



Transform bottom trawling coalition

A global coalition for change

Recent years have shown us the power of movement building and citizen mobilisation. Around the world, millions of people have taken to the streets to protest racial injustice and climate inaction. Grassroots organising has given rise to global movements. We've realised that to tackle systemic, deep rooted issues, we need to come together like never before.

That's why we want to build a global movement to tackle destructive fishing and restore our ocean. We're growing a broad coalition of small-scale fishers, seafood companies, conservationists, local tourism businesses, scientists, managers and fisheries policy experts that's devoted to inclusive, holistic and lasting change. We're pro small-scale fishing, we're pro environment and we're dedicated to bringing the needs of coastal communities to the fore.

Our movement will coordinate a single common front against the most pervasive and severe form of destructive fishing – bottom trawling – with coherent policy solutions and a united voice. We'll provide a safe space where coastal communities can articulate how bottom trawling affects their livelihoods and food security, and develop solutions that are viable for them. We'll engage with local fleets to explore alternative methods and facilitate a just transition. At the same time, we'll collectively speak up against the often politically powerful industrial fishing industry in a way that would pose too great a risk to individuals alone. In this approach the coalition will strive to empower, safely and equitably, those people whose livelihoods most rely on healthy marine ecosystems.

Our call to action

Overcoming the ocean emergency

Our ocean has never been so vital, nor so threatened. It drives climate and weather. It supplies oxygen for all and protein for many. It's home to a dazzling array of life. Yet it is under assault from all sides. Overfishing, pollution, and climate breakdown. These issues are changing the ocean in ways we've never seen before. They're draining our oceans of life, and threatening the fish populations that provide food for billions and livelihoods for hundreds of millions.

But while solving the climate crisis is incredibly complex, ending overfishing is pretty simple. We know the issues and we know how to fix them. We know they can be tackled with concrete, actionable policies replicated globally. And we know that doing so will make the ocean and all it contains more resilient in a warming world.

We believe that fixing overfishing is the single most powerful thing we can do to overcome the ocean emergency. And we believe that this has to start with tackling the industrial-scale fishing methods that do the most damage.

The need to tackle bottom trawling

One of the most popular industrial-scale methods for catching fish is also one of the most destructive. Bottom trawlers, vessels that drag weighted nets over the seabed to scrape up seafood, land around 19 million tons of seafood annually ¹. This is almost a quarter of global marine landings and is an amount larger than any other fishing method ^{1,2}. In some parts of the world over half of all seafood landed is caught in this way ².

It's a practice that's devastating for our seas and those who rely upon them to eat and to live. Trawl nets as wide as a football field plough up the seabed, destroying vast amounts of marine life. Fragile habitats that provide food and shelter for a huge and varied range of sea creatures can be crushed in minutes. Many never recover ³.

Fishing this way is also indiscriminate. Gear modifications and better management have improved things, but lots of sea creatures are still caught accidentally. Over the past 65 years alone, bottom trawlers have discarded overboard more than 400 million tonnes of untargeted marine life ⁴. This includes everything from protected species and marine megafauna to commercially valuable fish also targeted by small-scale fishers. Had this catch been landed, it would have been worth around US\$560 billion ⁴.

The destruction wrought by bottom trawling goes much deeper than the glaring loss of marine life. Over 100 million people rely on inshore subsistence and small-scale artisanal fishing for their daily food and livelihood – often using the same waters targeted by destructive trawlers ⁵. By pulverising complex habitats and undermining fish populations, bottom trawling creates conflict and diminishes fisheries that are critical to the livelihoods and food security of some of the most vulnerable people on earth ⁶.

Climate impacts

Then there are the climate impacts. The marine sediments and habitats disturbed by trawl nets are the world's largest carbon stores ⁷. Each year, bottom trawling releases an estimated one billion tonnes of CO₂ from the seabed, an amount that some have equated to emissions from the entire aviation sector ⁸. Whilst it's not clear how much of that carbon will stay in the ocean and how much will end up in the sky, it's likely to acidify our seas and further undermine productivity and biodiversity. Plus there are the emissions from the trawlers themselves, which are among the highest of any method of food production ⁹. Simply put, business-as-usual bottom trawling is incompatible with a net zero world.

Pro small-scale fishing, pro environment

That said, we recognise that not all bottom trawling is equally destructive to habitat, to fish populations, and to the planet. There are a handful of small-scale fisheries that use trawls powered by sail, oar and even horse. They make a negligible contribution to global landings, and aren't the targets of this call to action.

Rather, our focus is on powered vessels using bottom-towed fishing gear in coastal waters and marine protected areas globally. Such trawling is, we believe, inherently

industrial-scale, inherently bad for long-term local food security, and, where complex habitats are present, inherently destructive. In many parts of the world, there are bottom-trawl fisheries which are labelled as “small-scale”. There are mini trawlers in Indonesia, baby trawlers in the Philippines, small trawlers in the EU. But such vessels are small-scale in name only, and are often designated as such to allow them into in-shore zones reserved for local fishers. By any metric of effort or capacity, they are industrial-scale, and as such, ripe for collaborative transformation.

An end to subsidies and a just transition

We recognise that many bottom-trawl fleets are not deliberate architects of environmental damage, but the product of favourable national subsidies and loose regulation. Bottom trawl fisheries receive hundreds of millions of dollars in annual global subsidies, but pay nothing for the privilege of destroying fisheries habitats, undermining local food security and pumping vast quantities of CO₂ into the sea and sky¹⁰. Such subsidies constitute one of the greatest market failures the ocean has ever seen, and continue to prop up fisheries that would otherwise be financially unsustainable.

While we recognise that some of these fleets have been beneficial for coastal communities over the short term (by delivering employment on board vessels and in processing facilities, and bait to small-scale fishers), over the longer term, fishing this way simply isn't sustainable. And history tells us that the misery of a collapsed fishery outweighs the short-term returns of an unsustainable one¹¹. That's why we want to see states redirect those harmful subsidies and take a range of bold steps to support a just transition, safeguard the rights of displaced workers, and tackle the unintended consequences of trawling restrictions.

What are we calling for?

Bottom trawling is a special case. It undermines local food security and brings conflict to vulnerable coastal communities. No other method of fishing causes so much damage. No other method of fishing is as incompatible with the path to net zero. For the planet, for the ocean and for the hundreds of millions of people who depend upon it to eat and to live, we need to drastically transform bottom trawling now.

We want to see bottom trawling urgently tackled by all coastal nations, with evidence of a globally reduced footprint by 2030.

To help achieve this goal, we're calling for States, in consultation with fishworker organisations and other stakeholders, to:

- 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 (outside IEZs) to ensure vulnerable habitats and ecosystems are effectively protected and recovered.
- 3.** End subsidised bottom trawling and support a fair transition.
- 4.** Prohibit the expansion of bottom trawling to new, untrawled areas.

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