

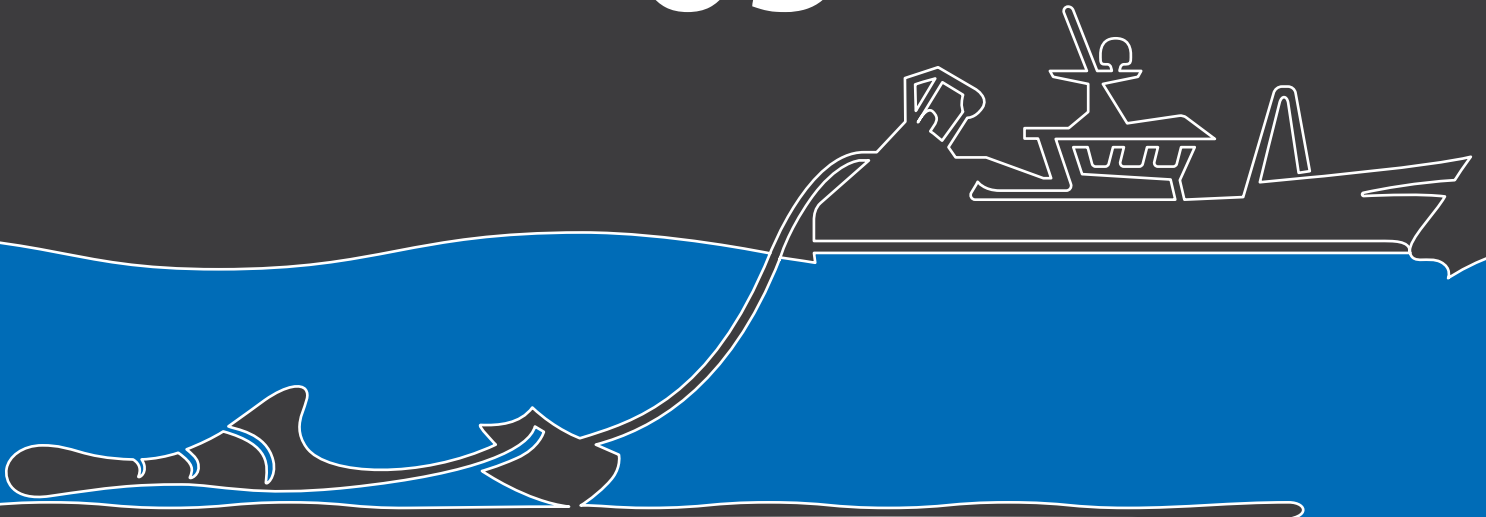


FISHY

FALSEHOODS

A series of papers debunking
myths about our industry

03



"Trawling Destroys the Seabed"

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FACT

Trawling does not "destroy" the seabed

FACT

Fishing does less harm to the environment than almost any other means of producing food.

FACT

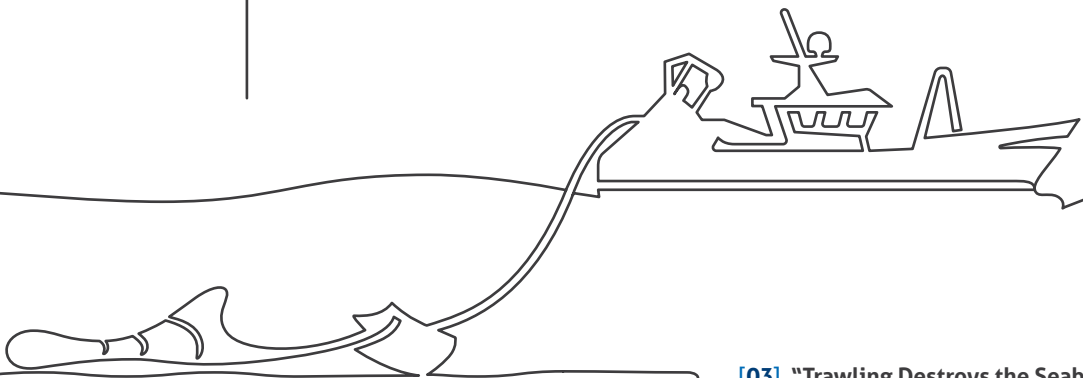
Most fishing grounds have been fished for generations yet continue to produce large harvests.

FACT

Most trawling isn't taking place in "vulnerable" habitats, which can be protected without wholesale bans on trawling.

Emotive words

Those who claim that trawling destroys the seabed are deliberately using an emotive and exaggerated term to mislead the public and to attract public sympathy and support.



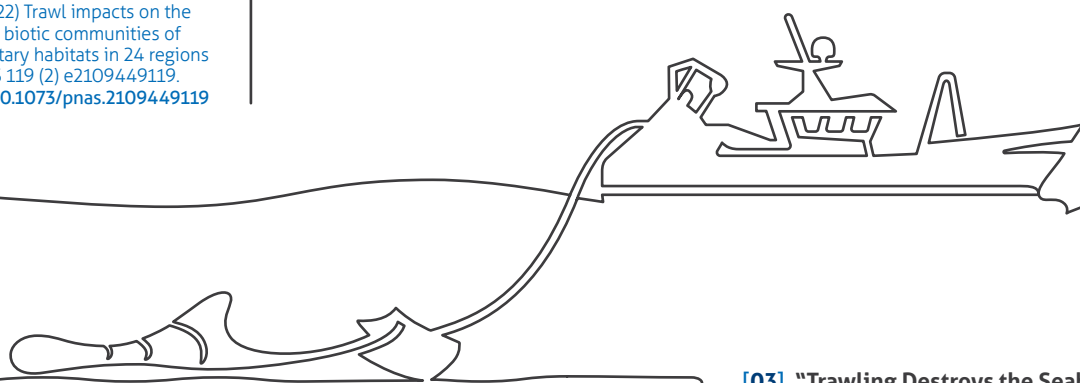
The scientific evidence

Scientific research has shown that the true impact of trawling on the seabed is much less than the lurid headlines would suggest.

A major international study of the effects of trawling on the seabed¹ found that across 24 regions worldwide (including the North Sea and West of Scotland areas) two-thirds of the seabed was not trawled at all and only 1.5% of the seabed area was severely impacted by trawling. Overall, the study concluded that the status of the seabed was relatively good (>0.8 on a scale from 0 to 1) in 21 of the 25 regions assessed, including the North Sea, West of Scotland and Irish Sea areas.

In the North Sea the status of the seabed was relatively good (>0.8) across more than 70% of the area, in the Irish Sea 80%, and in the West of Scotland area more than 90%. Only 3% of the North Sea, 9% of the Irish Sea and 1% of the West of Scotland area were severely impacted by trawling (status = 0). The areas most severely affected by trawling were in the Adriatic, Baltic Sea and off the coast of Iberia.

¹ Pitcher et al. (2022) Trawl impacts on the relative status of biotic communities of seabed sedimentary habitats in 24 regions worldwide. PNAS 119 (2) e2109449119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2109449119>





Towing heavy weights across the seabed?

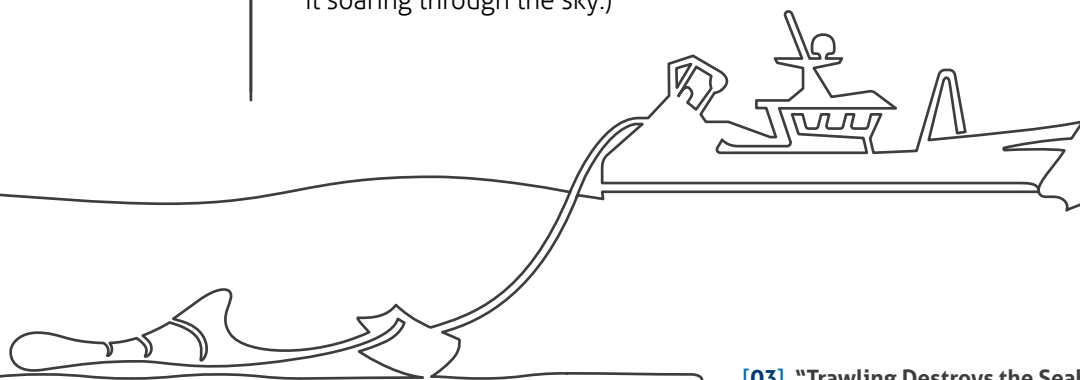
Would it be sensible to tow a heavy lump of iron along the road behind your car when you drive to work or to the shops? Think what it would do to your car's fuel consumption.

Yet that is what we are asked to believe fishermen are doing. Proponents of bans on trawling love to make our flesh creep with emotional descriptions of heavy weights being dragged across the seabed, ploughing up the bottom and destroying everything in their path.

This is nonsense: towing heavy weights across the seabed is no more sensible than towing one behind your car. Otter trawl nets are designed to catch fish by skimming *across* the seabed, not by ploughing through it.

A fishing boat uses less fuel when there is less contact between its trawl net and the seabed. So, skippers have a strong incentive to reduce that contact as far as possible, given how much fuel costs.

It is easy to be misled by the appearance of a trawl net when it is lying on the deck of a fishing boat or on the quayside. It may look like heavy lumps of metal but when it is towed behind a fishing boat it flies through the water. (In the same way, an aeroplane sitting on the ground may look like a heavy, lumbering lump of metal but that does not stop it soaring through the sky.)



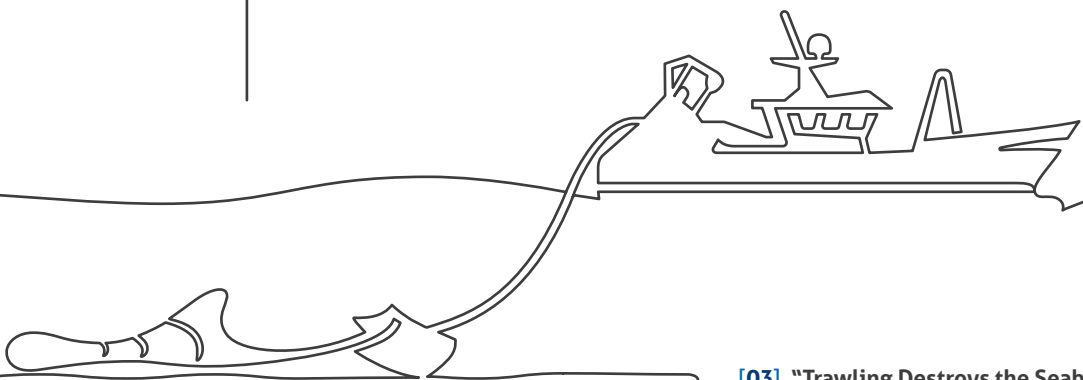
Does farming destroy the land?

Opponents of commercial fishing like to claim that trawl nets are being used to destroy pristine, undisturbed wildernesses. But trawl nets have been used in the North Sea for well over 100 years and have been towed across the same fishing grounds time and time and time again.

Rather than pretending that fishing grounds are natural, undisturbed wildernesses, a better analogy would be with farmland. Thousands of years ago our forebearers cut down the natural forests and cleared the natural vegetation that covered the land, or they dyked and drained the marshes, to create farmland. Every year, farmers use that land to grow the crops or animals that we depend on for food.

In the same way, fishermen have been returning to the same fishing grounds for generations. And those grounds have continued to produce large catches of fish year after year after year.

Although ploughing and harrowing cause far greater disturbance to the land than trawling does to the seabed, and although fishing grounds support an abundance of wildlife, compared to an average farmer's field, few people would suggest that farmers are destroying the land or that ploughing should be banned.



An important source of food

The purpose of fishing is to produce food. And nutritious, high-quality food at that.

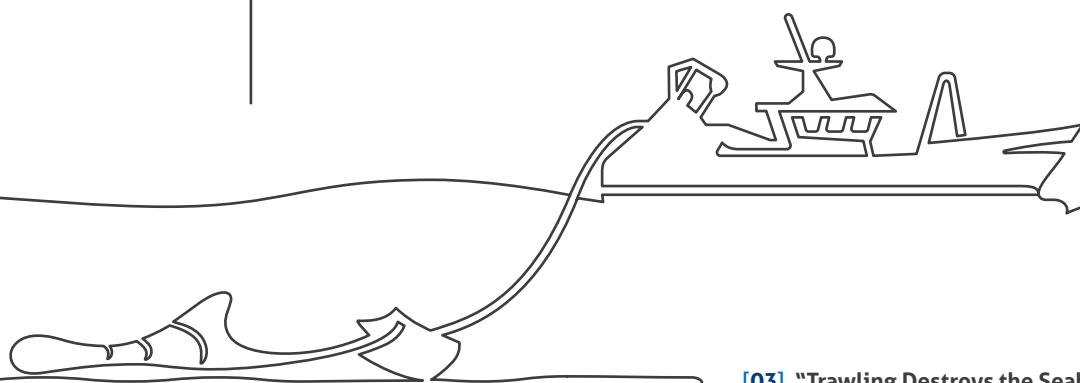
The British fishing fleet catches enough fish to provide about 2.5 billion meals each year. That is one meal each for almost one-third of the world's population, or 37 meals for every man, women and child in the UK.

Fish have a lower carbon footprint than any other source of animal protein (half that of chicken or pork, one-sixth that of beef), and the broader environmental footprint of fishing is less than that of most other means of food production (including vegetarian options).

Trawling is an effective and efficient means of catching many different kinds of fish. Other ways of fishing generally catch fewer fish species and also have undesirable environmental effects – entangling seals, dolphins or seabirds, etc.

So, whatever effects trawling might have on the environment have to be set against the effects of producing the same quantity of food (of the same quality) in other ways.

If fishermen are stopped from trawling, we will have to produce more food on land. More land will have to be cleared for farming and that farming will consume more fresh water, use more fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides, and produce more CO₂ than fishing would have.





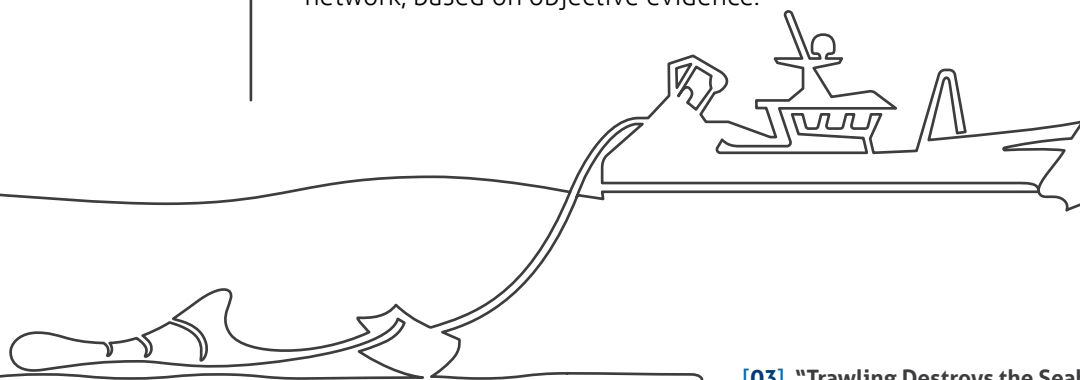
Should we ban farming within three miles of the coast?

A popular call from those opposed to commercial fishing is that trawling should be banned within three miles of the coast.

Yet such a sweeping measure would be no more logical than banning ploughing within three miles of the coast.

All fishing methods affect the environment in some way. Just as shipping, tourism, marine renewable energy or even just the weather do; this is a fact to be accepted as a compromise in the wider concept of securing food.

If areas of the seabed or certain features are found to need extra protection, they should be included in the Marine Protected Area network, based on objective evidence.





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A white line-art illustration on a blue background. It depicts a fisherman in a small boat, pulling a large net that is filled with fish. The net is being hauled up from the water, and the fish are visible inside it. The fisherman is standing in the boat, which has a small cabin and a mast.

www.shetlandfishermen.com