

Mairi Gougeon MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG



Dear Minister,

7th June 2022

The Scottish Government should ban intensive gillnetting in Scottish seas.

The use of this practice by foreign fishing boats in our seas has significantly increased in recent years and is highly destructive both to the economy of our coastal communities and to our marine ecology.

We hope that this joint letter serves to demonstrate the strength of feeling across our community concerning the environmental damage done by these vessels.

The Shetland Fishermen's Association represents over 110 commercial fishing vessels in Shetland covering a range of pelagic, whitefish and shellfish boats. Shetland Greens, the local branch of the Scottish Green Party, are committed to working with fishing crews in the isles to promote locally managed fisheries that will sustain the marine environment and our fishing communities for future generations.

Destruction of our marine environment

Gillnets are cheap, mass produced, monofilament plastic nets that are kilometres long. The intensity of the current gillnet fishing effort around Shetland means that large areas of sea are surrounded by a curtain of netting designed to catch or entangle everything swimming in their vicinity. The nets are not made to last and wear out easily, with vessel operators guilty of dumping masses of this used gillnetting into the water. The resulting bycatch or entanglements continue to have deadly consequences for Shetland's famed populations of sea mammals, birds, and our wider marine ecology.

Entanglement from discarded gillnets is not only a hazard for marine wildlife but also presents as a significant danger for shipping, as nets can become entangled in ships' propellers. The sheer proliferation of discarded gillnetting means that local fishing crews often trawl up a mess of dumped gillnet gear, spending considerable time and expense in untangling and disposing of the gillnetting responsibly. This can often lead to safety concerns onboard, especially when this detangling work needs carried out on deck in poor weather.

As well as dumping used gillnets, we are also concerned about the dumping of domestic rubbish from foreign fishing boats. A fishing crew spending days offshore will normally land both boxes of fish and bags of bruck, which should be unloaded when the boat is in harbour. Shetlanders do not see this happening. Instead, we frequently find French and Spanish food packaging washing up on Shetland's shoreline and the same rubbish being trawled up by our fishing crews in local waters.

Unregulated landings

We are concerned that many foreign fishing boats bypass the well-regulated local fish markets. Foreign boats frequently load their catch straight from the harbourside into the back of refrigerated lorries heading straight to markets on the continent - bringing little benefit to the local economy. These "lorry landings" invariably go uninspected by Marine Scotland, raising suspicions of illegal fishing. Marine Scotland must better fulfil its duty to check landings against catch declarations and quota allocations, to ensure that these vessels are fishing at sustainable levels.

Dangerous tactics at sea

Shetland's fishing crews also have more practical concerns: visiting gillnet vessels laying out kilometres of nets often render traditional fishing grounds inaccessible to Shetland boats - adding to the "spatial squeeze" increasingly experienced by fishermen around Scotland. Visiting gillnetters have also shown dangerous behaviour at sea, such as the infamous 2020 example of a Spanish owned, German-registered gillnetter attempting to run a rope through the propeller of a Shetland whitefish trawler.

Sustaining our Ecology and our Economy

Shetland's fishing fleet is a collection of family-owned small businesses, with an average crew age of 38 years old. Fishing operations in Shetland also support a large number of secondary jobs in related sectors such as fish processing and marine engineering.

Local vessels are all signed up to participate in KIMO's 'Fishing For Litter' scheme, old nets are recycled, and carbon emissions have been reduced by introducing 14 new build, fuel efficient trawlers to the local fleet within 10 years. Fishing also remains among the best sources of nutritious food, with a lower carbon cost than most alternative sources of protein.

Fishing crews and the Green movement are not always in agreement, but on this subject, we concur: the Scottish Government should **ban intensive gillnetting in Scottish seas**.

Any level of co-operation between our two sections of Shetland society should be illustrative to your government of the level of concern in our community, and the wider public will to see action taken. The practice and proliferation of intensive gillnetting is not compatible with sustainable fisheries management.

In the short term, whilst we understand the resource issues within the department, we hope to see Marine Scotland conducting much more regular inspections of these vessels when landing into Shetland ports - with a particular focus on waste logs and catch compositions to ensure responsible disposal of waste and sustainable fishing.

We also recognise, as the UK Government's Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recently did, the distinction between the visiting intensive gillnetters and the smaller, artisan inshore boats that practice gillnetting in responsible and sustainable ways.

We further note that the Scottish Government is seeking views, through its ongoing Future Catching Policy public consultation, on "additional management measures which might be required for the gillnet and longline fisheries." This consideration is welcome, and both the Shetland Fishermen's Association and the Shetland Greens will make sure to strongly re-iterate these points through the consultation process.

On behalf of our whole community, we hope the Scottish Government will soon take swift and sensible action to protect and sustain our island community's marine ecology and economy.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex Armitage', written in a cursive style.

Dr Alex Armitage
Shetland Islands Councillor for Shetland South
on behalf of the Shetland Greens

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sheila Keith', written in a cursive style.

and Sheila Keith
Executive Officer
on behalf of Shetland Fishermen's Association