

The Resilience of Scotland's fishing industry starts with healthy seas

Key points:

- Restoring Scotland's marine ecosystems goes hand in hand with the sustainability and resilience of the fishing industry.
- Marine conservation policy implemented well can improve sustainable opportunities for fisheries.
- It is crucial for the Scottish Government to prioritise ecological recovery and a just transition for Scottish fishing sectors to ensure sustainable fish stocks and livelihoods for future generations.

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Introduction

The health of Scotland's seas has rapidly deteriorated over the past decades, and continues to decline. The [Marine Strategy Part One: UK Updated Assessment and Good Environmental Status \(2025\)](#), shows that UK administrations failed to achieve Good Environmental status by 2020, with "*the overall, species-composition and size-structure of demersal fish communities deteriorating in the Greater North Sea and Celtic Seas regions*". The decline of Scotland's traditional coastal fishing fleet stems not from environmental regulation, but from a lack of fish, as key stocks, [such as Atlantic cod \(*Gadus morhua*\)](#), or [brown crab \(*Cancer pagurus*\)](#), are showing concerning population declines.

Ensuring the long-term prosperity of Scotland's fishing sector requires safeguarding and enhancing the very resources on which it depends. The future of Scotland's fisheries is inseparable from the health of the marine environment: thriving ecosystems support marine wildlife and sustain fish stocks vital to coastal communities. Restoring Scotland's marine ecosystems goes hand in hand with the sustainability and resilience of the fishing industry.

A just transition to ensure the long-term sustainability of Scotland's fishing industry

Scotland's coastal communities and fishing industries are facing increasing pressure due to climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, competition for marine space, and evolving management measures. [Scotland's Marine Assessment \(2020\)](#) highlights "Pressures associated with bottom-contacting and pelagic fishing continue to be the most geographically widespread, direct pressures across the majority of Scottish Marine Regions and Offshore Marine Regions" with some biogenic seabed habitats having declined in extent by [90% or more in some areas](#).

For many years, the [Scottish Government has been promising to deliver a step change in fisheries management to facilitate environmental improvement](#), a sustainable fishing industry and thriving coastal communities. However, significant progress towards this goal has yet to be proven. Balancing the need for

space for nature, food provision and a just transition to net zero must be addressed through a fair, equitable and transparent approach to marine planning.

Key actions:

1. **Operating a shift towards an ecosystem-based approach to management:** Fully integrate fishing into marine spatial planning (NMP2) to ensure all marine activities are considered. Without accounting for every activity in spatial plans, their environmental impact and long-term sustainability cannot be properly addressed, making a just transition unachievable. Coordinated planning helps avoid conflicts between different uses of the sea, reduces gear conflicts, and supports the sustainable, evidence-based allocation of space for both nature and fishing.
2. **Supporting small-scale and low-impact fisheries:** By prioritising preferential access to inshore fishing grounds for these fleets through improved quota allocation, spatial protections, and access to lower-impact fishing areas can [help sustain traditional fishing livelihoods](#) while reducing pressure from more damaging fishing methods
3. **Fully documented fisheries:** The roll-out of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras across the fleet is critical for ensuring compliance with fisheries management rules, monitoring bycatch of sensitive species such as cetaceans, and providing robust data to inform adaptive management. While [some sectors, including scallop dredging and pelagic fleets, have REM in place](#), much of the inshore and creel fleets remain unmonitored. This gap limits the effectiveness of existing measures, enforcement, and understanding of environmental impacts. A full rollout would strengthen transparency, governance, and the protection of Scotland's marine wildlife.
4. **Prioritise consultation and adoption of remaining fisheries management measures in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and for Priority Marine Features (PMFs) outside MPAs.** As we are now awaiting a consultation on inshore MPAs and PMFs outside MPAs, it is vital to implement restrictions on fishing gears based on scientific evidence, precaution where evidence isn't clear, and focusing on where species are most at risk, such as foraging areas, breeding areas and seasonal aggregations.
5. **Mitigate bycatch and entanglement in inshore fisheries:** Static gears such as creels and gillnets can entangle cetaceans, basking sharks, and other megafauna. [Proven solutions](#), such as sinking lines, should be rolled out with support for fishers through incentives or gear replacement. This protects wildlife while maintaining viable livelihoods.
6. **Strengthen sustainable inshore stock management:** Overfishing continues to threaten key species such as scallops, crab, and lobster. Robust Fisheries Management Plans, aligned with marine spatial planning and ecosystem-based management principles, are essential to ensure long-term stock resilience and the prosperity of coastal communities
7. Decentralisation of fisheries and conservation management to regional level, to allow for more inclusive and locally appropriate decision-making.



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For more information contact:

Calum Duncan Convenor of LINK Marine Group

Or

Fanny Royanez, Policy and Engagement Officer (fanny@scotlink.org)



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