

News Release

Immediate Release

19 March 2026

**ESS demonstrates that measuring the contribution of marine protection areas towards healthy Scottish seas is “feasible and informative”**

Environmental Standards Scotland (ESS) has today published a technical report setting out a practical method to calculate the potential contribution of spatial measures that restrict fishing, such as marine protected areas (MPAs), to achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) in Scotland’s seas.

Under the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, the Scottish Government is required to publish a Programme of Measures setting out how it will achieve GES in Scottish Waters as part of the UK Marine Strategy (UKMS).

GES is measured for different characteristics. The most recent assessment (2025) confirmed that GES was only met for two out of 15 characteristics.

Despite this, there has been **little quantitative assessment of how different measures** – including marine protected areas and fisheries restrictions – contribute towards meeting GES. This gap in analysis makes independent scrutiny of the Programme of Measures for achieving GES more difficult.

The ESS report, **How much could marine protected areas contribute to Good Environmental Status?**, seeks to address that gap by adapting an existing, internationally recognised assessment framework - the BH3a indicator used under the OSPAR Convention and the UK Marine Strategy - to provide a practical method for estimating the contribution of marine protected areas, to achieving GES targets.

The analysis includes a deep dive into how the BH3a methodology can be used to calculate the potential contribution of spatial restrictions on mobile bottom fishing - such as trawls and dredges – on physical disturbance targets for ‘benthic’ habitats, seafloor environments that support living marine species.

ESS’ analysis finds that:

- calculating the contribution of spatial measures to environmental targets is both feasible and informative, and could increase transparency for the development of future programmes
- inconsistencies in methodology – such as changing how the boundary of the North Sea and Celtic Sea are defined, or adjusting GES thresholds – can significantly influence conclusions about how much MPAs could contribute to meeting environmental targets. Such inconsistencies make it harder to meaningfully assess the environmental status of Scottish waters over time.

The report does not provide judgement on whether the Scottish Government has met its duties. Instead, it highlights how developing a more consistent evidence base can support clearer assessment and could increase transparent planning for future programmes.

Mark Roberts, Chief Executive of ESS, said:

“Achieving GES matters because it is the benchmark by which we judge whether our seas are healthy, productive and used sustainably. Our analysis shows that calculating the contribution of MPAs to environmental targets is feasible and informative, and could increase transparency to the assessment process used to evaluate GES in Scottish waters.

“This work also highlights that without consistent methodologies, it is hard to determine whether meaningful progress has been made. As Scotland develops the new biodiversity targets under the Natural Environment (Scotland) Act, there is an

opportunity to apply lessons learned from the difficulties of assessing GES, helping to ensure Scotland has strong and effective environmental targets for the future.”

ESS will use this work as part of its broader evidence base in examining how effectively Scottish public authorities are fulfilling their duties under the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010. This work is expected to conclude later in 2026.

## **ENDS**

Notes to editors:

- i) You can read the full technical paper [here](#)
- ii) For more information, please contact [press@environmentalstandards.scot](mailto:press@environmentalstandards.scot)