

A new study underlights the hidden costs of bottom trawling in Europe

A [new study](#), released in preprint, has revealed that the practice of bottom trawling in European waters, including those of the EU, UK, Norway, and Iceland, is imposing staggering economic costs of up to €10.8 billion annually, largely due to massive carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Forbidding this fishing practice in marine protected areas (MPAs) would benefit marine life, the climate and the fishing industry.

A destructive practice in Marine Protected Areas

Bottom trawling is a destructive fishing technique that involves dragging massive nets along the seafloor, capturing fish and marine species while destroying vital ecosystems. The environmental toll is severe, as it not only damages habitats but also generates vast amounts of bycatch (up to 75% of the marine life caught in these nets is discarded). Alarmingly, **bottom trawling is still prevalent in Europe's marine protected areas (MPAs), which were meant to offer refuge for marine life.** Currently, around 60% of Europe's MPAs are impacted by bottom trawling, with 13% of the trawling effort taking place inside these protected zones, including 20% within the EU.

Enric Sala, National Geographic Explorer and one of the authors of the study, calls bottom trawling in MPAs "an economic failure." He argues that banning this harmful practice in protected areas would not only benefit ocean life but would also be a win for the fishing industry and the climate.

Economic and environmental costs of bottom trawling

The economic implications of bottom trawling are substantial. The study estimates that bottom trawling generates a net cost to European society ranging from €330 million to €11 billion annually, with the majority of these costs stemming from the release of CO₂ emissions caused by the disruption of seafloor sediment.

European governments are currently spending around €1.3 billion annually on bottom trawling subsidies, a figure almost equal to the value of the jobs the industry supports. Without these subsidies, bottom trawling would not be profitable for many companies. Despite this, the practice only provides about 2% of the animal protein consumed in Europe. This suggests that **taxpayers are essentially funding the destruction of their own protected marine areas.**

Banning bottom trawling in MPAs

The research work proposes that reducing bottom trawling fishing effort by a third across Europe could maximize net benefits, especially if the social cost of CO₂ emissions is factored in. Redirecting a fraction of current harmful subsidies could also help finance a transition to more sustainable fishing practices. A ban on bottom trawling in MPAs, without simply relocating the fishing efforts elsewhere, would allow marine ecosystems to recover, mitigate global warming, and promote sustainable fisheries.

Bally Philp, national coordinator of the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, argues that the real issue lies in allowing bottom trawling in areas where more sustainable and selective fishing methods could be employed. This is costing jobs, revenue, and irreparably damaging marine ecosystems.

Several European leaders have already acknowledged the significant costs associated with bottom trawling. In April 2024, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis committed to banning bottom

trawling in Greek MPAs by 2030, with Sweden following suit shortly thereafter. The European Commission's action plan also aims to phase out bottom fishing in all MPAs by 2030, recognizing their crucial role in restoring biodiversity and supporting climate change mitigation efforts.

The findings of this study present a clear case for rethinking bottom trawling in Europe. A ban in MPAs could protect marine life, save taxpayers billions, support sustainable fisheries, and play a pivotal role in addressing climate change.