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P-06-1181 Sea bottom trawling is killing our marine wildlife...Stop bulldozing our seas

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Petition title: Sea bottom trawling is killing our marine wildlife...Stop bulldozing our seas

Text of petition: It is shocking that more than 97% of our marine protected areas (MPA), created to safeguard ocean habitats, are being destroyed by being dredged and bottom trawled. Analysis of fishing vessel data found that bottom trawling, the most destructive type of fishing on sea-floor habitats, is happening in 71 out of 73 offshore MPA's around the UK.

We call on the Welsh Government to ban all forms of bottom trawling by both foreign and UK vessels in Welsh waters. We are in an ecological emergency and need action now.

If we do not take action now, we will have no chance of stopping the shocking loss of biodiversity or mitigate the impacts of climate change.

A recent report "Protecting the Global Ocean for Biodiversity, Food and Climate", is the first study to show the climate impact of bottom trawling globally. This widespread fishing practice involves dragging heavy metal nets along the seabed, effectively bulldozing all sea life before it!

New research has revealed that this system of fishing pumps out one gigaton of carbon every year. This carbon is released from the seabed sediment into the water, and can increase ocean acidification, as well as adversely affecting productivity and biodiversity. Marine sediments are the

largest pool of carbon storage in the world. In fact fishing boats that trawl the ocean floor release as much carbon dioxide as the entire aviation industry!

There can be no place for bottom trawling in a modern nature friendly Wales!

1. Background

Bottom trawling is a method of fishing that targets species living on the sea floor. It's a type of 'active fishing', whereby the gear follows the target species (as opposed to passive methods where gear remains in place and allows the species to come to it). This type of active fishing includes:

- *Beam trawlers* which target fish on the seabed by towing a net from either side of the boat;
- *Demersal trawlers* which fish along or just above the seafloor to catch demersal (bottom-dwelling) fish. A funnel-shaped net is towed behind one or two boats; and
- *Dredges*, which are rigid structures towed along the seabed by a boat. They are used to target shellfish species such as scallops and oysters.

Bottom-trawling activities can cause physical loss or disturbance of seabed habitats, including through abrasion and smothering.

The carbon sequestered by vegetated coastal and marine ecosystems, in particular seagrass, saltmarsh, mangrove and seaweed habitats, is referred to as 'blue carbon'. The vegetation in blue carbon habitats removes carbon dioxide (CO^2) from the atmosphere and surrounding seawater, then stores carbon within plants and underlying sediments.

A July 2020 report Estimating the Carbon Sink Potential of the Welsh Marine Environment, prepared on behalf of Natural Resources Wales (NRW), found that:

> ... a lot of carbon is already stored away in Welsh marine sediments, at least 113 Million tonnes (Mt) in the top 10 cm. This represents almost 170 % of the carbon held in Welsh forests.

Welsh seas contain carbon sequestering (long term storage) habitats such as seagrass, saltmarsh and kelp, which encompass more than 99km^2 of the Welsh Marine Protected Area (MPA) network.

MPA is a collective term for all forms of protected nature conservation sites in the marine environment. They are geographically defined and formally recognised through legal or other effective means, such as voluntary approaches. MPAs may be designated for a variety of reasons, including marine conservation and fisheries management.

There are a total of 139 MPAs in Wales covering 69% of the Welsh inshore waters (the mean high water mark to 12 nautical mile territorial seas limit) and 50% of all Welsh waters. All Welsh MPAs are multi-use sites. However, some activities may be managed or restricted to reduce the likelihood of an adverse impact on the wildlife and habitats for which the site has been designated.

For example Skomer, Wales' only Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ), has specific fishery byelaws and codes of conduct. These prohibit the use of mobile fishing gear (dredges and beam trawls) and the removal of the King Scallops species " by any means", which has been prohibited since July 1990, upon designation of the, then, Marine Nature Reserve. As a result the density of King Scallops has increased seven fold in the 16 year monitoring period.

In response to this petition, the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd, Lesley Griffiths MS ('the Minister') states that:

> ... where there is evidence to demonstrate potential harm to a feature, it is possible to manage impacts within sites using mechanisms such as Fishing Orders

The Minister highlights the *Scallop Fishing (Wales) (No 2) Order 2010/269* which restricts dredging of the King Scallop species in Pembrokeshire Marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) (which includes Skomer MCZ) and "a small area where the designated feature is absent" in Cardigan Bay SAC. The Minister says that "no other towed gears are known to be used".

NRW has produced indicative feature condition assessments for features in Wales' European Marine Sites (EMS), which include all marine SACs and Special Protected Areas (SPAs), types of MPAs. These assessments considered the conservation status of the features (species and habitats), and found that 45% of all designated features are in favourable condition, whilst 45% are in unfavourable condition.

In her response to this petition, the Minister draws attention to Wales' only wholly offshore MPA which has been designated for benthic habitats – the Croker Carbonate Slabs SAC, which is considered to be in favourable condition. She states that (emphasis added):

> No towed gears are being used in this site **which would harm the feature for which the site is designated**.

In October 2020 the Guardian reported that 97% of UK offshore MPAs were subject to bottom-trawling in 2019, including all of Wales' offshore MPAs. This analysis was undertaken by environmental NGO Oceana, using data from vessel tracking platform Global Fishing Watch. Further analysis by Oceana of the 2020 data found the same number of UK MPAs were being trawled, and that the number of hours spent fishing with bottom-towed gear in these areas had increased by 10% from 2019.

Protecting the Global Ocean for Biodiversity, Food and Climate was published in March 2021. It states that marine sediments are the "largest pool of organic carbon on the planet and a crucial reservoir for long-term storage" of organic carbon, however:

> ...disturbance of these carbon stores can re-mineralize sedimentary carbon to CO^2, which is likely to increase ocean acidification, reduce the buffering capacity of the ocean and potentially add to the build-up of atmospheric CO^2. Thus, protecting the carbon-rich seabed is a potentially important nature-based solution to climate change

It finds that:

> MPAs - especially highly protected areas in which extractive and destructive activities are banned - can be effective management tools to safeguard and restore ocean biodiversity and associated services complement conventional fisheries management and contribute to the mitigation of climate change by protecting marine carbon stocks

In response to this petition, the Minister states that "MPAs cannot currently be designated for a resource such as carbon potential".

A recent report by environmental NGOs WWF, RSPB and the Marine Conservation Society calls for a 'climate-smart' strategy for the fishing sector, including a recommendation to:

> Limit bottom towed fishing gear to protect and support the recovery of blue carbon within current MPAs and in key areas outside of MPAs.

2. Welsh Government action

The *Environment (Wales) Act 2016* requires the Welsh Government to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases in Wales by at least 80% for the year 2050 with a system of interim emissions targets and carbon budgets. The Welsh Government has since committed to a net-zero by 2050 emissions reduction target. In 2017, the Welsh Government published its Natural Resources Policy as part of the implementation of the *Environment (Wales) Act 2016*, it states that the Welsh Government has committed to (emphasis added):

> ...the development of tools to measure the benefits of integrated approaches to climate change (including ecosystem services, safeguarding biological diversity, **carbon sequestration**, and wider co-benefits that support increased resilience).

NRW is working in partnership with the Welsh Government on the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project. In response to a written question in 2017, the then Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs described the project as:

> ...a comprehensive approach to evaluating all commercial fishing activity in Welsh waters and its interaction with MPA features. Its purpose is to identify where there is a risk the interaction between fishing gear and a MPA feature could have a potential negative affect.

As part of this project, a principles and prioritisation report was published in 2016 and states that the impacts of fishing activities in EMS will be considered under *Article 6(2) of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC)*, which:

> ... requires Welsh Government to avoid the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species, as well as disturbances of the species for which the areas have been designated, in so far as such disturbance by fishing activities could be significant in relation to the objectives of the Habitats and Birds Directives. Article 6(2) of the Habitats Directive has an emphasis on preventative measures, it is broad in scope and it is applicable to the all activities within a SAC.

Assessments have been completed on 40 high-risk ('purple-rated') interactions. These assess possible impact pathways of five different gear types; beam trawl, beam trawl (shrimp), light otter trawl, multi-rig trawl and scallop (queen) dredge, and eight different site features.

A consultation is expected on the high risk aspects identified in the project. There has been no public consultation launched at the time of writing this briefing.

In September 2018, the Welsh Government published an MPA Network Management Framework for Wales 2018-2023, which sets out information on MPAs, how they are managed and by whom, and plans for improvement. It also publishes annual MPA network action plans which sit alongside the framework and detail the actions identified by the Wales MPA Management Steering Group as priorities to improve MPA management and condition.

In September 2019, the Welsh Government published the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy in partnership with NRW. The strategy provides an overview of the high level marine evidence priorities in Wales and a framework to meet those evidence challenges. It states (emphasis added):

> [...] the marine environment [provides] a wealth of benefits supporting the well-being of coastal communities and wider society. These include, but are not limited to: a range of habitats and species that make up the wider marine ecosystem and provide 'ecosystem services' such as **sequestering carbon**, recycling nutrients and mitigating coastal erosion [...].

In November 2019, the Welsh Government published its first Welsh National Marine Plan, which includes a commitment to 'improve the understanding and

enable action supporting climate change adaptation and mitigation'. Although the plan doesn't refer to blue carbon directly, it states (emphasis added):

> Welsh marine natural resources are important assets and Welsh seas support a diverse range of activities across many sectors which make an important contribution to the economy, including through direct tangible benefits like food, oil and building materials, as well as provision of less obvious services like **carbon sequestration** and climate regulation.

In her response to this petition, the Minister states that she recognises "the importance of carbon sequestration and storage within our marine environment" and that the:

> Welsh Government will be supporting further research into the stocks and fluxes of carbon in marine habitats.

3. Welsh Parliament action

In August 2017, the previous Senedd's Climate Change Environment and Rural Affairs Committee published its report, Turning the tide? Report of the inquiry into the Welsh Government's approach to Marine Protected Area management.

In June 2019, the same Committee undertook follow up work on MPA management in Wales, assessing the progress made by the Welsh Government in taking forward the recommendations in the Committee report, and in delivering the MPA Network Management Action Plan 2018-19.

In relation to the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities Project the Committee recommended that:

> The Welsh Government should explain why management has not yet been implemented as a result of the AWFA [Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities] assessments for high-risk activities, which were published in 2017. It should bring forward a consultation on management options for those activities as a matter of urgency

In response the Welsh Government said that the results of the assessments will:

> ... be used to inform the management proposals for high-risk mobile gear fishing activities. These proposals will form part of a public consultation which, depending on the impact of Brexit-related work,

> should begin in early 2020. I would like to convey to the Committee that I am committed to protecting designated features, in line with the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

In response to a written question in August 2020 regarding the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities Project, the then Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs said that they were "unable to provide a set timeline for consultation" due to the "twin challenges of EU Exit and Covid-19".