

Bottom (Benthic) Trawling

There are many aspects of fishing practice which have a bearing on the sustainability of the overall fishing effort, one of the most important being the trawl method.

Our standard supply chain audit includes an assessment both of the fishing method, history of the fishing ground and known information about its topography, in order to understand the likely environmental impact.

We will not purchase fish from areas that have not previously been trawled, or from any locations where this type of fishing is damaging to marine habitats. We also do not support the use of towed gears for deep sea bottom trawling and we do not sell species such as grenadier or rabbit fish which are captured by this method.

We welcome the recent creation of no-trawl zones by the EU, Iceland, Norway and the Faeroe Islands in areas where important cold water corals are known and encourage research at national and international levels to identify and protect cold water coral reefs and hydro-thermal vents.

However, our business believes that bottom trawling can legitimately be used to fish for certain species in locations where there is a clear understanding of the nature of the seabed. Typically this will be where the seabed is soft - trawling here causes little more disruption than normal wave and tide action and the seabed quickly returns to its original state a few days after the trawl has passed.

An example of this is the southern North Sea, from where we buy a small amount of fish caught by beam trawling. We believe the soft sea bed in this region can sustain this method.

We support the development of spatial planning policy in UK waters and welcome the proposal that Marine Protected Areas should be an important part of the new Integrated European Maritime Policy. We believe there should be extensive zones where fishing and other commercial activities are prohibited, in order to protect the marine environment, ecology and biodiversity as well as to provide nursery grounds for fish populations.

In the longer term, we intend to press for better understanding worldwide of the impact of trawling on marine species and habitats. The systematic application of seabed mapping is still patchy and better research should be encouraged.

We will continue to monitor the available scientific evidence on this complex issue and to hold these policies under review.

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Background information follows...



Bottom trawling background information

There are a variety of types of towed trawl gears used for the capture of bottom dwelling wild fish species and it is therefore difficult to make a generalised statement regarding the appropriateness of their use. Trawls may also vary greatly in size and design, dependent upon the topography of the sea bed, the size of the towing vessel, the depth of fishing and the habits of the target species.

In most demersal fisheries (i.e. those directed at bottom-living species on the continental shelf areas such as cod, haddock, flatfish and prawns), the most common form of trawling is bottom (also known as benthic) trawling, whereby the net is dragged along the sea floor. There are several variations of this, two most common being beam and otter trawling. Towed trawl gears are also used for targeting species which live in deeper waters beyond the plateau of the continental shelf and a clear distinction should be made between this type of deep sea bottom trawling and standard benthic trawling.

The beam method involves the mouth of the net being held open by a solid metal beam which slides over the seabed on rollers or skids at each end. It is more commonly used in inshore waters by small vessels fishing for flatfish or prawns. Otter trawling derives its name from the 'trawl doors' (or 'otter') - which prevent the mouth of the net closing as it is pulled along the seabed.

Whilst both are well established methods and have been practiced for over a century, there has been increasing international concern in recent years as to the ecological damage which they may cause. In particular, the potential impacts on the habitats of demersal fish (especially juveniles) and the destruction of coral reefs, sea grass and sponge areas, which may take centuries to recover from a trawl pass.

However, the impacts of bottom trawling on the seabed vary considerably by sea bed type and local hydrographic conditions. For instance, in the relatively shallow southern North Sea, the seabed is largely sand/gravel, which undergoes constant natural change because of wave and tidal movement but which is also an ideal habitat for many species of flatfish, together with the fast-growing worms and other organisms that are their prey. On the other hand, as the seabed becomes harder, rougher and deeper it becomes more ecologically diverse and fragile.

The use of towed trawls to fish the greater depths off the continental shelf or down the slopes of sea mounts carries with it a different set of issues. Many of the species which live at these greater depths are adapted to conditions where food is not abundant and are they are therefore slow growing and long living, with relatively low fecundity. Deep sea trawls are amongst the largest trawl gears used and are capable of capturing large numbers of these species.

References

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- Fonteyne, 2000
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