



Introduction – Why Do We Need Ocean Recovery?

Scotland's seas are globally important for seabirds, basking sharks, grey seals, whales, dolphins, coldwater coral reefs, flamework beds, maerl beds and many other species and habitats. However, despite some welcome progress in establishing new Marine Protected Areas and a National Marine Plan, Scotland's Marine Assessment 2020 revealed continued declines in species populations and the ongoing poor status of much of the seabed.

Our seas provide a range of ecosystem services, including food provision, protection from storms, nutrient cycling and mitigation of climate change impacts, but ongoing destruction of marine habitats and ecosystems impair their ability to provide these life-sustaining benefits. We are locked into a negative feedback loop of increasing human pressure reducing the ocean's ability to help fight climate change, exacerbating the intertwined climate and nature crises. Urgent, transformative change in how we use, manage, connect to and protect our marine environment is urgently needed to deliver ocean recovery. We urgently need to set our seas on a path for recovery if we are to safeguard our future.

In our [Ocean Recovery Plan](#), the Save Scottish Seas Coalition has charted a course to ocean recovery by 2030.

1. We need legally-binding targets for ocean recovery to safeguard our future

Seas and coasts are one of Scotland's greatest assets, yet under pressure like never before. All UK administrations failed to achieve 11 of 15 Good Environmental Status (GES) indicators, to halt biodiversity loss in the ocean and to ensure fisheries were managed sustainably by 2020. Current legal drivers are too weak and therefore ambitious targets for the recovery of nature at sea must be enshrined in law.

Since 62% of domestic UK ocean is the devolved responsibility of the Scottish Government, there is a unique opportunity to set world-leading targets and pave the way for a brighter future for Scotland's seas. Scottish Environment LINK is calling on **legally binding nature recovery targets** across land and sea to:

- increase wildlife populations and their distribution.
- end the threat of species going extinct and
- increase the extent and quality of Scotland's habitats above and below the waves.

2. Scotland's Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) Network must be strengthened

Although 37% of Scotland's waters are designated within MPAs, most of the network awaits legal protection from the most damaging activities. For example, the MPA network protects less than 1% of the inshore seabed over which trawling has historically taken place. We must transform the network from simply protecting remnant pockets of less damaged or undisturbed seabed habitat, to ensuring MPAs can actively contribute to marine ecosystem recovery.



We are calling for at least **30% of Scotland's seas to be highly protected from damaging and highly extractive activities, with at least a third of that (10% Scotland's Seas) to be fully protected**¹. The ecological, social and economic benefits of this approach would be enormous, ensuring long-term ocean resilience and allowing nature and people to thrive. The network must be **well-managed, monitored and governed, and LINK is calling for an independent MPA Commission to help transform the network.**

3. We must reform fisheries to increase resilience in the face of the nature and climate emergency

Unsustainable fishing activities that contribute to stock depletion and continued ecosystem damage also undermine the resilience of coastal communities and threaten the long-term viability of coastal livelihoods. Unfortunately, the UK has failed to reach the Aichi Biodiversity Target 6 for all stocks to be fished at sustainable levels by 2020, with 67% of assessed stocks of interest fished at or below sustainable levels.

LINK members are therefore urgently calling for new policies and, where necessary, legislation to support a just transition to a modern, climate and nature positive fishing industry. The new powers in the Fisheries Act 2020, and new policies and legislation arising from Scotland's Future Fisheries Management strategy, must be used to:

- Deliver **binding targets to recover all fish stocks to healthy levels and eliminate bycatch and entanglement of non-target species**
- **Introduce Remote Electronic Monitoring** to improve data collection and **help end Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing**
- **Improve inshore fisheries governance** and transition to a new spatial management regime, including a **presumption against trawling and dredging in a significant part of inshore waters**
- Introduce a new vessel licensing system that **preferentially allocates fishing opportunities to those with proven lower environment impact.**
- Set clear, **ambitious annual targets to reduce sensitive species** bycatch every year until it is stopped.

4. We need environmentally responsible aquaculture practices

Environmentally responsible aquaculture practices must be achieved through a reformed regulatory system that is fully resourced and is robust, transparent, enforceable, and enforced.

The aquaculture industry plays an increasingly important role in Scotland's coastal communities, through job creation, and benefits from Scottish Government support to double its value by 2030.

The proposed growth targets, in particular those for Atlantic salmon, have raised concerns over the potential additional impacts this will have on the marine environment. Most notably, the release of waste material, medicines and treatments into the surrounding water; interactions with wild salmonid

¹ Fully and highly protected are classified by the IUCN as follows:

- Fully protected: no extractive or destructive activities are allowed, and all impacts are minimized;
- Highly protected: only light extractive activities are allowed, and other impacts are minimized to the extent possible.



populations relating to sea lice, disease and escapes; disturbance to marine mammals caused by acoustic deterrents² (seal scarers); and the sourcing of cleaner fish to control sea lice.

In 2018, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee concluded that the “*status quo* is not an option” in terms of regulation and enforcement. Although there are movements towards reform and improvement of the regulatory system, changes have been too slow and focused on monitoring, reporting, and providing guidance for new farms. **Little has been done to address the impacts of existing salmon farms. This needs addressed with the utmost urgency and must be prioritised over further growth.**

To achieve responsible growth of Scotland’s salmon aquaculture industry, it is essential to ensure that the regulatory system, along with spatial management, ensures **new farms are appropriately located and avoid sensitive or ecologically important areas. Additionally, a review of existing farms is required to identify poorly located farms, with the aim of relocating or closing them.**

5. The Scottish Government must increase investment in marine conservation

As 2021 starts, the Scottish Government has a unique opportunity to lead the world and set international gold-standards for marine conservation, developing strong positions for the Conference of the Parties (COP) 15 intercessional on biodiversity, championing an ambitious post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and COP 26 on climate change, championing the importance of ocean recovery in helping tackle the climate emergency.

However, progressive policy alone will not solve the climate and nature emergencies. Significant investment is vital to give Scottish authorities the capacity to enforce compliance and ensure ocean recovery. To match the scale of the nature and climate emergencies, LINK is therefore calling for the Scottish Government to:

- **Increase the public budget for marine conservation to ensure recovery**, including long-term marine monitoring programmes and effective MPA management plans,
- **Complete and resource Regional Marine Plans** that drive ocean recovery and restoration
- Develop **innovative finance models and scaled up investment to fund ocean restoration**
- Utilise **robust enforcement** such as fines for environmental damage to encourage best practice.

This briefing is supported by the following organisations:

Fidra
Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust
Marine Conservation Society
National Trust for Scotland
RSPB Scotland
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Whale & Dolphin Conservation
WWF Scotland

For more information contact:

Vhairi Tollan

² For more information on ADDs: [LINK statement](#) and recent blog: [Protecting marine mammals around fish farm](#)



LINK Advocacy Manager

vhairi@scotlink.org

LINK is a Scottish Charity (SC000296) and a Scottish Company Limited by guarantee (SC250899), core funded by Membership Subscriptions and by grants from NatureScot, Scottish Government and Charitable Trusts.

Registered Headquarters: 13 Marshall Place, Perth, PH2 8AH

Advocacy Office: Dolphin House, 4 Hunter Square, Edinburgh, EH1 1QW