



### Policy headlines

- An **ecologically coherent network with effective management** of MPAs to ensure protection, restoration and recovery of vulnerable and degraded marine species and habitats using a holistic approach particularly in relation to fisheries management measures.
- **Early and meaningful involvement with local communities** on any new proposals.
- **Provisions for MPA management within the new National Marine Plan (NMP2)** with joined up approaches in regard to other environmental policies both on land and at sea.
- **Improved public awareness** of the rich and varied marine wildlife of Scotland, particularly for our offshore waters from which people can often feel more disconnected.
- A commitment to **progress strict levels of protection for at least 10% of Scotland's seas in line with the IUCN categories<sup>9</sup>** of strict nature reserves (category Ia), wilderness areas (category Ib), or national parks (category II) with location and community collaboration being the biggest considerations.
- Put in place a **long-term data collection plan** which includes baseline data to be collected prior to management measures being implemented, in order to demonstrate the benefits of putting these protections in place.
- Develop **long-term scientific monitoring programmes** to measure progress and inform adaptive management.
- **Properly resourced enforcement** of management measures.

### Definitions

[Marine Spatial Planning](#) - Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is a public process of analyzing and allocating the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives that have been specified through a political process. MSP is not an end in itself but a practical way to create and establish a more rational use of marine space and the interactions among its uses, to balance demands for development with the need to protect the environment, and to deliver social and economic outcomes in an open and planned way.

[Sustainable development](#) - meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

## Marine Protected Areas

October 2024

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### Scope

Healthy marine ecosystems can bring enormous benefits to Scotland's society and economy, such as food and recreation, yet much of our seas are degraded and vulnerable<sup>1</sup>. The Scottish Wildlife Trust's Strategy 2030 vision<sup>2</sup> is a network of healthy, resilient ecosystems on land and sea that are supporting both people and wildlife.

Marine Protected Areas<sup>3</sup> (MPAs) are sites at sea in which human activity is restricted to varying degrees. They are the cornerstones of international efforts to conserve marine biodiversity and associated ecosystem services and cultural values, as well as mitigating the effects of climate change. In Scotland, it is the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009) that provides power to Scottish Ministers to designate MPAs.

The majority of MPAs in Scotland are designated for Nature Conservation for vulnerable species and habitats, from the famous bottlenose dolphins of the Moray Firth to the world's largest area of serpulid reef in Loch Creran. There are also MPAs designated for Demonstration and Research, Historic Importance and Other Area Based Measures which protect specific species such as sand eels. The current network covers 37% of Scotland's seas.

Designating an area as an MPA does not necessarily mean that it is protected from all activities. A report published in 2023 by Professor James Harrison<sup>4</sup> at the University of Edinburgh looked at the effectiveness of the current MPA network in Scotland. The analysis found that there are "significant gaps in management measures" and that none of Scotland's MPAs offer a high level of protection to "the site as a whole".

In Scotland, management measures for the whole MPA network were due to be completed in 2016, however this deadline was missed, along with another in 2020. As of 2024, real protection for the MPA network is now eight years late. With every delay, our coasts and seas are falling further behind the goals the Scottish Government has set for healthy, clean, productive, sustainable seas. This is in addition to international commitments such as the target to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (30x30) which was agreed at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at COP15. This is also a goal in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and appears in the Scottish Government 2020 Statement of Intent on Biodiversity. It was agreed at COP15 that countries would work towards this goal by increasing the number of protected areas, and crucially this also includes effective management measures. A global target for MPAs to be "effectively conserved and managed" as well as "equitably governed" was also set in December 2022 within the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

It is vitally important that management measures are brought in swiftly to avoid our MPAs becoming "paper parks" and protected in name only. The Harrison report on MPA effectiveness recommends robust enforcement and ongoing monitoring to improve available data for decision making. It is also imperative that we have ongoing collaboration between industries as well as innovative ways of engaging with communities to ensure we hear from a diverse range of voices.

Management measures are particularly important in relation to the most damaging forms of fishing, such as bottom trawling. A report published in 2023 on the socio-economic impact of a bottom trawling ban in the UK<sup>5</sup> found that bottom trawling is estimated to occur in 98% of the UK's offshore MPAs, thereby undermining their protected status. The report used models to predict how a ban on bottom trawling could increase the value of marine ecosystem services over two decades. The model predicted, with consideration to the costs of enforcing a ban across all UK offshore MPAs, that the net gain over 20 years would be an additional £2.57 billion, demonstrating that allowing ecosystems to recover can benefit our economy as well as our marine species and habitats. The report highlighted a

## Marine Protected Areas

October 2024

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need to move away from short-term thinking and instead consider the long-term benefits that a healthy, thriving marine environment provides.

In 2021, the Scottish Government published the Bute House Agreement, a power sharing agreement between the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Green Party, which included a commitment to “add to the existing MPA network by designating a world-leading suite of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) covering at least 10% of our seas”. Following a public consultation in June 2023 it was announced that “the proposal, as consulted on, would not be taken forward” based on an initial analysis of consultation responses and feedback from stakeholders. In the statement, the Cabinet Secretary committed to “developing a new pathway and timetable for enhancing marine protection” with renewed focus on community-led conservation initiatives and further engagement with local communities on taking forward enhanced marine protection in Scotland.

In response to the consultation<sup>6</sup>, the Trust highlighted concerns that a focus on HPMAs, whilst welcome, should not be a distraction to fully protecting the existing MPA network. The Trust strongly supports strengthening the existing MPA network to allow for greater connectivity between existing sites and protections for mobile species or those with seasonal variations in habitat as well as areas that provide supporting functions and processes. In terms of HPMAs, it is important that enhanced protections should be carefully sited for the greatest benefit and be developed with early collaboration with communities.

In April 2024, the Scottish Government ended the Bute House Agreement. A new Programme for Government was then announced in September 2024 setting out key actions for 2024 to 2025. One of the four main priority areas was tackling the climate emergency (alongside eradicating child poverty, growing the economy and improving public services). It is imperative that we have real action to address the twin climate and biodiversity crises, and that the government does not lose sight of the vital importance of nature as the basis for our entire economy and society.

The Scottish Marine Assessment<sup>1</sup> published in 2020 provided evidence of the poor condition of seabed habitats within Scottish waters, with the area of a range of important habitats such as maerl and seagrass beds having declined. We are also seeing a loss of seabirds at a rapid rate. The State of Nature report (2023)<sup>7</sup> highlighted the dramatic drop in seabird numbers in Scotland, falling on average 49% since 1986, which was before the extra pressures of avian flu and the marine heatwaves of 2023. While protection is important, we must also look at opportunities for restoration and recovery of marine habitats within the MPA network to turn the tide on biodiversity loss.

Scotland’s National Marine Plan is currently under review (the development process is known as NMP2) which provides an opportunity to provide stricter recommendations for MPA policy as a tool for managing our coasts and seas effectively for nature, the economy and society. Sustainable development is a vital component of marine planning, and we should be looking to improve the health of our seas not just for its intrinsic value, but also its value to coastal communities and the wider economy. The marine environment is already a very busy space and so consideration must be given to marine spatial planning to aid in identifying new sites whilst balancing the need for nature’s recovery, achieving Net Zero targets and improving our food security.

One of the key learnings from the Trust’s Oceans of Value Community Voice Method film<sup>8</sup> in Orkney is that there was a common feeling that it is important to have a healthy, thriving, sustainable marine environment. That is the base from which all those who rely on marine activities for their livelihoods are derived whether that’s fishing, tourism or recreation. The success of MPAs and other marine protection measures relies on the cooperation and stewardship of

## Marine Protected Areas

October 2024

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marine industries and coastal communities, with a clear message as to why protecting the marine environment is so vitally important in combating the twin nature and climate crises.

### References

1. [Scotland's Marine Assessment \(2020\)](#)
2. [Scottish Wildlife Trust Strategy 2030](#)
3. [Marine Protected Areas – Scottish Government](#)
4. [Ensuring the effectiveness of the Marine Protected Area Network in Scotland](#) - Professor James Harrison - University of Edinburgh - November 2023
5. [A socio-economic analysis of a bottom contact fishing ban in the UK](#) - Valuing the impact on ecosystem services within the UK's offshore benthic MPA network – Marine Conservation Society – July 2023
6. Scottish Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) - [Scottish Wildlife Trust Consultation Response](#) – April 2023
7. [State of Nature Report](#) - 2023
8. [Scottish Wildlife Trust Oceans of Value Project](#) – Community Voice Method
9. [Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories](#) – IUCN

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