



Parliamentary Briefing: Opportunities and Challenges for Scotland's Fishing Sector in 2025

Key points:

- A healthy marine environment boosts fish populations, resilience to climate change, and long-term fisheries sustainability by supporting biodiversity and habitat restoration.
- "Spatial squeeze" and conflicting marine use can be addressed by integrating fisheries management with marine conservation for fair, ecosystem-based planning.
- Small-scale, low-impact fisheries should be supported with better access to resources, quota allocation, and spatial protections to sustain traditional livelihoods and reduce environmental harm.

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Benefits to fishing of a healthy marine environment

A healthy marine environment is fundamental to the long-term sustainability and prosperity of Scotland's fisheries. However, ongoing environmental decline, driven in part by [widespread fishing pressure](#), is undermining the very foundations that support fish stocks and the livelihoods that depend on them.

Scientific evidence [increasingly demonstrates](#) that protecting and restoring marine habitats [benefits fisheries](#) by enhancing fish populations, [improving resilience to climate change](#), and ensuring the long-term viability of the sector. For example, just 3 years after the establishment of the Lyme Bay marine protected area (MPA) in England, recreational income (diving and angling) [increased by £2.2 million](#), and after 10 years the monthly landings value for static gear fishers had [increased by £1,452 inside and £866 outside the MPA](#), despite more static fishers operating in the area. Well-managed marine ecosystems support greater biodiversity, provide essential [nursery and spawning grounds](#) for species, and contribute to more stable and productive fish stocks.

Despite this, a false dichotomy persists, suggesting that environmental protection is inherently at odds with fishing interests. This perception is reinforced by fragmented policymaking and stakeholder engagement that treat fisheries management and marine conservation as separate issues. In reality, failure to integrate these priorities, and to meet existing legislative and policy commitments, means that neither fisheries nor the marine environment is safeguarded. The Scottish Government must enable a shift towards a truly [ecosystem-based approach](#), where fisheries management works with environmental protections, to deliver benefits for both nature and people.

A just transition for Scotland's fishing sectors and coastal communities

Scotland's coastal communities and fishing industries are facing increasing pressure due to changing environmental conditions, competition for marine space, and evolving management measures.



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.

An [ecosystem-based approach](#) to the development of national, regional and sectoral marine plans offers a framework to balance these competing demands while ensuring the long-term health of Scotland's seas, and an opportunity to provide much-needed clarity and certainty for fishers, coastal communities, and other marine users. Fisheries management continues to be treated by policymakers as [separate from marine planning](#), an approach we strongly disagree with, and which is contrary to the [principles of ecosystem-based management](#). Without fully considering all marine activities in spatial plans, their environmental impact and long-term sustainability cannot be properly addressed, making a just transition unachievable. A more holistic approach is required, that focuses on:

1. Supporting small-scale, low-impact fisheries

Small-scale, low-impact fisheries are a cornerstone of Scotland's coastal economy, providing employment, supporting local food systems with a lower carbon footprint, and contributing to cultural heritage. Yet, these fisheries often face significant challenges in securing access to resources and markets, particularly in competition with larger, more industrialised fleets. 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.

2. Reforming inshore fisheries management

Ecosystem-based inshore fisheries management actively supports sustainable, low-impact fishing in tandem with protecting the marine environment. Reform of fisheries management in Scotland should focus on taking a more inclusive regional approach to delivering an inshore low-impact zone, which includes no-take zones to protect vital nursery and spawning grounds, static-gear only zones to reduce habitat damage and bycatch, and MPAs with meaningful fisheries management measures. Higher-risk activities like scallop dredging should only be permitted where it can be scientifically justified.

Key policy actions needed for an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management

A shift towards an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management in Scotland requires decisive action across multiple fronts. The Scottish Government must implement spatial management, ensure transparent governance, and prioritise sustainability, in order to secure a thriving fishing industry that is both environmentally and economically sustainable. Appropriate resourcing for policy delivery must be prioritised. Comments made during the Rural Affairs and Islands [Committee session](#) on the Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement [call for evidence](#) on 5th February highlighted that Marine Directorate resourcing will constrain the ambition and level of reform possible for inshore fisheries. The purpose of the call for evidence should be to achieve the best approach possible to fisheries management and seek to secure the budget to deliver the best outcome.

Key actions needed for the Scottish Government to fulfil its legislative and policy commitments include:

1. Ensure full adherence to existing legislative frameworks, including UK Marine Strategy Regulations (GES), UK Fisheries Act objectives, and Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs), including an FMP for the environmentally high-risk king scallop dredge fishery as a priority interim measure;
2. Prioritise consultation and adoption of remaining fisheries management measures in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and for Priority Marine Features (PMFs) outside MPAs;
3. Conduct a comprehensive review of Scotland's fishing capacity to assess its compatibility with environmental sustainability and set environmental limits;

4. Implement spatial management strategies, including establishing inshore low-impact zones with No-Take Zones, static-gear only zones, and mobile-gear only zones where justifiable, areas for nature conservation, and embed fisheries management within marine planning;
5. Develop mechanisms to incentivise low impact fishing practices, including spatial management and quota allocation, aligned the Future Fisheries Management Strategy 2020-2030's objectives to support diversification of inshore fishing;
6. Accelerate the roll-out of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras across the fleet for fully documented fisheries, enhancing transparency and data accuracy;
7. Eliminate bycatch of non-target species and marine mammal entanglement, prioritising the implementation of [scientific recommendations](#) for static gear;
8. Reform regional fisheries and conservation governance structures with meaningful participation from a broad range of stakeholders and opportunities for [co-design of management](#) to ensure decisions reflect the full range of interests in Scotland's marine environment;
9. Ensure the principle of a just transition for Scottish fisheries is integrated into the Inshore Fisheries Management and Implementation (IFMI) policy proposals and regional management models, supporting diversification and sustainable practices;
10. The Marine Directorate should be appropriately resourced to deliver the necessary reform to fisheries management that delivers long-term benefits to people and nature.

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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