



What are “Highly Protected Marine Areas” (HPMAs)?

Highly Protected Marine Areas are areas of the sea that are placed under strict protection to support ecosystem recovery and protect against climate change.

The Scottish Government has committed to giving a small proportion - just 10% - of our seas this strict protection. This is in line with international recommendations for nature recovery and resilience and follows the EU’s own 10% target for strict protection.

HPMAs are well-established globally and proven to have ecological benefits, which in turn can benefit fishers. The success of the no-take zone of Carry-le-Rouet in the French Mediterranean, created in 1983, led to the fishing industry playing a key role in the establishment of a second HPMA nearby, the reserve of La Couronne.

Why do we need HPMAs in Scottish seas?

We are facing a twin nature and climate crisis, and nature's recovery must be central to government priorities and policies. In their latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [sixth assessment report](#), warned that the impact of climate change was increasingly irreversible and called for every country and sector to take drastic action on all fronts to tackle the climate crisis. Last year, the UN Secretary General declared an “Ocean Emergency” and called for collective and urgent action to restore marine life.

In Scotland, the health of our seas is vital for communities who rely on marine activities like fishing and wildlife tourism. However, evidence shows a continuing decline of marine ecosystems and some of our living seabed habitats, such as seagrass, have suffered from catastrophic decline. UK administrations have collectively failed to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) for 11 out of 15 indicators under the UK Marine Strategy, with seabird populations in particular continuing to decline.

Scotland’s Marine Assessment 2020 identified climate change, seabed-contacting and open water towed fishing activities as the key pressures facing marine biodiversity.

By providing core zones for ecosystem recovery, alongside other measures for spatial protection, HPMAs are a key tool to help us address the climate and nature crises, allowing Scotland’s marine ecosystem to recover and be more resilient to climate change. Thriving seas, with healthy fish populations and resilient habitats depend on Scotland having an effective planning system at sea that protects key areas, including HPMAs, so that Scotland’s seas support species, habitats and communities.

How do HPMAs work?

HPMAs provide strong levels of protection to the marine environment by prohibiting all impacting or damaging activities in a small proportion of designated sites. Activities that remove or damage natural resources or that dump materials and pollutants in the sea are banned. The specific rules for HPMAs will be determined by the Scottish Government.



The recently published [MPA Guide](#) provides a helpful summary of what activities are or are not compatible with fully and highly protected areas.

What are the benefits of HPMA's?

The ecological effects of no take zones have been widely documented globally. A 2019 study showed that HPMA's can provide greater benefits than other types of Marine Protected Areas.

HPMA's provide dedicated havens for vulnerable and depleted marine life to recover. Allowing fish, shellfish and other species to flourish in a fully protected area also benefits the many people and activities which rely upon healthy seas. The benefits from these areas overflow into surrounding waters, increasing the abundance and resilience of sea life, benefitting low impact fishing.

Analysis of the 24 no-take zones in the Mediterranean Sea demonstrated that high levels of protection have significant ecological benefits for fish biomass and equally positive effects for fisheries' target species. The total fish biomass and density were on average twice greater in fully protected areas than outside.

The community-led no take zone in Lamlash Bay off the Isle of Arran is Scotland's only strictly protected area equivalent to a HPMA (as proposed in the current consultation) and demonstrates the potential for success on a small scale. As well as ecological improvement over the last 10+ years, benefits to the local community and economy have been evidenced as a result of the no take zone.

Where will HPMA's be placed?

The Scottish Government is responsible for designating HPMA sites. Proposals will be informed and assessed by Scottish Government conservation advisors, NatureScot and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, who will suggest whether they meet the criteria to be designated as HPMA's. Proposals from organisations and members of civil society will also be invited ('third party proposals'), which will be assessed in the same way.

It is our view as environmental NGOs that coastal, island and fishing communities should be closely involved in the process of designation as equal partners. An effective HPMA network should be spread across both inshore and offshore waters, in areas that have been degraded or that have the potential to recover to a more natural state and should be designed to support both ecological and social sustainability.

Can HPMA's exist alongside a viable fishing industry?

Yes - HPMA's can in fact support a sustainable fishing industry. By having designated ocean recovery zones, fish stocks will increase with spill over effects in neighbouring areas. The example of French fishermen working towards additional HPMA's after experiencing the benefits of no-take zones shows that this approach can bring significant benefits to industry itself.

Where else has HPMA's?



HPMAs are a key tool to enable the protection and recovery of marine ecosystems. Globally, the number and coverage of HPMAs are increasing. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 sets a target of 'strict protection' of 10% of the EU's seas by 2030.

Various HPMAs can be found worldwide, and research demonstrates their benefits on marine life within and outside their boundaries. The MPA guide helpfully provides a map of 226 MPAs, 126 of which are under high levels of protection.

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.

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