



A threat to people and planet: The need for the Transform Bottom Trawling coalition

Our ocean is fighting for survival. Over 90% of the world's fish populations are either overfished or being fished at maximally sustainable levels¹. Less than 3% of the ocean is highly protected, leaving it vulnerable to exploitative fishing practices that threaten the future of the world's seas. Among the worst and most pervasive of these is bottom trawling, whereby large, weighted nets are dragged by trawlers across the seafloor, scooping up everything in their path and causing immense damage to seabeds.

Bottom trawling poses a threat to our climate, marine ecosystems, and the coastal communities that depend on them. EJF has joined forces with the global coalition, [Transform Bottom Trawling](#), to call for an end to this destructive practice and for stronger protection and restoration of our ocean that is so vital in the battle against the climate crisis.

The Transform Bottom Trawling coalition presents **4 key policy asks** to States, in consultation with fisheries organisations and other stakeholders:

1. Establish, expand and strengthen national inshore exclusion zones (IEZs) for small-scale fishers in which bottom trawling is prohibited
2. Prohibit bottom trawling in all marine protected areas (MPAs) to ensure vulnerable habitats and ecosystems are effectively protected and recovered
3. End subsidised bottom trawling and allocate financial and technical resources to support a fair transition for fleets
4. Prohibit the expansion of bottom trawling to new, untrawled areas

These policy recommendations will help achieve the coalition's main goal: **bottom trawling tackled by all coastal states by 2030, with evidence of a globally reduced footprint**. This is essential to protecting the future of our ocean, combating global heating, and safeguarding the human rights and livelihoods of coastal communities.

A threat to fish populations and livelihoods

Bottom trawling is highly unselective. As heavy nets – sometimes the size of a football pitch – are dragged along the seafloor, everything in their path is swept up, taking both targeted and untargeted species – so-called “by-catch”. In contrast to more selective, artisanal fishing

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2022) The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022: Towards Blue Transformation. Rome, 238p., <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0461en/cc0461en.pdf>

techniques, this has catastrophic repercussions for fish populations, including threatened or endangered species.



A seahorse in the bycatch of a Mexican shrimp trawler vessel. Image courtesy of Transform Bottom Trawling.

When catches are emptied onboard trawlers, workers sort through the fish and often discard unwanted species, in spite of laws stating that the entirety of catches must be brought onto land. These discarded fish have, in many cases, died before they hit the water. This has highly detrimental consequences for fish populations, particularly where species are already exploited, overfished or threatened. Over the past 65 years alone, bottom trawlers have discarded over 400 million tonnes of untargeted marine life, worth around US\$560 billion². Bottom trawling also threatens fish populations by undermining their ability to reproduce – juvenile or pregnant fish are often included in catches, and trawler nets can cause immense damage to areas of the seabed that are essential for certain species' reproduction³.

This indiscriminate practice is not only a threat to the stability of marine ecosystems, but also to the livelihoods of artisanal fishers. Where artisanal fishers' target species are caught in trawl nets unintentionally and discarded dead, artisanal fishers face dwindling fish stocks and income.

² Cashion, T. et al (2018) Reconstructing global marine fishing gear use: Catches and landed values by gear type and sector. *Fisheries Research*, 208. pp. 57-64

³ Oceana (2016) Press release: Oceana unveils images of fish nursery areas damaged by bottom trawling in the Strait of Sicily. Oceana, Madrid. Available at: <https://europe.oceana.org/press-releases/oceana-unveils-images-fish-nursery-areas-damaged-bottom-trawling-strait/>

When these species are targeted intentionally, artisanal fishers are placed at a disadvantage, their techniques and gear unable to compete with the scale of bottom trawling.



A bottom trawling vessel in the Bay of Biscay off the French coast. Image source: Environmental Justice Foundation.

Over 100 million people depend on small-scale artisanal fishing and inshore subsistence for food resources and livelihoods⁴, often operating in the same areas as bottom trawlers. Communities who have relied on coastal ecosystems for generations are finding their way of life undermined, often with few alternative livelihood options to turn to for income or food. This is worsened by the fact that a significant portion of bottom trawling occurs off the coasts of poorer nations where food security is of critical importance. Expanding and strengthening IEZs allows coastal communities to continue fishing in ways that have sustained social-ecological systems for centuries, free from the interference and destruction of bottom trawlers.

Bottom trawling is enabled by significant national subsidies, loose regulations, a lack of monitoring and inadequate enforcement of laws. [Improving transparency in the fisheries sector](#) in general is fundamental to reducing the impacts of bottom trawling, and especially for the successful banning of the practice in MPAs and IEZs – regulations must be free from loopholes and fully enforced, backed up by comprehensive monitoring and reporting. There must be an end to enabling subsidies, with funds redirected towards a just transition for fleets to ensure that viable livelihood options exist outside bottom trawling.

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2020) The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020. Sustainability in action. Rome, 207p., <https://www.fao.org/3/ca9229en/CA9229EN.pdf>



An artisanal fisher and trawling vessel off the coast of Sierra Leone. Image source: Environmental Justice Foundation.

A threat to the climate and marine life

The ecosystems at risk of decimation by bottom trawling are vital to tackling global heating – blue carbon has the capability to be significantly more effective at sequestering carbon than tropical forests⁵. This makes the ocean the world’s largest carbon sequestration opportunity⁶; protecting and restoring blue carbon solutions can play a pivotal role in meeting net zero targets and limiting heating to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.

Almost 98% of the ocean is under pressure from human-driven stressors, including industrial fishing practices such as bottom trawling⁷. As heavy trawl nets scrape along the seafloor, they cause immense damage to marine wildlife and destroy these essential ecosystems, releasing the carbon they store and accelerating global heating. Bottom trawling releases one gigaton of carbon per year from the seabed - nearly three times the UK's total carbon emissions in 2021⁸. Included in the destruction are seagrass meadows, one of the most efficient carbon sequestering

⁵ EJF (2021) Our blue beating heart: Blue carbon solutions in the fight against the climate crisis. EJF, London. Available at: https://ejfoundation.org/resources/downloads/EJF-Blue-Carbon-Brief_EU.pdf

⁶ Duarte, C. M. et al (2013) The role of coastal plant communities for climate change mitigation and adaptation. *Nature*, 3. pp. 961-968

⁷ Halpern, B. S., et al (2015) Spatial and temporal changes in cumulative human impacts on the world’s ocean. *Nature Communications*, 6

⁸ Sala, E. et al (2021) Protecting the global ocean for biodiversity, food and climate. *Nature*, 592. Pp. 397-402

ecosystems in the world⁹. Seagrass meadows can take decades to recover from damage caused by bottom trawling.



Destruction to the seabed following bottom trawling. Image courtesy of Transform Bottom Trawling.

In addition to being vital stores of carbon, seagrass meadows and other ecosystems threatened by bottom trawling play a crucial role for marine wildlife by providing the breeding grounds and nurseries that underpin healthy fish populations. Combined with its lack of selectivity, often resulting in the deaths of threatened and endangered species, bottom trawling presents an enormous threat to marine biodiversity and coastal ecosystems.

Only 3% of these essential ocean habitats are fully contained within protected areas. To make matters worse, bottom trawling is not prohibited in all MPAs, despite the very clear need to protect these rich, biodiverse areas. Bottom trawling and dredging, another highly destructive fishing practice, took place in 97% of MPAs in the UK in 2019¹⁰, while in the EU, studies point to higher intensity of trawling within than outside MPAs. Destructive fishing, for example, has been found to affect 86% of the areas designated under Natura 2000 for the protection of marine wildlife¹¹. It is vital that bottom trawling be banned in all MPAs and that IEZs be expanded and

⁹ Fourqurean, J. W. (2012) Seagrass ecosystems as a globally significant carbon stock. *Nature Geoscience*, 5, pp. 505-512

¹⁰ Oceana (2021) Press release: UK Government set to license over 1,000 EU and UK fishing vessels permitting continued bottom trawling in UK Marine Protected Areas in 2022. Oceana, London. Available at:

<https://europe.oceana.org/en/press-center/press-releases/uk-government-set-license-over-1000-eu-and-uk-fishing-vessels-permitting>

¹¹ Oceana (2020) Perry, A. L. et al. Eds., *Unmanaged = Unprotected: Europe's marine paper parks*. Oceana, Brussels. Available at:

strengthened. In order to truly safeguard blue carbon solutions, this must be coupled with stringent monitoring and full enforcement of regulations.

Steps for urgent and ambitious change

The impacts of bottom trawling must be radically reduced for the sake of the climate, the survival of coastal and marine ecosystems, and the communities that rely on them. Greater transparency and accountability must be at the centre of these efforts, supported by strict regulations and effective monitoring and enforcement measures.

Tackling the climate emergency requires a complex, multilateral effort across industries and institutional scales, but the necessity to protect and restore our oceans is unequivocal. Few fishing practices are as detrimental and as incompatible with measures to halt global heating than bottom trawling – prohibiting it is a very clear and tangible step we can take to ensure the future of marine ecosystems and the people who depend on them. The global collaboration behind Transform Bottom Trawling creates a strong front to take on this pervasive and destructive form of fishing, with the voices of coastal communities at the heart of policy.