

WRFT response to Scottish Government Consultation on Draft Marine Conservation Order for the Wester Ross MPA



Peter Cunningham, 28th July 2015 info@wrft.org.uk.

1. Background

Wester Ross Fisheries Trust [WRFT] was set up in 1996 in response to the collapse of salmon and sea trout fisheries around Wester Ross. The Trust aims to support the fisheries and wildlife within the Wester Ross area which depend upon healthy wild fish populations. Healthy fisheries are of vital importance to the local economy of Wester Ross. Formerly, the seas around Wester Ross were renowned for the fisheries they supported. In addition to commercial fisheries, in the 1960s and 1970s Ullapool hosted many major angling festivals, including the annual British Skate championships and European Federation of Sea Anglers championships¹. Fisheries for cod, haddock, whiting and many other species around Wester Ross collapsed following the removal of the three mile limit to mobile gear in 1984 and the subsequent inadequately regulated increase in demersal trawling in coastal waters².

Our work addresses opportunities for actions which will restore and support wild fish populations and the natural productivity of rivers, lochs and coastal seas for the benefit of people and wildlife.

In 2012 a Third Party Bid for a Marine Protected Area [MPA] for Loch Gairloch and the western part of Loch Ewe was developed and submitted, with support from a wide diversity of organisations and individuals within the local community³. Loch Gairloch was not included within one of the new set of inshore MPAs. However we were pleased that Loch Ewe was incorporated within the Wester Ross MPA as designated in July 2014.

In January 2015 we responded to the Scottish Government's consultation on draft fisheries management measures for the Wester Ross MPA⁴. Two management options were presented. One of the options proposed to exclude dredgers from all of the inner sea lochs (including Loch Ewe and Gruinard Bay) and around the Summer Isles; the other option proposed to exclude dredgers from smaller areas within the Wester Ross MPA including only part of Loch Ewe. Our view was that neither of the management options presented was adequate to achieve the stated aims of the Wester Ross MPA to protect a range of different types of seabed habitat and to restore maerl beds and flameshell beds; especially given that large parts of the MPA remained unsurveyed.

We therefore welcome the Draft Marine Conservation Order for the Wester Ross MPA⁵ and this opportunity to provide further comment.

¹ Robinson, Laurie (1970) Sea Fishing in Scotland. The ESFA officials assessed the 1965 EFSA championships at Ullapool (there were 524 entries) as 'Scotland's Finest Hour'.

² Cod are showing signs of a recovery <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27867-cod-make-a-comeback-thanks-to-strict-cuts-in-fishing/>

³ Gairloch and Wester Loch Ewe 3rd party bid for a MPA <http://www.wrft.org.uk/news/newsitem.cfm?id=145>

⁴ WRFT response to Wester Ross MPA Management consultation can be found via links at: <http://www.wrft.org.uk/news/newsitem.cfm?id=184>

⁵ The Draft Marine Conservation Order for the Wester Ross MPA can be found via links at www.gov.scot/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork/MPAMGT/protectedareasmgt/conservationorders

2. Proposed management measures for ‘firm ground’ habitats (including areas with flameshell beds, maerl beds, kelp and seaweed communities on sublittoral sediment, maerl or coarse shell gravel with burrowing sea cucumbers, northern feather star aggregations [and sea grass beds])

The Draft Conservation Order for the Wester Ross MPA proposes to prohibit suction dredging, mechanical dredging and beam trawling from throughout the Wester Ross MPA.

We fully support this proposed management measure.

In addition to achieving the stated aims of the MPA, our view is that this measure will foster the recovery of some fish and shellfish populations and support an increase in the production of commercial species within the MPA and therefore lead to an increase in the value of the MPA to the local economy. ‘Firm ground’ habitats are of importance to many species, including commercially important shellfish (scallop, lobster, brown crab) and fin fish, providing spawning habitat for herring, skate and other rays; nursery habitat for cod and other members of the cod family, plaice and other flatfish species; and feeding habitat for sea trout⁶.

Our view is that this measure can therefore also help to secure employment within the MPA. We anticipate an increase in the productive value of these shallow water areas for creeling, scallop diving, rod and line fishing and other local businesses, and that this increase will greatly outweigh the loss in the value of these areas to nomadic scallop dredging (and other more destructive methods of fishing).

Therefore, this measure represents a ‘win-win’ solution, which can provide the sort of benefits for both nature conservation and for local fishing communities within and beyond the MPA that prompted our initial community led 3rd party bid for a Marine Protected Area within the area.

However, to achieve these ‘potential’ benefits the Scottish Government should also put in place a licensing system to regulate all fishing activity within the MPA, primarily to prevent a Loch Torridon type ‘honey pot’ situation from arising within the MPA of too many creelers, scallop divers, or other fishers moving into the area to take advantage of any new opportunities that arise (see in section 4 below).

⁶ Dredgers may have a future role as an efficient tool for harvesting a crop of scallops or other shellfish within an extensive-aquaculture type operation (e.g. ranching) in the same way that a tree harvester or potato harvester or other crop-specific harvesting machine is used on land, where and when the overall benefits of harvesting a crop using a dredger can be shown to outweigh the losses to other economic and ecosystem interests.

However, dredging should only be permitted in areas where an Environment Impact Assessment has been carried out to:

- (1) assess whether or not the economic benefit from scallop dredging outweighs the damage to seabed habitats of importance in their own right or as habitats which support other shellfish or fin-fish species;
- (2) assess whether there are or could be better methods (e.g. via utilisation of ROV technology) of harvesting scallops which cause less damage to the sea bed and other shellfish stocks and to the potential of the area to support other wildlife including species of commercial importance.

We would therefore recommend the exclusion of mechanical dredgers from all areas with maerl beds, sea grass beds and other sensitive shallow (especially <20m deep [photic zone]) habitats which provide valuable ecosystem services wherever they are located around Scotland (and not just within MPAs).

3. Proposed management measures for deeper water 'burrowed mud' habitats

For the deeper water habitats within the MPA including burrowed mud, the stated management aim is to 'conserve' (i.e. prevent further deterioration). The Draft Conservation Order for the Wester Ross MPA proposes to continue to allow demersal trawling by vessels of less than 150 gross tonnes within three extensive 'derogated areas' representing over half of the total seabed area within the Wester Ross Marine Protected Area, and very approximately 80% of the 'burrowed mud' habitats.

In so far as achieving the most important aims of the MPA to protect and restore the shallow water 'firm ground' habitats (as discussed above), we (WRFT) are less concerned about the management of the deeper water habitats than of the shallower water habitats. BBC 1 Scotland's recent documentary 'Prawn Wars'⁷ highlighted some of the long-term conflicts between creelers and trawlers fishing the burrowed mud habitats around the West of Scotland. Some local fishermen have expressed concern that the MPA represents the 'thin end of the wedge' so far as their own interests are concerned.

Nevertheless, the proposed measures seem reasonable to us, so far as we understand that in addition to achieving the conservation objectives for burrowed mud habitats they will safeguard fishing opportunities for all of the smaller locally-based trawlers (i.e. most of the small trawlers based in Ullapool, Gairloch and Aultbea) by restricting access for larger nomadic demersal trawlers that are capable of fishing (and usually fish) further afield including those from the east of Scotland. However, other solutions may be more acceptable, for example to restrict access to the larger trawlers from only the inner two 'derogated areas' closest to Ullapool (e.g. leaving the outer 'derogated area' open to trawlers of all sizes), and / or by providing a linking corridor between the inner two 'derogated areas' to allow smaller trawlers to tow between them without raising their gear? An alternative solution could help to lower the level of hostility towards the concept of 'Marine Protected Areas' expressed by some. Cans of muddy worms . . . ?

Any measure will only achieve the aims of the MPA if the amount of demersal trawling by trawlers within the MPA does not increase; **hence the need for licensing to prevent an increase in the number of trawlers fishing within the MPA** (see below).

We recognise that with regard to protecting the seabed, using creels to harvest prawns is a lower impact, more selective, and generally higher value alternative to demersal trawling; and therefore that it may be more compatible with achieving the aims of the MPA and maximising economic value of the area. Over a period of years, the introduction of incentives which promote creeling and discourage trawling from the most sensitive shallower areas and promote trawling but to discourage creeling from deeper, more distant waters may be a useful way forward. This could also help to foster further recovery of fin-fish populations, such as skates, other rays and flatfish (turbot, plaice, dab, etc.). For the time being these fishes will remain vulnerable to capture by trawlers within the MPA. These issues have recently been considered elsewhere⁸, and we have no further comments to make at present.

⁷ BBC 1 Scotland Landward Special 'Prawn Wars' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b063j0z6/landward-20152016-12-prawn-wars-landward-special>

⁸ Management of the Scottish Inshore Fisheries; Assessing the Options for Change <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/01/4022>

4. The need to issue licenses / permits to fish within the MPA

There is a clear need to develop a licensing system to regulate all fishing activity within the MPA, including both commercial and recreational fishing activity.

The licensing system should aim to support and safeguard all pre-existing locally-based fishing businesses within the MPA.

This would help to prevent a free-for-all and the otherwise inevitable (and on-going) conflict between fishermen. Such a licensing system should be designed to prevent an unsustainable increase in the number of trawlers, creel boats and other boats (e.g. scallop dive boats) working within the MPA. The licensing system should also enable improved monitoring and management of the MPA and of fish and other wildlife populations therein.

Examples of appropriate and successful systems elsewhere in the world could be adapted to fit the Wester Ross MPA. Here is an opportunity for Scotland to catch up with other more advanced countries (e.g. Iceland, Norway, Australia, New Zealand) who have progressed further so far as maximising the economic value of their natural assets. Maybe one day Scotland could take the lead . . . ?

5. Education and awareness-raising

Various misinformation or somewhat unbalanced opinion has been circulated via social media and other media (including the BBC, e.g. Radio Scotland 'News for the Highlands and Islands' 28th July 2015 am) during this consultation period creating much confusion within local communities. Some of this has promoted ill-feeling towards individuals who have openly expressed support for the draft Marine Conservation Order and even for the concept of Marine Protected Areas. People need to be able to provide objective comment without prejudice or fear of intimidation. Collectively, we're becoming an increasingly ignorant lot, enabling some of those who wish to exploit our natural assets for their own short-term benefit to get away with it!

The Scottish Government and its agencies can help to address this problem by providing clearer information and clearer explanation to enable everyone within the local community, from primary school-children upwards, to more easily understand the proposed measures and why they have been introduced⁹.

The success of the MPA is dependent upon widespread public support; this can only be achieved if there is widespread public understanding and acceptance of why marine protected areas have been designated and how they can help to secure our best long-term economic and environmental interests.

⁹ For starters, an interpretive poster with a map of the Wester Ross MPA showing sea bed habitats, explaining their origin, their importance for wildlife and fisheries and why they are in need of protection, and how the MPA is intended to help them . . . would be useful. This could be part of an education & awareness raising package aimed at children and other members of local communities, which includes a series of on-line video presentations, and some hands-on interactive activities . . .

How many of today's schoolchildren in Ullapool or living around other parts of the Wester Ross MPA are even able to recognise a herring?