

Government Leak Reveals Destruction of Marine Wildlife

The declines in iconic Scottish marine habitats in this unpublished report are shocking.

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Scotland has failed to meet a ten-year-old target to prevent damage to precious marine wildlife, according to a leaked Scottish Government report seen by The Ferret.

The report reveals that “priority” seabed habitats meant to be protected around the coast have declined in five large areas since 2011. Seagrass, flame shells, seaweed beds and tubeworm reefs have been destroyed by the fishing industry and pollution, it says.

Campaigners warn that these habitats – vital for fish and as a store for carbon – are now “perilously close” to being wiped out after a “decade of decline”. They accuse ministers of breaking promises made a decade ago to prevent the marine environment from being harmed.

Experts describe the declines as “shocking” and “tragic” and call for damaged habitats to be restored. The Scottish Government says it is “working towards a full assessment” of the state of Scotland’s seas that will be published “in due course”.

The [Marine Scotland Act](#) was agreed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2010. It [required](#) the Scottish Government to ensure the “protection and enhancement of the health of the Scottish marine area”.

This involved conserving a series of key habitats, seen as vital for plants and animals and as nurseries for fish. They are described as “priority marine features”.

They include swaying green fields of [seagrass](#) and small, bright orange, multi-tentacled shellfish called [flame shells](#). There are also beds of purple seaweed known as [maerl](#) and [“serpulid” reefs](#) created by red, pink and orange tubeworms.

Video thanks to Howard Wood

The leaked report is called a “Scottish Overall Assessment 2020” and examines the state of six vital habitats in 11 marine regions around Scotland. It is a draft dated October 2019 compiled by scientists from the government’s [NatureScot](#), formerly Scottish Natural Heritage, and [Marine Scotland](#).

The report’s main conclusion is that the marine habitats in five regions have shrunk between 2011 and 2019. “The target of no loss...has not been achieved in the Moray Firth,

West Highlands, Outer Hebrides, Argyll and Clyde regions,” it says.

A summary table from the report lists the five areas in red for having failed to meet the target. There is “insufficient data” to judge whether Scotland’s six other marine regions have met the targets or not, it adds.



Summary table from leaked Scottish Government report, showing habitat losses between 2011 and 2019.

The report blames the declines on dredging, trawling, anchoring, overfishing and engineering works. It also fingers climate change, ocean acidification and [pollution from fish farms](#) and other sources, as well as diseases and storms.

Losses have been particularly severe in the Argyll marine area. Since 2011 it has lost 53 per cent of its flame shell beds and 35 per cent of its serpulid tubeworm reefs, known as aggregations, as well as unspecified areas of seagrass and [horse mussel beds](#).

The report highlights a “marked deterioration” and “widespread fragmentation” of serpulid reefs in Loch Creran in Argyll. The cause is said to be “uncertain”, though there has been damage from fishing and pollution in the past.

According to the leaked report, more than 90 per cent of the serpulid reefs in Loch Teacuis, an arm of Loch Sunart in the West Highlands, have been lost. Virtually all of the [blue mussel beds](#) in the Dornoch Firth, part of the Moray Firth marine region, are said to have gone.

Loch Fyne in the Clyde region has lost 10 per cent of its maerl beds and nine per cent of its flame shell beds. The report points out these have been damaged by [scallop dredging](#) in the past.

The Sound of Barra in the Outer Hebrides has lost 27 per cent of its seagrass beds, partly because of the construction of the [causeway connecting Eriskay](#) and South Uist in 2001.

The report stresses that there is “low confidence” in its overall assessments because records only exist for a “small proportion” of the habitats. There is also “uncertainty” over how much human activities can be blamed for the declines, it says.

Video thanks to Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST).

The unpublished government report was obtained by the campaign group, [Open Seas](#). It contrasted the report’s bleak scientific assessments with the Scottish Government’s upbeat [announcement in September](#) that 30 per cent of Scotland’s seas was now protected by marine conservation areas.

Phil Taylor, head of policy for Open Seas, accused ministers of failing in their duty to protect and enhance the health of the marine environment. “The declines are really serious and show these habitats are now perilously close to being effectively wiped out in our seas,” he said.

“Human impacts, including expansion of scallop dredging in the 1990s and the deregulation

of bottom trawling in inshore waters, have contributed to widespread decline. Scotland's underwater habitats have been reduced to isolated patches covering a fraction of their former extent."

Taylor pointed to estimates in the report suggesting that only small beds of flame shells and maerl were left in the Clyde marine region. Both were believed to have been widespread 50 years ago.

"These habitats are the foundation of a functioning ecosystem, and they are important for capturing and storing carbon, for fish to spawn and feed," he told The Ferret.

"We cannot afford yet another decade of decline. The Scottish Government is required by law to protect inshore marine habitats from bottom-towed fishing, but has repeatedly missed its own deadlines."

Professor [Murray Roberts](#), a leading expert on marine ecology from the University of Edinburgh, urged action to stem the losses. "The declines in iconic Scottish marine habitats in this unpublished report are shocking," he said.

"It is simply tragic to think that we might have lost over 90 per cent of the beautiful tubeworm reefs from the western Highlands. Thanks to global climatic change, the seas across the world are warming, becoming more acidic and running short of the oxygen vital to life."

He added: "It's essential humanity's use of marine ecosystems becomes sustainable and that we protect and restore the patchwork of iconic habitats that define Scotland's marine natural heritage."



Underwater wildlife on a flame shell bed. Photo thanks to NatureScot.

[Our Seas](#), a coalition of 69 coastal business, community and environmental groups in Scotland, described the situation as urgent. "The last fragments of these once widespread habitats are being further degraded within our own lifetimes," said the group's co-ordinator, Ailsa McLellan.

"The Scottish Government maintains that 30 per cent of our seas are protected. But this is misleading because many of these supposedly protected areas have [no protective measures](#) in place at all."

She maintained that only around five per cent of the inshore seabed had permanent protection from bottom-towed fishing gear. "If the Scottish Government continues to sit on its hands whilst remnant habitats disappear from our seas, then it will be failing us as a nation," she said.

The Scottish Greens contended that targets were useless without government action to meet them.

"These figures show a shocking level of environmental destruction to Scotland's marine environment," said the party's environment spokesperson, [Mark Ruskell MSP](#).

“The Scottish Government cannot continue to hide behind its targets. It needs to act to stop this destruction now.”



Close-up of serpulid reef. Photo thanks to NatureScot.

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) warned that business-as-usual was driving a “spiral of ocean decline” that had to be reversed. The new findings painted “a worrying picture”, according to the society’s head of conservation in Scotland, Calum Duncan.

“If hundreds of hectares of valuable carbon-storing, nursery-providing, biodiversity-enriching living reef and seagrass habitat have been lost in the years since the [Marine Scotland Act](#) was established to help protect and enhance our seas, then everyone should be concerned,” he said.

“The true picture of loss is likely to be even greater since the trends for most habitats in most regions appears to be unknown.”

Video thanks to Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST).

The Scottish Government’s wildlife agency, [NatureScot](#), confirmed that it had contributed to the leaked report as part of a full assessment of Scotland’s seas. “NatureScot’s assessment is based on data from seabed surveys carried out mainly in marine protected areas between 2011 and 2018,” said a spokesperson for the agency.

“The losses reported may be caused by a range of pressures including those associated with human activities or natural drivers of change including storm action and fluctuations in recruitment of the habitat-forming species.”

Nature Scot pointed out that management measures were put in place in 2016 to protect the most sensitive seabed habitats. “It will take time for the benefits of these measures to be seen and for this to be reflected in the results of our marine protected area monitoring work,” the spokesperson added.

The Scottish Government reiterated that more than 30 per cent of Scotland’s seas were covered by protection areas designed to achieve conservation objectives while allowing “sustainable use” to continue.

A government spokesperson said: “We are working towards a full assessment of Scotland’s waters that will inform our vital work in supporting nature conservation, marine planning, and helping to develop new approaches to marine management. This work will be published in due course.”

The [Scottish White Fish Producers Association](#) and the [Scottish Fishermen’s Federation \(SFF\)](#) declined to comment on an unpublished report. They pointed to SFF’s environmental policy [statement published](#) on 9 October 2020.

This committed this fishing industry to “taking all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure that the fisheries and ecosystems in which they operate are accessed and managed responsibly to preserve their sustainable use for current and future generations.”

SFF said it “supports the principle of marine protected areas for conservation of biodiversity and geodiversity features in particular areas, and will continue to work towards striking a balance between conservation and sustainable harvesting.”

It also “acknowledges that its fisheries are a shared resource at national and international level” and promised to “cooperate with all relevant stakeholders.”

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The Ferret’s policy is to publish documents on which our stories are based whenever possible. In this case, however, we have decided not to release the full text of the draft Scottish Government report on the marine environment in order to protect sources.

This story was published in tandem with the [Sunday National](#).

Featured image: Flame shell thanks to [NatureScot](#).

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