

10th December 2024

Dear Cabinet Secretary

Re – Community led marine protection

I am writing to you on behalf of the Coastal Communities Network (CCN). CCN is made up of 30 community groups located all around the coast and islands of Scotland, united by a desire for a stronger community voice in the management of our seas and coasts. Together they engage Government and other partners to advocate for better protection of our unique marine biodiversity. All members of CCN are led by, and accountable to, the people who live and work in their local area. For more information, please see our website: www.communitiesforseas.scot.

As you are aware, nature is in decline across many areas of Scotland, something that coastal communities are seeing firsthand. In response, community-led groups are taking an increasingly important role in delivering marine conservation in Scotland. **CCN members are keen to understand what communities that want to bring forward community-led protection measures can do to start this process, and potentially meet with you to discuss the current gaps in protection measures and ideas as to how these can be improved.**

We welcomed the statement by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy in June 2023, which reaffirmed the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting any group that wishes to pursue community-led marine protection in its local area. This would allow them to follow the examples of some CCN members such as the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) in setting up a No Take Zone, Berwickshire Marine Reserve introducing voluntary measure agreements, or FIMRO's efforts in engaging the local community through Scotland's only Demonstration and Research MPA to improve the state of the local marine environment. However, we recognise that using existing processes and mechanisms, there is limited scope to both protect the marine environment while ensuring adequate community leadership in its management.

Current perceptions of marine conservation amongst many in coastal communities are of processes being top-down, rather than being led by grassroots and community organisations, that communities often lack power and a voice at community level, and that a just transition to a healthy and sustainable marine management system is currently lacking.

During recent gatherings and discussions between CCN members, the potential for groups to pursue community-led protection measures was highlighted. Indeed, there is a high demand amongst CCN members for the aforementioned support from the Scottish Government, to enable them to designate a local marine area for community-led protection. Over the past few weeks, ten member groups of CCN – a third of the membership – expressed an interest in receiving such support.

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Community-led management of local marine environments offers a unique opportunity to sustainably govern the marine environment, and build bridges in what can often be polarized debates. For example, from discussions we have had internally amongst CCN members, groups do not wish to completely restrict fishing from large swathes of the sea, but rather restrict more damaging forms of industrial fishing, such as demersal bottom trawling. This would allow the marine environment to naturally regenerate, often helped by community-led restoration efforts, and enable more sustainable forms of fishing, such as creel fishing and scallop diving, to grow and continue to support local livelihoods. Governance by a wide range of community stakeholders can help to identify and promote such sustainable uses of the marine environment for the benefit of both the local community and marine ecosystems.

As such, members of CCN are keen to know what communities that want to bring forward community managed marine protection could do to start the process, and what mechanisms already exist for this?

Many members of CCN are engaged in active restoration efforts all along the Scottish coastline, and thus see the connections between protection measures and restoration efforts. CCN supports the idea of creating an ambitious and bold Marine and Coastal Restoration Plan, and are looking forward to being involved in the preparation of this Plan. Effective community-led marine management measures are also vital to the success of this Plan as, without appropriate protection, restoration efforts will be less than optimal.

We would also be delighted to meet with you to discuss the potential for community-led marine management directly.

Best wishes,

Sarah Doherty

On behalf of the Coastal Communities Network