



Protecting Our Seas: Urgent Steps for the next Scottish Government

Scottish Environment LINK members urge Scottish political parties to commit in their 2026 manifestoes to launching the long-delayed public consultation on fisheries management measures within inshore Marine Protected Areas and for the protection of Priority Marine Features (PMFs) outside MPAs **within the first 100 days of Session 7** of the Scottish Parliament.

February 2026

This briefing builds on Scottish Environment LINK's [2026 Scottish Parliament Manifesto](#) ask to: "...deliver an effective marine protected areas network based on ecosystem health, including identifying important areas of blue carbon for protection and enhancement inside and outside the MPA network" in light of further delays to the process to establish fisheries management measures in inshore MPAs announced by the Scottish Government in December 2025.

Background - why MPAs matter

Scotland has over 230 MPAs designated to protect seabed habitats (e.g. maerl beds, seagrass meadows, coldwater coral reefs), commercially important fish species, seabirds, marine mammals and sharks. However, designation alone does not provide protection to these species and habitats. Human activities that pose a risk to their protection and recovery must be managed. This includes activities such as fishing with certain types of fishing gear, which can damage seabed habitat or entangle large animals unintentionally.

The MPA network is one critical pillar, alongside species-specific action and wider seas measures such as marine planning, for protecting and recovering the marine environment, supporting climate resilience and sustaining coastal livelihoods that depend on a healthy marine environment. Well-managed MPAs are scientifically proven to safeguard biodiversity and support sustainable economic opportunities. They can protect nursery grounds for fish and shellfish stocks, restore degraded seabed habitats, support healthier more resilient ecosystems, improve long-term sustainability of fisheries and enhance long-term carbon stores in seabed sediments. Well managed MPAs can help support fishing into the future, ensuring habitats and important areas for commercial species can recover and thrive.

Climate change is already affecting Scotland's seas through warming waters, ocean acidification, shifting species distributions and increasing extreme weather events. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [AR6 report](#) confirms with high confidence that the North Atlantic has warmed, which has led to increased frequency of marine heatwaves affective plankton communities and stress on cold-water species such as Atlantic cod. Healthy marine ecosystems are more resilient to the effects of climate change and offer opportunities to maximise nature-based solutions such as the protection of coastal habitats to support coastal defence and reduce flooding.

The problem - delayed implementation and missed goals

Effective fisheries management measures for many MPAs remain unimplemented years after site designation. Delays to implementing these measures contribute to continued degradation of sensitive marine habitats, ongoing biodiversity loss, increased vulnerability to climate change and missed opportunities for sustainable coastal economies. Despite multiple commitments - both legal obligations and domestic policy commitments - dating back over several parliamentary sessions, fisheries management measures for many MPAs have not been delivered.

Delays to policy implementation have impacts on both nature and people. Repeated delays to the process results in continued habitat and species damage in protected sites where fisheries activities remain unrestricted, for example, two-thirds of seabird populations breeding in Scotland have [declined over the last 20 years](#). As well as delays causing ongoing uncertainty for marine industries, such as fishers, repeated missed commitments erodes trust among stakeholders and coastal communities and confidence in the process is lost.

Scotland's coastal communities and economies depend on healthy seas. Fish and shellfish populations are not only commercially important but they are also part of the natural marine food web and many species are classed as Priority Marine Features. Healthy seas support food production (sustainable fisheries and aquaculture), tourism, well-being and recreation and heritage. Uncertainty and delay around MPA management measures creates investment risk (e.g. fishers wishing to invest in their vessel technology or capacity), business planning difficulties and community frustration.

The need for urgent action

Environmental change takes time and continued postponement makes it virtually impossible for MPAs to contribute fully to Scotland's biodiversity and climate targets in 2030. After more than a decade of delay, it is critical to progress the consultation as soon as possible.

Scientific evidence shows we are at a turning point for nature and climate. Marine ecosystems are under increasing pressure with biodiversity loss accelerating, not slowing, and the resilience of fish stocks, seabirds and coastal habitats is weakening. MPAs are designed to help address these challenges, but only if they are properly managed.

People working on the water need certainty, stability and trust in the decision-making process, as well as a fundamentally healthy environment. Clear timelines and transparent consultation are essential to building trust and ensuring that policies reflect diverse values and societal needs.

The next Scottish Parliament represents a critical opportunity to reset the process. A firm commitment to support a consultation within the first 100 days of Session 7 would signal political leadership, prevent further slippage against environmental targets, provide long-overdue clarity for coastal communities and keep Scotland credible on nature and climate action. Scotland cannot afford to lose another



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parliamentary session to delay. The decisions taken in the next few years will shape the health of our seas and the future of coastal livelihoods for the next generation.

Suggested manifesto wording

“Within the first 100 days of the next Scottish Parliament, we will launch a public consultation on fisheries management measures for inshore Marine Protected Areas and Priority Marine Features, ensuring Scotland’s seas are protected, productive and resilient for future generations.”



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.

This briefing has been compiled on behalf of LINK's Marine Group and is supported by: Marine Conservation Society, National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Seabird Centre, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Whale and Dolphin Conservation and Young Sea Changers Scotland.

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Image: Paul Naylor

