

Open letter from United Kingdom scientists concerned with the protection of deep-sea biodiversity

To the **Right Honourable Ben Bradshaw MP**, UK Minister for Nature Conservation and Fisheries, House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1A 0AA

13th October 2005

Dear Minister,

We urge you to take advantage of a historical opportunity to secure significant protection for the world's deep-ocean ecosystems on the high seas – the two-thirds of the world's oceans that lie beyond the jurisdiction of any nation. We are calling on you exercise leadership during the UK Presidency of the European Union to negotiate a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawl fishing on the high seas at the United Nations General Assembly this year.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that over the past several years the scientific community has expressed increasing concern over the impact of bottom trawl fishing on cold-water corals and other vulnerable deep-sea species and ecosystems.

At the 10th Deep-Sea Biology Symposium and the 2nd International Symposium on Deep Sea Corals, both held in 2003, over 100 scientists signed a letter of concern to the United Nations General Assembly. The letter stated:

populations of numerous commercially important species of deep-sea fish and precious corals associated with seamounts, ridges, plateaus, continental slopes, coral reefs and sponge fields in the deep-sea have been serially depleted by fishing;
benthic habitats and communities have been severely damaged by fishing activities;
the biological characteristics of most deep-sea species render the deep sea particularly sensitive to anthropogenic disturbance and exploitation;
although knowledge of deep-sea biodiversity is limited, evidence to date suggests that deep water habitats such as coral, seamount, seep and vent ecosystems are likely to harbour distinct assemblages of diverse and highly endemic species.

The lack of effective international regulations for the conservation of natural systems and the protection of the biodiversity of the deep sea on the High Seas, as well as within areas of national jurisdiction (EEZs), is a cause of great concern. In this regard, consistent with the precautionary approach, we recommend that:

the conservation and protection of the biodiversity of the deep sea is the responsibility of all nations, in particular on the global ocean commons – the High Seas;
the UN General Assembly should adopt a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawl fishing on the

High Seas effective immediately.

Subsequently, 1,136 scientists from 69 countries, including over 70 marine biologists from the UK, endorsed the *Scientists' Statement on Protecting the World's Deep-sea Coral and Sponge Ecosystems* released at the February 2004 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, calling on the UN General Assembly to adopt a moratorium on bottom trawl fishing on the high seas. In December 2004, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution expressed similar concern with respect to deep-sea bottom trawl fishing, urging that it be banned in national waters of the UK.

Minister, this issue requires leadership – both within the European Union and at the United Nations. We urge you to use the opportunity conferred on you by the UK's Presidency of the EU. We ask you to negotiate this year a common EU position in support of a UN General Assembly moratorium on high seas bottom trawl fishing to protect deep-sea corals and other vulnerable species before more of these ecosystems are irreparably destroyed and their wealth lost to present and future generations.

The following individuals have signed the letter (affiliations are for identification only, and do not imply endorsement by the signers' institutions):

Professor Callum Roberts, Environment Department, University of York, YO10 5DD.
Dr Jason Hall-Spencer, University of Plymouth
Dr Alex Rogers, British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge
Professor Lord May of Oxford OM AC Kt PRS, Dept of Zoology, University of Oxford
Professor Alastair Fitter, FRS, Dept of Biology, University of York
Dr Alasdair Edwards, Division of Biology, University of Newcastle
Dr. Andy R. Brand, Port Erin Marine Laboratory, University of Liverpool
Dr Bryce Beukers Stewart, University of Liverpool
Professor Chris Thomas, Department of Biology, University of York,
Dr Dan Laffoley, Marine Ecologist
Dr Jason Matthiopoulos, Sea Mammal Research Unit, University of St Andrews
Professor Barbara Brown, University of Newcastle
Dr Jo Gascoigne, School of Ocean Sciences, University of Wales Bangor
Dr Julie Hawkins, Environment Department, University of York
Dr Kerry Howell, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough
Dr Lea-Anne Henry, Scottish Association for Marine Science, Oban
Dr Elizabeth Ashton, Department of Environment and Natural Resources Management
Cantho University, Vietnam
Professor Phil Weaver, National Oceanography Centre, Southampton
Dr Mark Spalding, The Nature Conservancy, Newmarket

Matthew Bunce, MSc, Marine and Coastal Policy Research Group, University of Plymouth
Dr J Murray Roberts, Scottish Association for Marine Science, Oban
Dr Olivia Langmead, Marine & Coastal Policy Research Group, University of Plymouth
Professor Ray Seed, School of Ocean Sciences, University of Wales-Bangor
Dr Sascha K. Hooker, Sea Mammal Research Unit, University of St Andrews
Dr Paul Johnston, University of Exeter
Sue Wells, MSc, c/o UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre, Cambridge
Alastair Harborne, MSc, School of Biosciences, University of Exeter
Dr Andrew Balmford, Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge
Professor Mark Williamson, Department of Biology, University of York
Dr Andrew R.G. Price, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Warwick
Dr Clare Bradshaw, Dept of Systems Ecology, Stockholm University, Sweden
Professor Dave Raffaelli, Environment Department, University of York
Dr Jean-Luc Solandt, Marine Conservation Society, Ross-on-Wye
Dr Simon Ruddell, Sea Mammal Research Unit, University of St Andrews
Dr Jonathan Gordon, Sea Mammal Research Unit, University of St Andrews
Dr Jon Pitchford, Dept of Biology, University of York
Karen Bowler, MSc, Marine & Coastal Policy Research Group, University of Plymouth
Dr Charles Sheppard, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Warwick
Professor Kevin J. Gaston, Department of Animal & Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield
Leanne Mason, MRes, Environment Department, University of York
Dr Lynda Rodwell, Marine & Coastal Policy Research Group, University of Plymouth
Dr Martin Skov, School of Ocean Sciences, Univ. of Wales Bangor
Dr Mauvis Gore, University
Marine Biological Station, Millport
Dr Rupert Ormond, University Marine Biological Station, Millport
Dr Peter Mumby, School of Biosciences, University of Exeter
Professor Richard Law, Department of Biology, University of York
Susan E. Gass M.E.S., Scottish Association for Marine Science, Oban
Dr Lynne Sneddon, School of Biological Sciences, University of Liverpool
Stephen Mangi, MSc, Environment Department, University of York
Dr Nola Barker, Marine Stewardship Council, London
Professor Paul Tyler, National Oceanography Centre, Southampton
Professor Chris Frid, School of Biological Sciences, University of Liverpool