

# Communities the best stewards of natural resources



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Controversial proposals to create Highly Protected Marine Areas risk turning into a political riptide for the Scottish Government.

The Bute House Agreement that brought the Greens into a power-sharing agreement with the SNP in 2021 included a commitment to introduce HPMA's covering "at least 10 per cent of our seas" including inshore waters (a devolved responsibility) and offshore waters (reserved to the UK government).

The deadline for submitting responses to a Scottish Government consultation paper on Scottish HPMA's passed earlier this week. That paper includes an extensive list of proposed activities to be banned within HPMA's including commercial and recreational fishing of any kind, finfish and shellfish aquaculture, and seaweed harvesting, amongst many other things.

HPMA's are presented in the consultation paper's accompanying 'Policy Framework' document as one set of measures (alongside existing Marine Protected Areas and other initiatives) to tackle the biodiversity

crisis within the marine environment. However, as readers of this newspaper will be aware, the proposals' wide-ranging prohibitions have provoked vehement opposition from a wide spectrum of interests in island communities including local authorities, the fishing and aquaculture industries, individuals, and representative bodies.

All are united by a shared concern regarding the potential for lasting damage to be inflicted on the sustainability of these communities if HPMA's are designated in their localities.

The prospect of draconian HPMA designations and their impact on fragile rural communities probably comes pretty far down any list headed 'poor optics' for the SNP right now, but they're still not a good look. It's obvious that the Greens were the driving force behind HPMA's inclusion in the Bute House Agreement given that their manifesto for the Scottish Parliament election in 2021 said that "at least 30 per cent of our seas are protected, and a third of this area will be highly protected, which means fishing and other industries would be excluded".

In contrast, the SNP's 2021 election manifesto made no mention of HPMA's. It did, however, include a promise to "create an explicit economic link between catching and landing, incentivising the landing of more fish in Scotland creating more jobs and business opportunities onshore, especially in processing."

Neither did the SNP's manifesto give any indication that fish farming's time for new developments might soon be up.

Instead, it stated: "We will explore how a Norwegian-style auction system for new farm developments might generate significant income to support inspection and welfare services, provide real community benefit on islands and in remote rural areas and support innovation and enterprise."

It's taken a screeching policy U-turn to get from these manifesto statements regarding fishings and aquaculture to

the SNP's enthusiastic embrace of HPMA's, as proposed in the Bute House Agreement.

Leaving aside the inherent contradictions between the statements and the SNP's current position on HPMA's, there are other significant policy disconnects between the HPMA's concept as envisaged in the Scottish Government's consultation paper and other key aspects of marine policy.

Take, for example, the ambition to be a global leader in "healthy, quality, sustainably harvested and farmed Blue Foods for our own population and beyond", one of six outcomes underpinning the Government's 'Blue Economy Vision for Scotland'. It's difficult to see how a blanket ban on inshore fishing and aquaculture under the proposed HPMA regime aligns with that outcome.

That policy disconnect is underscored by the Blue Food Assessment, recently published landmark research led by Stanford University's Center for Ocean Studies and others. It found that fish, shellfish and algae offer "untapped potential for global development if the right policies and investments are put in place".

Professor Dave Little of Stirling University's Institute of Aquaculture, and one of the study's authors, notes of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture that "despite their contributions, they are often overlooked and unsupported by policies". Many working in these industries in Scotland would doubtless concur.

One would be forgiven for imagining that the choppy political waters into which the Scottish Government is drifting over its proposed HPMA designations offers an open goal to opposition parties; an opportunity to portray the SNP's acquiescence to the Greens' HPMA demands as a transactional policy price worth paying to lock in a pro-independence majority in Parliament.

Inconveniently for Labour and the Conservatives – should they wish to press that point – their respective 2021 election manifestos also committed both



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parties to introducing HPMA's. Without explicitly outlining activities to be banned, Labour indicated support for "a plan for ocean recovery with at least one tenth of Scotland's Seas fully protected, and a further 20 per cent highly protected, from destructive and extractive activities by 2030."

Meanwhile the Conservatives promised to "pilot the introduction of Highly Protected Marine Areas" without any detail regarding what that would entail.

So much for low politics at high table. The much more important concern for already designation-laden island communities is how they can protect their local economies, cultures and livelihoods, so inextricably linked to the sea, amid the looming prospect of HPMA's being imposed upon them.

The HPMA consultation paper's blithe assertion that additional benefits will be generated from "carefully managed tourism and recreational

activities", to compensate for what may be lost is simplistic at best.

There is no disputing that the biodiversity crisis within the marine environment is real and pressing. However, the response to that crisis demands implementation of far more nuanced policy mechanisms than the proposed HPMA's represent.

It also demands an approach that enables island communities to be front and centre in the sustainable stewardship of natural resources, rather than passive recipients of top-down designations.

If Scotland's political parties are genuinely committed to addressing the marine biodiversity crisis in ways that help rather than harm these communities' sustainability, now is the time to show it.

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