



Saving the Flapper Skate in Scottish Seas

Summary

Once widespread across the northern North Sea, flapper skate are critically endangered on the IUCN Red List, requiring urgent action to ensure population recovery.

We support permanent designation of Red Rocks and Longay MPA to provide much-needed protection for this egg-laying site, but doing so in the absence of a wider nature friendly framework of marine and fisheries management may not be enough to allow the flapper skate population to recover. We therefore recommend the following:

- An **ecosystem-based approach to the management of all activities**, taking cumulative impacts inside and outside MPAs fully into account
- **Nature-friendly fisheries management** throughout Scotland's seas
- A **strategy for the recovery of all shark, skate and ray species** in Scotland's waters.
- More research and monitoring to **better understand cumulative impacts** on flapper skate populations and identify future sites
- **Integration** between the Future Fisheries Management strategy, National and Regional Marine Plans, Blue Economy Action Plan and Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to recover nature at sea.
- Setting the **conservation objective for this site to "recover"**

Background

International commitments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, OSPAR Convention and UN Sustainable Development Goals and national commitments, including the UK Marine Strategy, Fisheries Act 2020, Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 and Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 require nature at sea to be protected and enhanced.

The UN has recognised there is an ocean emergency. Tackling this in Scotland requires completing and strengthening the Marine Protected Area (MPA) network; properly protecting the most vulnerable marine species such as flapper skate across their whole range and ensuring wider seas measures such as marine planning and fisheries management have ocean recovery at their core.

Scottish Environment LINK members therefore welcome commitments in the Bute House Agreement to complete fisheries management measures for the existing MPA network and to designate at least 10% of Scotland's seas as Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs). Best available science and the precautionary principle must underpin identification, designation and management of all Scottish MPAs, including HPMAs.



Flapper Skate

Initially identified as “common skate”, two species known as flapper skate (*Dipturus intermedius*) and common blue skate have now been distinguished. Once widespread across the northern North Sea ¹, overexploitation and habitat degradation led to a sharp flapper skate population decline. Flapper skate are now “critically endangered” on the IUCN Red List² and are a Priority Marine Feature (PMF) in Scotland.

Red Rocks and Longay proposed MPA³

The [Red Rocks and Longay urgent MPA](#) was designated in March 2021, following the discovery of an important flapper skate egg-laying habitat⁴, the first of this scale to be identified in Scotland. We are pleased the MPA will be made permanent on 9th February 2023, providing much-needed protection for a vulnerable life-history stage and complementing the Loch Sunart to Sound of Jura MPA which protects principally adult skate.

However, the proposed objective to “conserve” flapper skate is based only on the feature (flapper skate eggs and quaternary of Scotland) identified within the site and does not acknowledge the wider context that:

- i. flapper skate populations in the North East Atlantic are Critically Endangered (IUCN Red List);
- ii. this being the largest and only significant flapper skate egg-laying area known in Scottish seas, the evidence to support the notion that this recorded number of eggs represents a breeding ground in “favourable” condition is limited.

In the context of an ocean emergency, a conservation objective of “recover” would be more appropriate. Furthermore, despite the clear importance of Red Rocks and Longay, protecting this site in isolation from other life stages (e.g. neonates, juveniles or mature females) will not suffice to allow flapper skate populations to recover.

To ensure the recovery of Flapper skate population in Scotland’s seas, the following actions are needed:

An ecosystem-based approach to management

Tackling the ocean emergency, in keeping with Scotland’s marine nature conservation strategy, requires: i. a robust network of Marine Protected Areas and other effective area-based conservation measure; ii. ecosystem-based marine planning and fisheries management with the recovery of nature at core and; iii. species-specific strategies for the most vulnerable species, including flapper skate, wherever they are found.

Both of Scotland’s flapper skate MPAs must be protected and enforced and any future sites for other life-history stages that are discovered must be protected. Across all Scotland’s sea area, marine

¹ Nature Scot – Flapper Skate Scottish MPAs and fisheries https://consult.gov.scot/marine-conservation/red-rocks-longay-marine-protected-area/supporting_documents/MPA%20Fisheries%20Guidance%20Note%20%20Flapper%20Skate.pdf

² Ellis, J. R., McCully-Philipps, S. R., Sims, D., Walls, R.H.L., Cheok, J., Derrick, D. & Dulvy, N.K. 2021. *Dipturus intermedius*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2021. E.T18903491A68783461. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2021-2.RLTS.T18903491A68786461.en>. Accessed on 25 April 2022

³ See Scottish Environment LINK full response to the Red Rocks and Longay consultation

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/consultation-paper/2022/02/proposal-designate-red-rocks-longay-marine-protected-area/documents/consultation-proposal-designate-red-rocks-longay-marine-protected-area/consultation-proposal-designate-red-rocks-longay-marine-protected-area/govscot%3Adocument/consultation-proposal-designate-red-rocks-longay-marine-protected-area.pdf>



planning and fisheries management regimes must be transformed to put the recovery of nature at their very core (nature and climate friendly fishing and management), which ensures the protection and recovery of all Priority Marine Features (PMFs), such as flapper skate, and their vulnerable life-history stages, and ecological connectivity between those stages. A new recovery strategy for flapper skate, and all sharks, skates and rays, should be developed to help improve the population status of these vulnerable species.

Currently, fisheries are largely managed by stock and in isolation from other conservation measures, such as fisheries restrictions within MPAs. The cumulative displacement of activities, such as fishing effort, can lead to increasing pressure on marine ecosystems outside MPAs, potentially reducing ecosystem service benefits, including tourism, fishing opportunities and human health/wellbeing.

Inshore fisheries management and planning must therefore be transformed to ensure that species and habitats can recover, ecosystems can function, more environmentally friendly fishing activities (e.g. lower impact gear) are given preferential access to fishing grounds and measures are delivered holistically recognising the interaction and overlap between MPAs and wider seas.

Improve Research and Monitoring

Very little is known about the behaviour of juvenile and adult flapper skate. Research is needed to better understand the movement of adult flapper skate and the movement and site-preference of juvenile flapper skate. In Orkney, flapper skate have been observed to lay egg cases on rough ground in close proximity to sediments, such as a boulder field skerry over sand.⁵ This provides at least one area important to consider for future flapper skate conservation action.

More monitoring is also essential to better understand the cumulative impacts of marine activities on flapper skate populations at all life-stages. To ensure the Red Rocks and Longay MPA meets its conservation objectives, adequate management, effective compliance measures and regular monitoring are essential.

Scottish Environment LINK recommends research and monitoring to improve scientific evidence of the short, medium and long-term impact of static and mobile fishing gear on PMFs, including flapper skate, and prospects for their recovery.

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

For more information contact:

Calum Duncan Convener of the **Marine** LINK Group,
calum.duncan@mcsuk.org

Or

Fanny Royanez, Marine policy officer
fanny@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: 5 Atholl Place, Perth, PH1 5NE
Advocacy Office: Dolphin House, 4 Hunter Square, Edinburgh, EH1 1QW

⁵ <https://www.orkneyskatetrust.co.uk/flapper-skate/>