms of fishing is therefore critical to success, and must be backed not just by financial support and quota reallocation away from the most damaging practices, reskilling and retraining to adopt more sustainable practices, or support to exit the industry with dignity, but also by a listening ear and a recognition of the scale and nature of change for many.

“ We need to work on overfishing [...] but it needs to be done with empathy and there need to be other options [...] ensuring that [...] it doesn't end someone's livelihood in a really abrupt and horrible way, particularly for rural communities where one fisher can support many people in that community. ” ACA_001

“ When you talk about the just transition, you know an integral part of that is the resilience to be able to make that transition, and how you can build that resilience. ” BRIAN O'RIORDAN

Short-term financial compensation for affected individuals is likely to be needed to avoid a cliff-edge for fishers, while a **fishing vessel scrappage scheme** to allow for appropriate decommissioning and compensation as part of a fair transition away from destructive fishing would support those who face a cliff-edge or seek alternative livelihoods or forms of fishing. These could be funded by applying a small proportion of windfall taxes from the oil and gas industry which is chronically polluting the marine environment,³⁰ providing a win-win for climate, nature and people.

“ We need to try and stop some of the destructive fishing methods, but also we need to try and give alternatives to people as well. ” JOE REDFERN



PRINCIPLE 3: RESILIENCE



RECOMMENDATIONS

BY END OF 2026

Remove destructive bottom-towed fishing inside marine protected areas and blue carbon hotspots on a whole-site basis.

BY END OF 2027

Introduce effort restrictions across UK waters to ensure fishing activity is compatible with thriving marine ecosystems, starting with bans to fly-shooting and large 'supertrawlers' over 100 metres in length.

BY END OF 2026

Incorporate ecosystem-based management into all existing and new Fisheries Management Plans, tailored to local contexts.

BY END OF 2027

Extend the remit of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities to twelve nautical miles.

“ I've spent a lot of time out at sea watching fishing and there's something about watching a supertrawler which is quite horrendous because of the volume when you think how can that much stuff be brought out of the sea and still have a healthy ocean? Or watching a fly shooter because they literally take anything. You watch it come up, life being crushed and just moulded all together. Fly shooting is a particularly visual representation of overfishing I think. ” WILL MCCALLUM

From stakeholder interviews, it was clear that certain methods of fishing, including bottom trawling, dredging and fly-shooting, were of particular concern and need to be restricted. These practices destroy seabed habitats, weaken ocean resilience and contribute to overfishing by producing high levels of bycatch, resulting in the death of non-target fish species and other marine wildlife such as seabirds and marine mammals.

“ We're treating these wild species like they're in little boxes and we're saying just manage each one and get as much yield out of it as you can. Whereas actually what we're talking about is taking wild species out of an ecosystem. ” DAN STEADMAN

“ We do need to have a concept of overfishing that includes damage to the environment as well as to the particular fish stock that's being exploited. ” RUSSELL LEAPER

As a priority to protect and increase ocean wildlife, the most destructive fishing activities, including **bottom trawling, fly shooting and dredging should be banned in all marine protected areas and across vital ecosystem and blue carbon hotspots.** This could be implemented rapidly through a simple condition on the licenses issued to fishing vessels, prohibiting them from using these gear types in those locations, or through the introduction of MPA management byelaws that cover the whole site not just where the degraded features are at the moment. As well as the marine wildlife these sites protect, more than two-fifths of organic blue carbon are located within the existing MPA network.³¹

Fly shooting should be banned entirely from UK waters, given this form of fishing has some of the highest potential impacts and has grown significantly in recent years, followed potentially by other highly destructive fishing practices.

“ If you can still allow dredge scalloping in a marine protected area, what's the point of that MPA? ” CAROLINE BENNETT

Outside of protected areas, measures to increase resilience could include implementing seasonal closures during critical periods like spawning or breeding seasons, establishing depth limits for non-selective gear to protect shallow nursery habitats and closing areas during times of high bycatch risk for endangered species as well as implementing effort restrictions, notably a ban on 'supertrawlers' (fishing boats over 100 metres in length that largely focus on pelagic species) which are incompatible with thriving marine environments or with equitable distribution of fishing opportunities. Ecosystem approaches should be implemented through more integrated Fisheries Management Plans, already being developed but on a siloed basis, so that fishing and fish populations are managed according to their local conditions and with the wider health of the marine ecosystem at their centre.

“ Would you use a bulldozer to flatten an entire woodland to get a wheelbarrow full of rabbits and deer? No. Okay, so why are we doing it for marine habitats. There are less damaging ways to fish, and those should be rewarded and incentivised. ” CHRIS WILLIAMS

These approaches are likely to be context-dependent, so we encourage managers to work closely with established regulators, such as the **Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs)** in England and other stakeholder groups, to explore ecosystem approaches relevant for their region. Some interviewees recognised IFCAs as doing positive work to integrate fisheries and environmental considerations with limited resource, and have put in place a series of positive restrictions on destructive fishing in recent years.³² Yet their remit only extends out to six nautical miles. This should be extended to the twelve nautical mile boundary with the English offshore area, with sufficient investment to scale up their operations accordingly.

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSPARENCY



RECOMMENDATIONS

BY END OF 2025 FOR PRIORITY SECTORS AND OVER 10M VESSELS,
BY END OF 2026 FOR ALL OTHER VESSELS

Roll out the mandatory use of remote electronic monitoring as a condition of fishing in English waters, prioritising the most damaging vessels.

BY END OF 2026

Make public all information on vessel ownership, licenses, quota holdings, authorisations and previous sanctions.

BY END OF 2025

Introduce a due diligence supply chain obligation for seafood to set legally binding minimum environmental, social and safety standards.

Lack of high quality data, information and reporting undermines not just those seeking to demonstrate (and be paid fairly for) sustainability, but also enables opaque and powerful interests to perpetuate unsustainable and often illegal forms of fishing.

Fisheries transparency needs to be underpinned by the mandatory and universal roll-out of **remote electronic monitoring (REM)**: the use of cameras, gear sensors, and GPS units to ensure that catches are accurately recorded and fish are not unlawfully discarded. The use of REM can provide better information about catch and bycatch composition, which can support better estimates of fish population status as well as improved real-time monitoring. This monitoring needs to be backed up by adequate enforcement and sanctions for non-compliance which must be set at a level which serves as an effective deterrent.

Some progress has been made with REM becoming mandatory for vessels in identified priority fisheries following a trial period in the summer of 2024 in English waters.³³ We also recognise that the Scottish Government will progress with mandatory REM on pelagic vessels and scallop dredgers.³⁴ However, there is much more to do. Time is of the essence and a clearly defined timeline for making REM mandatory across all vessel types is needed. The current timeline from the UK Government for roll-out in English waters lacks ambition and does not cover all sectors and vessels.

Beyond REM, there is a need to throw a light on the labyrinthine ownership structure of some fishing vessels, and the accumulation of fishing quota into the hands of a select and powerful group of companies and individuals. This is an issue where the UK Government could lead by example on the world stage. The UK already has a strong history of working to strengthen the reporting of ultimate or “beneficial” ownership of companies to tackle corruption and environmental crime in other sectors, and has the capacity and expertise to apply this to the fishing industry, for example by including vessel ownership on the UK’s official beneficial ownership registry. **All information on vessel ownership, licenses, quota holdings, authorisations and previous sanctions should be made public** alongside real-time data of fishing operations to show where and when individual vessels are operating.

The UK can also play a leadership role on the world stage in this area. **The Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency**³⁵ is a set of ten policy principles designed to be adopted by governments globally, in law and in practice. These principles address the lack of transparency in three critical areas: vessel information, fishing activity, and governance and management. The UK has not yet at the time of writing formally endorsed this Charter, and should do so without delay, and move swiftly to implement its principles.

Finally, this lack of transparency has resulted in seafood relying disproportionately on voluntary certification schemes to demonstrate environmental sustainability, rather than legally binding minimum standards. For too long, such schemes have become the aspiration rather than the bare minimum, hampered by fragmented metrics and inadequate assessment of impacts. The government should therefore introduce mandated government standards that align to build healthy marine ecosystems, which would drive both consistency of reporting and a level playing field.

For imported products, the government should establish a legally binding **due diligence process for seafood**, building on its intention to establish a due diligence obligation for deforestation and applying it to wild-caught and farmed seafood. This would require the whole of the food value chain, from investors to retailers, to be able to show that the seafood they are processing has not come from areas or vessels associated with human rights abuses; illegal, unreported, or unregulated fishing; or environmentally destructive practices. This should also be a condition of issuing licenses under the provisions of the Fisheries Act. This would go alongside more proactive efforts to increase the transparency and traceability of those supply chains.



PRINCIPLE 5: RESPECT



RECOMMENDATIONS

BY END OF 2026

Strengthen visa protections and minimum salary requirements for fisheries workers and close loopholes that facilitate abuses of safety and human rights.

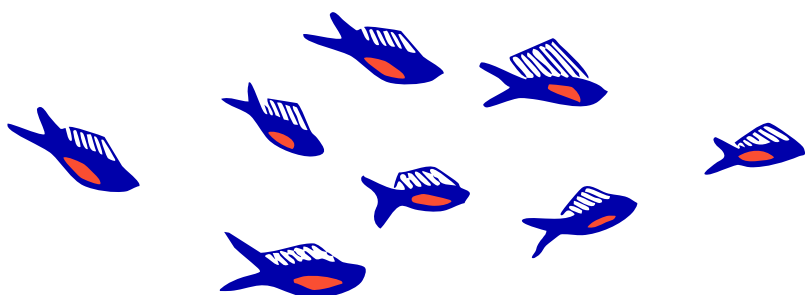
BY END OF 2026

Introduce tougher sanctions and penalties for abuses of safety and human rights.

BY END OF 2027

Improve legally binding minimum labour standards for the fishing industry.

“ How can it be that a multi-million pound fishing vessel is allowed to pay someone a third of minimum wage and sell into the UK supply chain? It's disgusting and shameful. ” CHRIS WILLIAMS



Fishers around the world deserve dignity, safety, and fair treatment, yet too often are exposed to illegal and abusive behaviour by vessel owners, often associated with wider illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) forms of fishing. Oceana stands firmly behind those brave individuals in their fight for justice and fairer seas – restoring the respect and dignity of fishing as a profession goes hand in hand with restoring the health of the ocean.

The UK is already bound by legislation that guarantees all fishers' rights to decent food and accommodation, medical care, regulated working time and other provisions, as part of ratifying the International Labour Organisation's Work in Fishing Convention³⁶. Yet there are further steps the government can take to stand up against this behaviour.

Visa protections for fisheries workers should also be strengthened. For many fisheries workers, the conditions of their visas mean that they are often not even allowed to set foot on UK soil or are hired on transit visas that allow operators to restrict them to vessels under extreme working conditions and pay less than UK minimum wage.³⁷

Sanctions should also be increased for those vessels that are convicted of human rights and slavery abuses, and those vessels should be **publicly named and shamed**. This includes the removal of taxpayer subsidies (and changing the law to enable recovery of historic financial support), the removal of quota and the revocation of vessel licenses to fish in UK waters. There should be no place for any vessel that operates in ways that undermine basic human rights.

Finally, the government should **work hand in hand with unions** that represent fishing industry workers to improve minimum legal working conditions for workers; ensure the stories of workers are heard and respected; and ensure that such standards are not beholden to standards the supply chain voluntarily set for themselves. The public should be confident that all seafood, let alone seafood certified to voluntary standards,³⁸ is free from forced labour and human rights abuses.

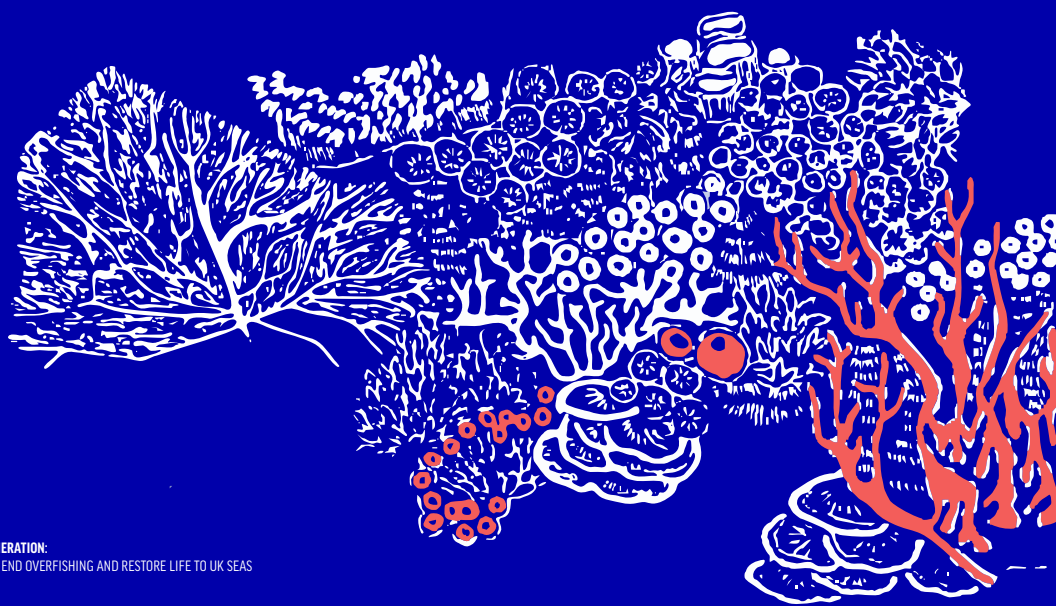
PART THREE: ESTABLISHING THE ENABLING CONDITIONS – DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

“ The longer it takes for a strategy to come out that aids sustainability or restoration, the potential more impact is going to take place in the meantime, which means you’re going to have to double your efforts to return back to the original state. ”

ROBERT WALSH

Ending overfishing; protecting marine wildlife; building resilience and cultural identity; and restoring our blue carbon hotspots will deliver multiple wins for the government. However, to make such a strategy a success and deliver on its mission-led approach, the government will need to organise itself differently to deliver across currently siloed departments and ways of working.

Some recommendations for this are set out on the following pages.



1. SET A BOLD WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Many of the legal and policy frameworks are in place to deliver this roadmap. Yet achieving this vision cannot be driven by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) or the equivalent departments in the devolved administrations alone; it requires a cross-government approach and buy-in and involvement across relevant departments, including the Treasury, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Communities and Local Government. Such an approach needs to deliver long-term consistency and ambition at the highest levels of government, while being flexible to allow for tailored implementation according to local circumstances.

Ending overfishing should be a whole-government effort, driven forwards by a cross-departmental taskforce made up of officials and cabinet representatives from all relevant government departments and the Prime Minister’s Office, and including ministerial representatives from across the devolved administrations. It should engage regularly with, and consider input from, representatives of statutory environmental agencies, fisheries research bodies, NGOs, community groups and members of the general public as well as from across the full diversity of the fishing industry from the catching sector to processors and including the small-scale inshore fleet. By bringing together diverse expertise and resources, this group can foster a more holistic and coordinated response to the complex challenge of overfishing.

“ Changing the status quo really is the real challenge. ”

BRIAN O’RIORDAN

2. IMPROVE PUBLIC AND PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY

Currently, fisheries management is out of sight, out of mind to most, including most parliamentarians and the general public. Yet critical elements of future fisheries policy are playing out right now, from the development of fisheries management plans to meet the objectives of the Fisheries Act to annual negotiations between countries on the amount of fish that can be caught within and across the boundaries of our seas. Most of these discussions are rarely seen, let alone scrutinised. Yet there is a strong public mandate for action to reward fishers who are working to improve the environment, and to restrict those who are damaging it.

Proactively publishing international and devolved negotiation positions, as well as records of negotiations, would enhance government accountability in its commitment to ending overfishing. This transparency would allow stakeholders to more effectively engage with decision-making processes; better understand the rationale behind decisions; learn from mistakes; and potentially improve compliance and support for management measures.

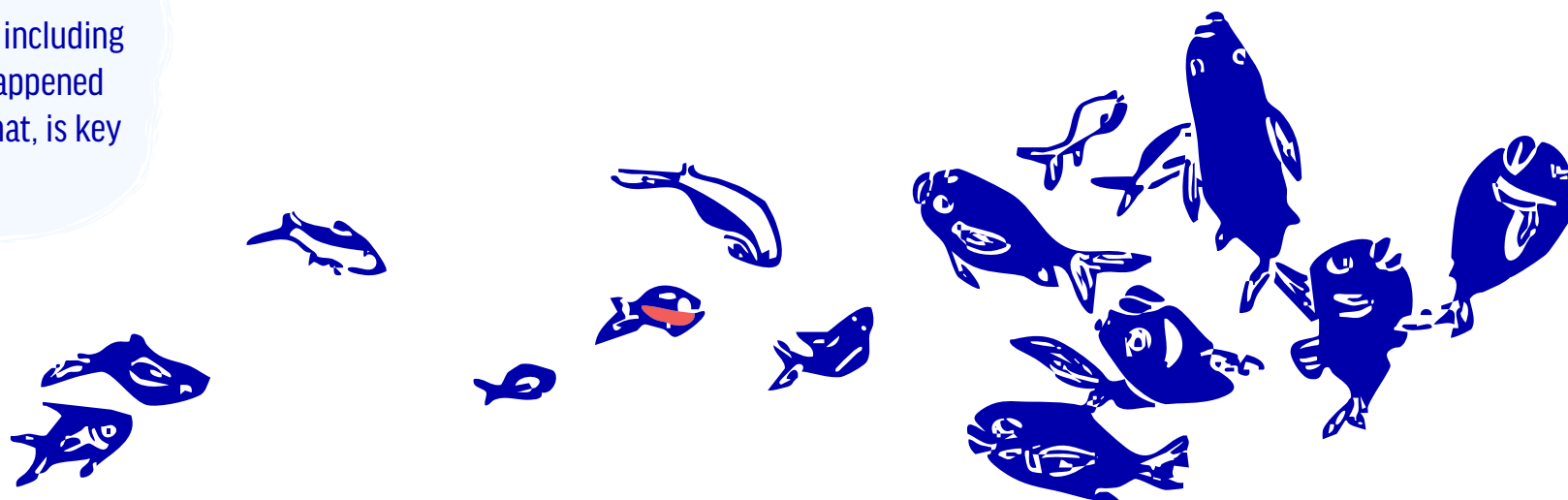
“ Full transparency about UK and individual devolved administration positions regarding fisheries negotiations, including proper documentation of where everyone stands, what happened during the negotiation process and who advocated for what, is key to allow for proper public scrutiny. ” JENNI GROSSMANN

“ There has to be short term goals but also ensuring that there's continual review towards those goals. ” DR MATHIEU LUNDY

The government should also do more to publish regular reports on progress towards ending overfishing and recovery fish stocks in domestic waters; currently this evidence is largely hidden from public view. Oceana's Taking Stock report in 2023 provided the most comprehensive overall assessment of UK fish populations to date, finding that over a third of the 104 stocks analysed were being overfished and a quarter were in a critical condition.³⁹ The government should take on this work and publish a comprehensive annual audit of UK fish stocks for parliament, with time allocated each year for select committee scrutiny of and wider debate on government's progress towards ending overfishing.

“ It just seems like there's a real lack of accountability as to not only how these decisions are made but how decisions are repeatedly made which essentially sanction overfishing? ”

EMMA CRANE



3. ENSURE EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION FOR NATURE-FRIENDLY FISHERS

“ Everybody that’s trying to manage fisheries should be a fisherman for a while and see what it’s like being there as part of the ecosystem. ” **JOE REDFERN**

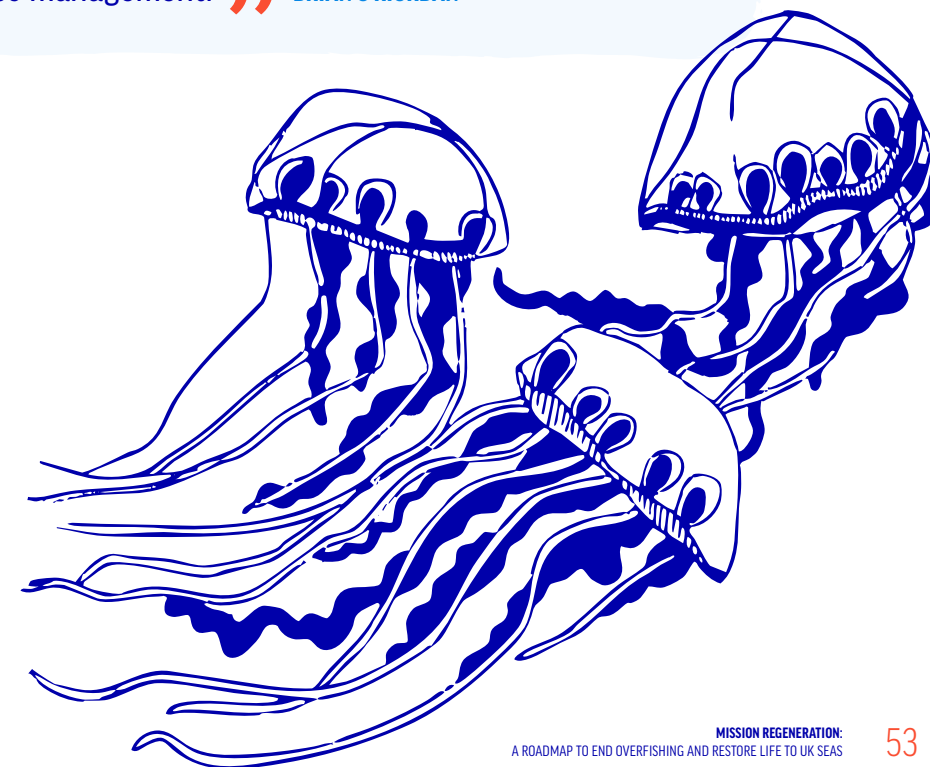
Increasing representation for those fishers who fish with, rather than against nature, is a prerequisite for delivering real change within the industry. This includes, but is not limited to, including low-impact fishers in decision-making spaces and ensuring their interests and expertise are effectively incorporated into fisheries management. Providing financial assistance to support their leadership and participation in policy discussions will empower low-impact fishers to engage more effectively, fostering greater collaboration and more equitable solutions for sustainable fisheries management.

“ It’s quite hard for a fisherman to go to a meeting if he’s the sole person in charge of his boat because if he’s at a meeting, his boat isn’t going out. Whereas it’s often the case that larger boats with multiple crew have better representation at meetings and can go in person because they’ve got someone else to ensure they’re not losing out on a day’s fishing. So that’s one example of how smaller boats are less heard in some decision making arenas. ”

DR SARAH COULTHARD

Involving local stakeholders and nature-friendly fishers in the decision-making process is vital to ensure that transitions are tailored to the specific needs of communities. It is long accepted that when it comes to fishing, the actions and advice from other fishers is one of the most influential factors in making positive environmental choices. Yet currently there is no national-level body to advocate for the policy changes needed to end overfishing and share best practice. Lower-impact and smaller-scale fishers are often not included in conversations, or don’t have the funds or capacity to participate. **A clearly organised and resourced network that explicitly is supporting a nature-friendly fisheries transition** could fill this gap, and take lessons from the success of the Nature Friendly Farming Network in the farming space.

“ There is a huge amount of information out there in the fishing sector, the data derived from experiential knowledge of the fishers being out at sea every day, being in the port, seeing what’s happening in the water. We’ve got to find better ways of including this in fisheries management. ” **BRIAN O’RIORDAN**



4. DELIVER A STRONG BUT RESPECTFUL APPROACH WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION AND OTHER PARTNERS

For too long, both fishing and the environment have suffered as bargaining chips in the pursuit of trade agreements. The inherently transboundary nature of many fish populations requires a constructive and consistent approach with partners, in particular those EU nations whose vessels fish in UK waters and vice versa. However, the government should build on its ability to introduce and enforce fisheries management measures for its protected areas to assert these principles of regenerative fisheries through its trade relationships, and not let fishing be negotiated away as a condition of securing wider trade deals.

Many of the UK's recent conservation measures, including to protect sandeel populations in the North Sea or restrict bottom trawling in MPAs, have been challenged by one or more European Union Member States, under pressure from their domestic industrial fishing lobbies. As the UK and EU renegotiate their post-Brexit Trade and Cooperation agreement in 2026, closer alignment should not come at the cost of ocean destruction or giving back access for industrial fisheries to destroy the habitats and species the UK has rightfully sought to protect.

This should be backed up by a legally binding set of minimum environmental standards for the seafood we import, including from the EU, to ensure that the UK is not offshoring its environmental impact through the seafood we consume, and that UK fishers have a level playing field when investing in becoming more sustainable.

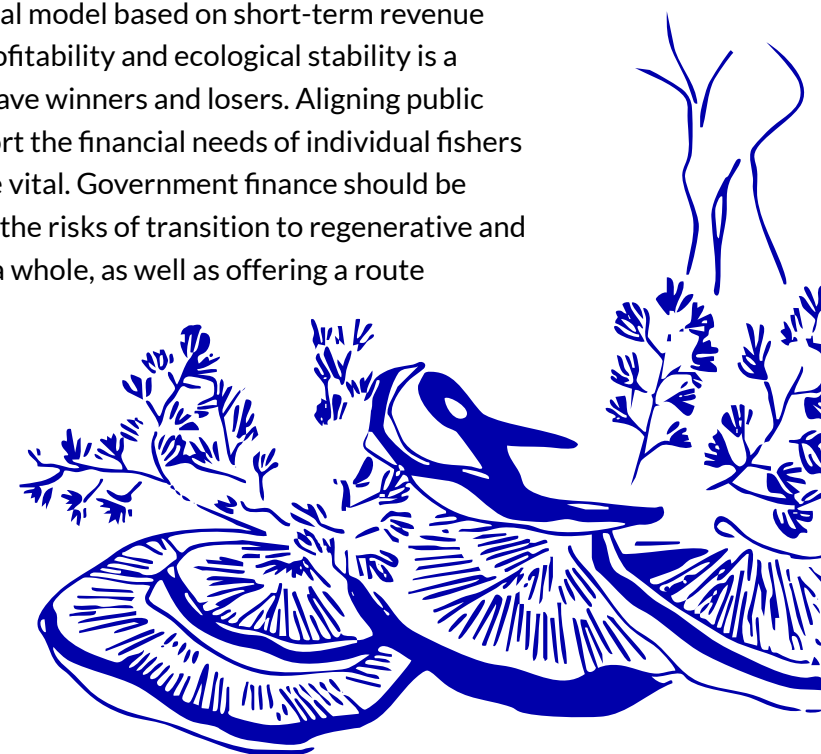
“ We import nearly everything that we eat and export nearly everything that we catch... which doesn't make sense for food security and... food miles. There must be a better way. ” JOE REDFERN

5. REORIENTATE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FINANCE IN LINE WITH REGENERATIVE PRINCIPLES

A fundamental shift in how fishing is financed and supported from both public and private sources is needed to ensure a fair transition towards nature-friendly, or regenerative, fishing. For too long, it has been more profitable to overfish than to fish regeneratively, thanks to perverse subsidies, lack of enforcement and the true costs of overfishing being hidden – this cycle needs to be reversed.

Compared to the UK agriculture sector, where government payment schemes for farmers are being redesigned around delivering for nature and climate, current use of government investment into fisheries is at best piecemeal and at worst actively supporting the degradation of the marine environment.⁴⁰ This lack of clarity in turn is putting off the scale of private investment into regenerative fisheries needed to derisk the transition.

The transition from a financial model based on short-term revenue and subsidy to long-term profitability and ecological stability is a fundamental one, that will have winners and losers. Aligning public and private finance to support the financial needs of individual fishers who take this journey will be vital. Government finance should be seen as a means of reducing the risks of transition to regenerative and nature-friendly fisheries as a whole, as well as offering a route to alternative livelihoods.





CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the UK's current approach to managing its seas is not delivering for people, climate or nature. Over a quarter of our fish stocks have been depleted to critically low sizes. More than half of fishing catch limits this year were set too high to be sustainable. Key wildlife habitats and carbon stores are being bulldozed by destructive bottom-towed fishing gear, even within supposedly 'protected areas'. Employment in the industry, particularly in local coastal fleets, is still plummeting. It does not have to be this way.

Continued overfishing is fundamentally a political decision – transformational action to save our seas is possible, if the political will is there. A regenerative fishing sector, with science, fairness, resilience, transparency and respect at its heart, can be the beating heart of delivering true ocean recovery and coastal prosperity. Just as UK governments have recognised the need for fundamental change in our farming system, so it must do so for fishing, where we stand arguably even closer to collapse.

This is a crucial moment for UK fisheries policy. New management plans are being drafted for key fish stocks and our fisheries and trade agreement with the EU will be coming up for renegotiation. A new government is in power in Westminster with a fresh chance for change and a public mandate for strong action on nature and climate. But there's still no overarching vision or plan to end overfishing, and a lack of timebound legal accountability on the government to deliver. We don't have a government view on what, and who, fisheries should be managed for.

Oceana is calling on the new government to seize this opportunity to make overfishing a thing of the past, once and for all. We can bring life back to our seas and our coastal communities, build resilience in the face of the climate crisis, and demonstrate global environmental leadership. Radical and holistic reform is needed – there is no more time to waste.

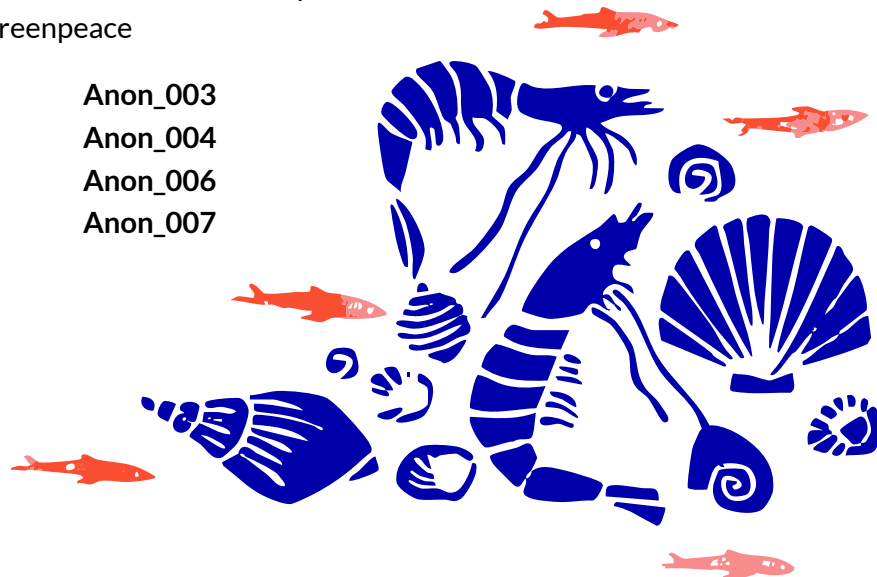
ANNEX

This report presents Oceana's opinions and recommendations, and should not be seen as reflecting the views or endorsement of consulted parties. We are extremely grateful to Amber Carter for her support on research design, conducting interviews, and developing early drafts. We are also very grateful to all of the interviewees listed below whose knowledge and experience shaped our thinking.

Expert stakeholders interviewed (listed in line with anonymity preferences)

Bally Philp, Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation
Brian O'Riordan, Low Impact Fishers of Europe
Caroline Bennett, Sole of Discretion CIC
Chris Williams, ITF Fisheries Section
Daniel Steadman, The Pew Charitable Trusts
Edward Baker, Plymouth Fishing and Seafood Association
Emma Crane, Peers For The Planet
Jenni Grossmann, ClientEarth
Jeremy Percy, formerly Director of New Under Ten Fishermen's Association
Joe Redfern, Shellfish Association of Great Britain/ Whitby Lobster Hatchery
Dr Mathieu Lundy, Ulster Wildlife
Robert Walsh, Northern Ireland Marine Task Force
Russell Leaper, marine mammal scientist
Dr Sarah Coulthard, Newcastle University
Will McCallum, Greenpeace

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ENDNOTES

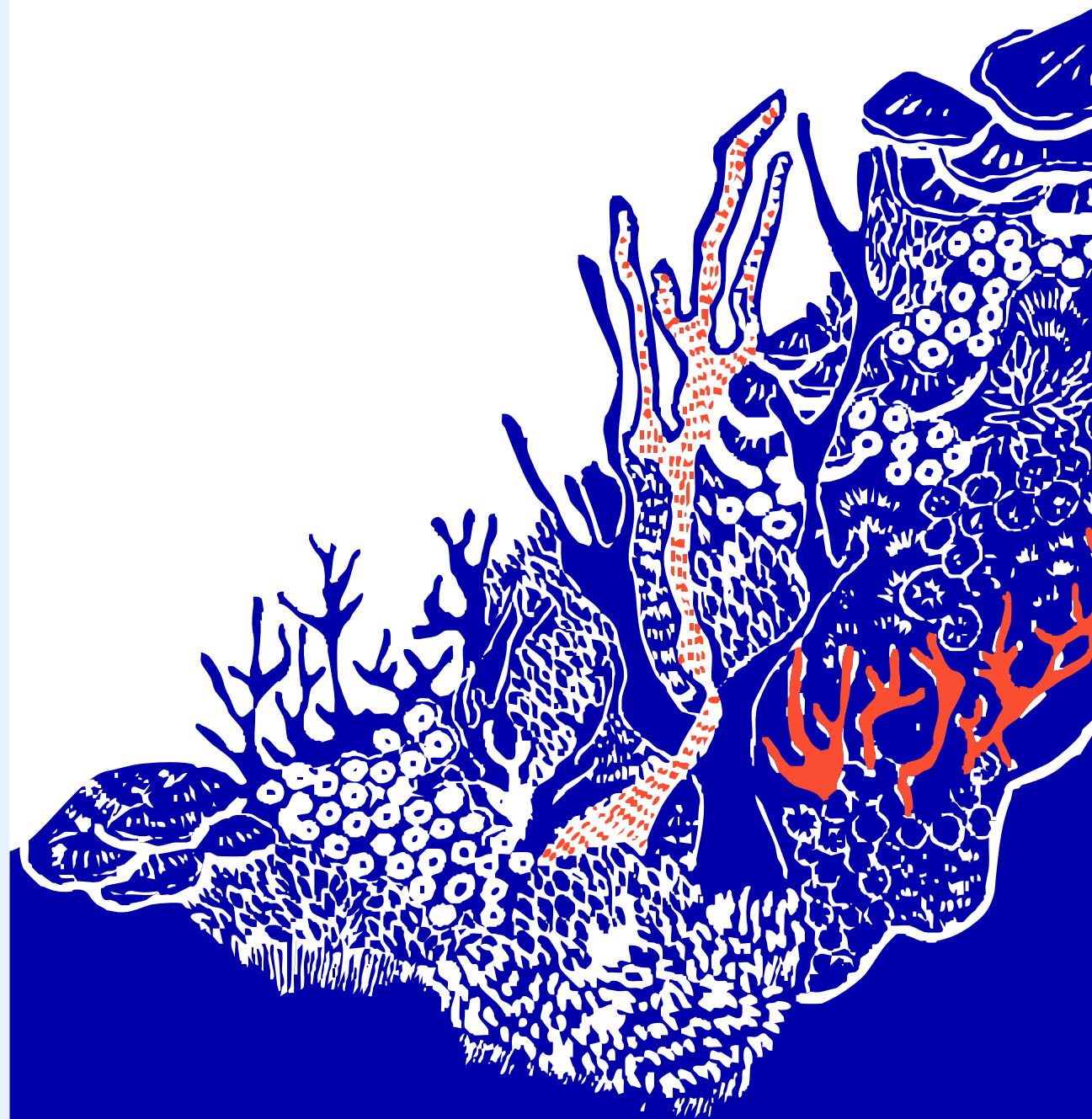
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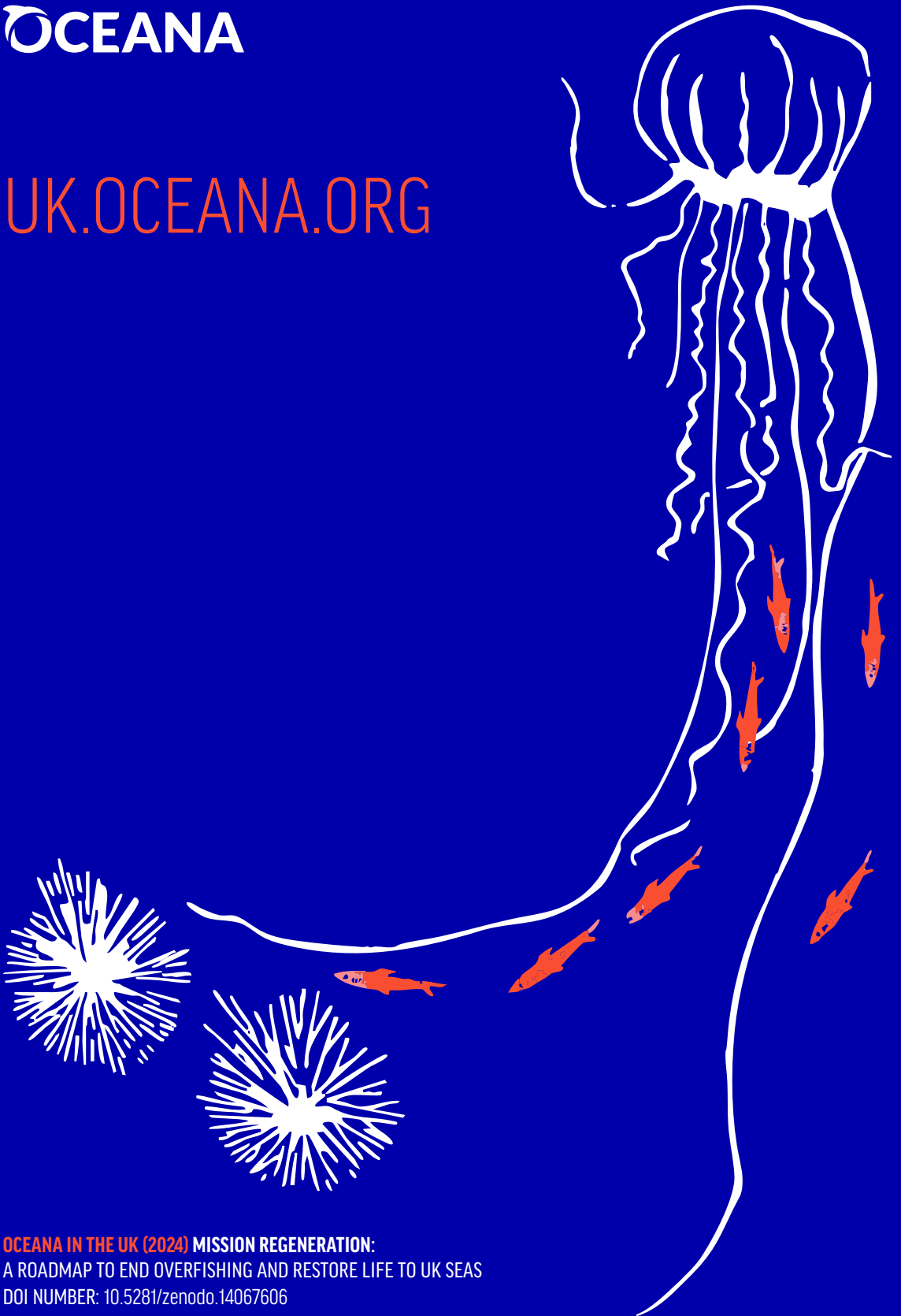
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