

## Sandeel

### DESCRIPTION

Sand eels are slim, elongated, usually silver fish, eel-like in shape and movement. They have a continuous dorsal fin and no pelvic fins, a long head with a projecting lower jaw, and a forked tail. Their preferred habitat is gravelly sand on the seabed, allowing them to bury into it to avoid predators. They are territorial, but from March to September they move around in large shoals to feed during the day. Their abundance has made them attractive as a fishery, and until the early 2000s over one million tonnes were landed each year. The sandeel fishery is not used for human consumption, but is an industrial fishery, for livestock or aquaculture feed and as use as fertiliser.

### ACTION

The sandeel is a 'cornerstone species' of the marine environment. It is a vital food supply for seabirds and larger fish, and so fluctuating population levels have repercussions throughout the marine ecosystem. Scotland is internationally important for seabirds, hosting one third of EU breeding populations. Seabirds such as puffins and kittiwakes rely on sandeels to feed their chicks. Concern over declines in seabirds thankfully resulted in the closure of the Wee Bankie and Shetland sandeel fisheries, and other measures within the EU. Unfortunately sandeels, and seabirds, are in continued decline.



Sandeel and whiting - RSPB Images

Climate change is having drastic impacts on our marine environment, and scientific research has shown that warming seas affect the abundance of plankton, on which sandeels feed. In the NE Atlantic, there has been a 70% reduction in the biomass of zooplankton<sup>1</sup>. In addition, sandeels found off the Forth or Forth and Shetland are slower growing than those in the main fished areas, and may not spawn for the first time until age three, making their populations more sensitive<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, it is vital that we manage our marine environment in a sustainable way, using marine spatial planning to guide development, and that Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are introduced in order to provide some resilience for our marine species as the climate changes. It is also

important that the National Marine Plan and the siting of developments including offshore renewables take into account sensitive areas for sandeels, fisheries and seabirds. Current Scottish Government proposals are being consulted upon<sup>2</sup>.

### FURTHER READING

RSPB Scotland [briefing](#)<sup>1</sup> on seabirds, development, and marine climate change impacts.

Scottish Government [press release](#) and Marine [consultation](#)<sup>2</sup> which closes on 13 November.

Scottish Government [webpage](#) on sandeels<sup>3</sup>.

### MSP SPECIES CHAMPION



**Dave Thompson MSP**

**Member for:** Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch

**Region:** Highlands and Islands

**Party:** Scottish National Party



**RSPB Scotland, 2 Lochside View, Edinburgh Park,  
Edinburgh EH12 9DH**

**0131-317-4100** [www.rspb.org.uk/scotland](http://www.rspb.org.uk/scotland)