Protection of cold water coral reefs in the OSPAR Maritime Area
- a matter of urgency

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Koster/Yttre Hvaler - A Potential MPA

Location
The eastern parts of the proposed area in the northern Skagerrak (Koster/-Väderöfjorden and Singlefjorden) are situated in Swedish territorial waters and the western part (Yttre Hvaler) is situated in Norwegian territorial waters. The central position of Kosterfjorden/Yttre Hvaler is approximately 58°58,70 N and 11°01,60 E.

Potential Reasons for Selection
The Kosterfjorden/Yttre Hvaler area is representative for marine areas in Skagerrak. The area has a very high diversity of marine species and contains many unique habitats and species that can not be found elsewhere in Sweden or this part of Norway. It contains rich and unique deep sea coral reefs dominated by *Lophelia pertusa* and is an important area for a great variety of invertebrates, fishes, sharks and seals. The area also hosts internationally important numbers of seabirds.

Site Description
The area is situated at the north-eastern edge of the deep Norwegian trench connecting the Skagerrak with the Atlantic Ocean. The depth of the area varies from 260 m in the deepest part of the trench to depths of <50 m towards the coast, with the major part of the area being ~200 m deep. The bottom topography is highly varied and the area contains many different marine biotopes such as soft and hard substrates at various depths, kelp beds and shell gravel.

The hydrographic conditions in the Skagerrak are characterised by stratified water masses with highly saline (35‰) bottom water originating from the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean covered by layers of lower salinities (15 - 33‰), influenced by runoff from the Baltic Sea and local rivers.

Kosterfjorden/ Yttre Hvaler - a Showcase Example for the OSPAR System of Marine Protected Areas

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Potential Reasons for Selection
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Biological Features
The proposed ensemble of Kosterfjorden/Yttre Hvaler can be considered to be representative for Skagerrak habitats and species. But it also contains many unique traits that cannot be found elsewhere in Sweden or this part of Norway (south and east of Vestlandet), e.g. deep (>200m) soft and hard bottoms, very exposed shallow sediments and rocks and deep water coral reefs, dominated by *Lophelia pertusa*. The species diversity is very high, with ~7000 species recorded to date. Deep water coral reefs dominated by *Lophelia pertusa* are one of Scandinavia’s most species-rich environments. Small patches of living *Lophelia pertusa* colonies have long been known to exist in the Swedish Koster-/Väderöfjorden. Only in 2002, a previously unknown coral reef at least 1.2 km long and 200 m wide was found north of Tisler in Yttre Hvaler in Norway, close to the border to Sweden, possibly the largest reef found in inshore waters so far. Living corals were found between 160 and 74 m depth and yellow varieties of *Lophelia pertusa* were documented for the first time. There are at least two more, yet unexplored reefs nearby.

Fig. 1: Location of the proposed Kosterfjorden/Yttre Hvaler transboundary MPA. The detailed map inserted gives an impression of the type and size of the area (courtesy of Tomas Lundälv, Tjärnö Laboratory)

Fig. 2: Yellow variety of *Lophelia pertusa* at Yttre Hvaler © Tomas Lundälv, Tjärnö Laboratory/WWF Sweden
Many invertebrate species have been recorded in the area, e.g. sea-pens, sponges and brachiopods. Lightly trawled fjords like Singlefjorden still contain many species that are sensitive to trawling. The area is known as an important area for reproduction and growth of a lot of commercial fish species, molluscs and crustaceans, but also sharks and rays which, however, have decreased dramatically in recent times. Moreover, the area contains many important feeding grounds for the common seal (Phoca vitulina) and, to a smaller extent, the grey seal (Halichoerus grypus). The Skagerrak area (48.500km²) is also identified as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International and hosts internationally important numbers of e.g. guillemot (Uria aalge), herring gull (Larus argentatus), great skua (Catharacta skua), little auk (Alle alle).

**Human Impacts**

There are many threats to the area, large-scale ones like eutrophication, and local ones, such as fishery, shipping, exploitation for harbours and other constructions. There is a big shipping lane passing right through the area to the harbours in Halden, Sarpsborg and Strømstad and the area is close to the major shipping route to the Oslo fjord. Thus, there is a risk of oil spills and release of toxic chemicals, which particularly endanger the seabirds and the sensitive coral reef biotopes in the area. There is no offshore oil industry in the region, although oil prospecting may be initiated in the Norwegian sector of Skagerrak. The most immediate threat has been considered to be the shrimp fisheries. The shrimp trawling has lasted for almost 100 years and occupies about 80 fishermen and some 50 boats. The Skagerrak shrimp stock is considered stable and is not threatened. Nevertheless, shrimp trawling has negative side effects including both direct mechanical damage on the fauna in deep soft sediments and sensitive biotopes such as coral reefs, and indirect effects of increased sedimentation on deep hard bottoms, caused by re-suspension of seafloor sediments. Observations made at the coral reef in Hvaler indicates that at least 50% of the living reef has been damaged to a larger or lesser degree. This has caused great concern, not least amongst fishermen, who have reported reduced catches in the areas near to corals after trawling activities.

**Existing/Proposed Protection**

Koster-Väderöfjorden (~426 km²), in the Swedish part of the area, has already been declared a Natura 2000 area according to the EU Habitats Directive. The County Administration in Västra Götaland is working on a management plan for the area. Since 1999, a working group, consisting of representatives from public authorities, fishing organisations and individual fishermen, has been successfully working to reduce the effects of shrimp trawling on the sensitive marine organisms in the area. Certain gear regulations have been introduced and a number of small areas within the Natura 2000 area are being identified as protected zones where trawling is forbidden. In Norway, the area is listed as a candidate area in the national marine protection plan currently under development. Under this plan, a network of MPAs will be established in Norwegian waters in 2004. The Norwegian 1999 Coral Regulation enables the Ministry of Fisheries to close coral areas to fishing with equipment that may touch the sea floor. The area can also be given the status of a nature reserve or national park under the Norwegian Nature Conversation Act, which has been considered for some time now by the regional authorities with respect to Yttre Hvaler.

**Action to be taken**

Since the newly found Norwegian reefs lie very close to Swedish coral reefs and other important marine areas, it is proposed to establish a transboundary protected area that includes the present marine protected area, Kosterfjorden-Väderöfjorden, the newly discovered reefs in Yttre Hvaler and parts of the Singlefjord. The whole area should be nominated as an OSPAR marine protected area, to be included in the network of marine protected areas in the North-East Atlantic. Within the area there should be cooperation across the national border regarding protection and administration. Coral reefs and other sensitive or valuable areas should be identified and protected from trawling and other activities. The local and national agencies in both Sweden and Norway have indicated their willingness to create a transboundary MPA in the area, but so far there is no decision.

**References/Further Reading**


http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/europe/where/ne_atlantic/corals.cfm

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Fig. 3: Fragile epibenthos living on undisturbed soft sediment habitat © Tomas Lundälv, Tjärnö Laboratory/WWF Sweden

Text prepared by Åsa Anderson and Andreas Tveteraas
The Røst Reef - A Potential MPA

Location
The Røst Reef is located west of the Røst Island in the Lofoten Archipelago, Northern Norway. The reef is approximately 40 km long and 2-3 km wide (see map). It covers an area of approximately 100 km² (10 times larger than the Sula Reef). The reef lies within Norway’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The reef is found within the following coordinates:
A: 67°35,5’ N  9°31,1’ E
B: 67°33,0’ N  9°38,2’ E
C: 67°19,4’ N  9°02,7’ E
D: 67°22,3’ N  8°55,4’ E

Potential Reasons for Selection
The Røst Reef is the world’s largest known cold water (Lophelia pertusa) reef. As such, WWF recognises the Røst Reef as a global natural heritage that merits protection through MPA status. Norwegian scientists estimate that between 30 and 50 % of all Lophelia reefs in Norwegian waters are damaged or impacted as a result of bottom-trawling. Video observations of the Røst Reef have shown particularly large and dense Lophelia colonies, and the reef appears to be largely intact. These factors all contribute to the importance of protecting the Røst Reef for the future.

Site Description
Although the continental break off Røst was known by fishermen to house corals, the discovery of a continuous reef of this size came as a big surprise. The reef was discovered during a routine survey 13-26 May 2002, where a new methodology for coral reef detection was employed. The reef grows above and under the edge of quarternary landslide, at depths between 300 and 400 m. A second survey of the reef was conducted in October 2002. A detailed map of the reef was produced by means of multibeam echosounding.

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Fig. 1: The location of the Røst Reef west of the Røst Island in the Lofoten Archipelago (Northern Norway) is indicated in red on the inserted map.

Biological Features
So far, no ecological studies have been performed on the Røst Reef, but the reef is expected to play the same ecological role as other Lophelia pertusa reefs. Studies performed by the Institute of Marine Research at Storegga, Norway, have shown a significantly higher density of redfish (Sebastes marinus) in Lophelia areas (up to six times higher densities) as compared to the surrounding seabed. Catches of ling (Molva molva) and tusk (Brosme brosme) were also higher in Lophelia areas than outside, although these differences were not statistically significant. Lophelia reefs are known as biodiversity hotspots of the deep seas. More than 750 species have been registered in North-East Atlantic Lophelia reefs.

Fig. 2: Echosound images of the continental break off Røst. Image 1 shows the entire length of the reef area. Image 2 shows details of the landslide terrain. Black lines in image 2 represent sections covered by video inspections. Dense Lophelia colonies grow on the ridges below the break edge. © Institute of Marine Research, Bergen, Norway.
**Human Impacts**

Only a very small portion of the Røst Reef has been inspected by video. The observations indicate that the reef is largely intact. However, a significant number of entangled lines and nets were observed on the reef during video inspection (Fosså, pers.comm.).

According to information from the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, net and line are the most common fishing equipment used on and around the Røst Reef. Trawling activities take place both in the northern and southern parts of the coral area, and to a lesser extent east of the coral area.

A potential threat towards the Røst Reef is future oil and gas development in the vicinity of the reef. The Røst Reef lies within the so-called "Nordland VI" petroleum block, which is regarded as a promising field by oil and gas companies. No licences were granted in this block during the latest licensing round as the Norwegian Ministry of Oil and Energy felt a need for more information before allowing further petroleum activities in this sensitive area, including possible measures to protect coral reefs (letter to WWF-Norway, 10 May 2002).

In general, little is known about the impacts of oil and gas exploration on *Lophelia* colonies. Infrastructure development may lead to physical destruction of reefs and stress due to increased sedimentation. Discharges related to drilling and production (drilling muds and produced water) contain substances known to affect other marine organisms negatively. Until the long-term impacts of these discharges on *Lophelia* have been determined, no such discharges should be allowed near the Røst Reef.

**Existing/Proposed Protection**

To protect the Røst Reef from damaging fisheries activities, a proposal to amend the 1999 Coral Regulation is being considered by the Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries. With this amendment, the Røst Reef and a 5 km buffer zone on all sides will be protected from all fisheries with equipment that may touch the bottom.

While this is certainly a wise and valuable step towards the protection of this unique natural feature, the reef is still unprotected from the potential impacts of petroleum activities. WWF therefore proposes the establishment of a no-go zone for petroleum activities in the Røst area. This zone should encompass the reef, the important seabird colonies at Røst Island and their feeding ground as well as the important fish spawning grounds between Røst Island and the reef.

The Norwegian Nature Conservation Act does not apply beyond territorial waters. It is not possible, therefore, to protect the Røst Reef as a nature reserve. This is a weakness that should be improved in the ongoing process of developing a new Norwegian biodiversity act.

**Action to be taken**

Norway may want to nominate the Røst Reef as a potential OSPAR MPA. Even though OSPAR has not decided on implementation mechanisms for MPAs yet, this will signal the importance of the Røst Reef for regional nature conservation with the intention to ultimately include it in a network of marine protected areas in the North-East Atlantic.

*Text prepared by Andreas Tveteraas*

**References/Further Reading**


http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/europe/where/ne_atlantic/corals.cfm
This letter is sent to you as information only.

The original letter (in Swedish) has been sent to:
Norwegian Ministry of the Environment
Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries
Swedish Ministry of the Environment
Swedish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries

Ulriksdal, 5th September 2002

Our valuable coral reef must be protected!

During the summer, researchers at the Tjärnö Marine Biological Laboratory in Strömstad made a sensational find – a previously unknown coral reef. The reef is beside Tisler in Yttre Hvaler, Norway, on the threshold of the Koster fjord on the border between Norway and Sweden. The newly discovered reef is 1.2 km long and 200 metres wide, but it is possible that there are further living reef sections outside this area. This means that the reef may be the biggest found so far within the skerries, around 1000 times bigger than that which has previously been discovered in the Koster area. Living coral has been found between 150 and 74 meters deep. This means that the reef is one of the shallowest discovered, with the exception of the Tautra reef in Trondheim fjord (39m).

Deep-sea coral consisting of *Lophelia pertusa* is one of Scandinavia’s most species-rich environments. Several hundred species have been observed on or in the vicinity of similar reefs. Reefs provide an important place for reproduction and growth of a string of important commercial fishing species. Yellow varieties of *Lophelia pertusa* have been observed on the newly discovered reef and as far as we know these have never previously been documented!

Unfortunately damage has been observed on the reef, most likely caused by trawl fishing. The estimates made so far suggest that at least 50% of the living reef has been damaged to a greater or lesser degree. Furthermore, trawling has destroyed relatively large areas on the edges of the living coral. There are areas where residues from trawling are trapped in the reef, others where most of the coral has been broken up and further areas where large blocks of coral have been broken loose. Previous studies have shown that 30-50% of coral reefs in Norwegian waters have been ravaged by trawler fishing. This has caused great concern not least amongst fishermen, who have reported reduced catches in the areas near to corals after trawling activities.

The newly discovered reef near Tisler is a unique and extremely rich coral area. This fact, combined with the ecological and economic importance of coral reefs and their vulnerability signifies that the **newly discovered reef must immediately be protected** against damaging effects and interference. Since the new reef lies very close to the previously discovered Swedish coral reef, WWF considers that a **transboundary protection area, including both Norwegian and Swedish waters** should be established.

The Koster-Väderö fjord, on the Swedish side of the border, has already been declared a Natura 2000 area (SEO520170, SEO520143) according to the EUs Habitat Directive. A working group (Kostergruppen) consisting of representatives from public authorities, fishing organisations and individual fishermen has been working to reduce the effects of prawn trawling on the sensitive marine organisms in the area since 1999. The work has been successful. Amongst other things the work has lead to a number of small areas within the Natura 2000 area being identified as protected zones where
Trawling is forbidden. No protected zones have so far been created in the Norwegian part of the area. However a process is underway to establish such zones and the Norwegian fishery department has signalled a willingness to give financial support to further mapping of the seabed in the Skagerack area.

Joint transboundary protective measures have previously been discussed for this area and around Singlefjorden. The area is lightly trawled compared with neighbouring areas, which means that it still contains many valuable species that are sensitive to trawling.

It is very important to secure protection for the area and we remind Sweden and Norway of commitments made to protect the marine environment through international agreements within the EU, North Sea Commission and OSPAR. WWF therefore makes the following demands to you as ministers with direct responsibility for, and means to, safeguard the future of these areas:

**Create a continuous transboundary protected area** by extending the present marine protected area, Kosterfjorden-Väderöfjorden, to include the newly discovered reef north of Tisler and parts of the Singlefjord. Within this area, WWF considers that:

- There should be cooperation across the national border regarding protection and administration (e.g. fishing, shipping)
- The whole area should be appointed a MPA within the OSPAR framework for protected areas.
- Coral reef and other sensitive or valuable areas should be identified and protected from trawling and other threats. The working methods used by the Koster-Väderöfjord group, where all interested parties are included in the process, should be used.
- More resources for mapping of the seabed and surrounding area should be made available because information currently available is limited.
- Two specific areas should be protected immediately:
  1. **Trawling should be banned in the area of the newly discovered reef north of Tisler.** The Norwegian "Koralllforskriften" enables the possibility to close areas of valuable coral reef to fishing on the sea bed. **The reef should also be given the status of "marint verneområde" and should be protected from all forms of damage through protection with " naturvernloven".**
  2. **Trawling should be banned in all trawlable parts of the Singlefjord (>60m), from Säcken northwards in both Swedish and Norwegian waters.** Previous plans for transboundary protection for these areas should be realised.

Realisation of these demands would testify to the political energy and the governments’ intentions to strengthen management of the sea environment.

With best regards

Lars Kristoferson
General Secretary WWF-Sweden

Rasmus Hansson
General Secretary WWF-Norway

This letter has been sent to the Swedish Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries as well as the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Fisheries. A copy in English is submitted to the 2003 Meeting of the OSPAR Biodiversity Committee for information.
Press release

Embargoed till 0001hrs 23rd October 2002

Government inaction threatens to destroy Darwin Mounds

A status report published today on recently discovered coral reefs unique to Scotland (the Darwin Mounds), reveals threat of ongoing damage by deep water trawlers despite a year old government commitment to urgently protect them (1).

A year ago to the day, Margaret Beckett, UK Secretary of State for the Environment, promised to protect the Darwin Mounds by designating them as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (2). A year on and WWF, the global environment network, is still waiting for government action. Meanwhile, the Mounds, thought to be thousands of years old, are being destroyed by fishing boats trawling the area for deepwater fish.

Today’s report, Out of sight and still under threat, reveals that no action has been taken to prevent continued damage by trawlers. Latest information reveals that catches of deep water fish species in the area doubled during 2001. New catch quotas proposed under the Common Fisheries Policy for deep-water species, with no restriction of where they are fished, will mean that fishing will continue. WWF is concerned that the Mounds are under more threat than ever.

“Margaret Beckett’s promise to protect the Darwin Mounds has delivered nothing,” said WWF’s Marine Officer Helen McLachlan. “Instead each day that passes means these corals could be destroyed before they are ever protected, resulting in the loss of a unique marine habitat before we have time to truly appreciate its wonders.”

WWF is calling on the UK and Scottish Governments to act now to save the Darwin Mounds by:

- prioritising designation of the Darwin Mounds as a Special Area of Conservation
- issuing emergency measures to stop deep water trawling over the area of seabed covered by the Darwin Mounds, as well as reviewing other activities such as scientific sampling and communications cable laying
- funding a survey of the Mounds to assess the extent of any further damage to the area.

“These corals are an oasis of marine life, hosting species such as sponges, starfish, sea urchins, crabs and deep sea fish. Compared to the barren seabed around them, the mounds are like a tropical rain forest surrounded by desert.”
“They are a precious jewel in the crown of Scotland’s natural heritage. The Scottish Executive should also be pressing the UK government to live up to its commitment to protect them, rather than turning a blind eye to their fate,” added McLachlan.

EDITOR’S NOTES

(1) First discovered in 1998, the Darwin Mounds are unique. They are a collection of sandy and cold-water coral mounds, located some 1,000m below the surface of the ocean, about 185km north-west of Cape Wrath, the north-west tip of mainland Scotland. There are hundreds of mounds in the field, which in total cover approximately 100 sq km. Individual mounds are typically circular, up to 5m high and 100m wide.

(2) On 23 October 2001, UK Minister Margaret Beckett made a commitment at WWF’s Oceans Recovery Summit in Edinburgh to protect the Darwin Mounds. [www.defra.gov.uk/news/2001/011023a.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2001/011023a.htm). The summit launched the Edinburgh Declaration, targeting politicians and marine stakeholders alike to sign up to action to safeguard the seas. WWF is pressing Scottish politicians to sign up – only a minority has so far bothered to do so. Go to [www.wwf.org.uk/scotland](http://www.wwf.org.uk/scotland) for further information. WWF has written both to Margaret Beckett and to Scottish Fisheries Minister Ross Finnie MSP asking for urgent action to be taken.

(3) The ‘Out of sight and still under threat’ report is available on our web site and on PDF.

(4) see attached questions and answers briefing for basic information

(5) According to latest information, fish landings of target species in the area (VI ) such as Round-nosed grenadier and Orange roughy have doubled. Landings of Orange roughy have increased (2001 latest assessment) from 130 tonnes to 280 tonnes. The Round-nosed grenadier catch has doubled from 433 tonnes to 955 tonnes. Many of the species are landed in North West Scottish ports such as Lochinver. French and Irish deep water trawlers dominate the fishing. The Orange Roughy is also severely threatened by over-exploitation as it does not mature till it is aged 30. The population had already declined by 70% by 1998.

(6) The Marine Task Force of the environment umbrella group 'Scottish Environment Link' are this week launching a manifesto on the need for improved management strategy for Scotland's Seas, called 'seas fit for Scotland'.

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WWF is now known simply by its initials and the panda logo, in line with the whole international network. WWF, the global environment network, takes action to conserve endangered species, protect endangered spaces and address global environmental threats, by seeking long-term solutions.
Close Europe’s cold-water coral reefs to fishing

In a recent report to the European Commission, scientists from ICES have warned that the only way to protect Europe’s cold-water coral reefs is to accurately map them and then close them to fishing trawlers. Research has shown that cold-water coral in the northeast Atlantic is being seriously damaged by towed nets, which can break up the reef structure, damage the sensitive coral polyps and swamp the reef with sediment. The most common species in the northeast Atlantic is *Lophelia pertusa* and closed areas for this species have already been used as a protection measure in Norway and Sweden.

The report was produced in response to a request by the European Commission for advice on the impacts of fishing on cold-water coral reefs. ICES is the main provider of scientific advice to the European Commission on fisheries and environment issues in the northeast Atlantic. David Griffith, General Secretary of ICES, said today,

“Towing a heavy trawl net through a cold-water coral reef is a bit like driving a bulldozer through a nature reserve. The only practical way of protecting these reefs is therefore to find out where they are and then prevent boats from trawling over them. We know that most fishing boat skippers would rather steer clear of coral reefs, as the reefs can damage their gear, so producing accurate maps will actually help them to avoid these areas”.

ICES has also advised that current by-catch recording schemes for fishing vessels should be widened to include records of *Lophelia*. This will help identify the main areas where fishing pressure is having an effect on reefs.

Protecting cold-water coral reefs

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives are the main legal tool for nature conservation around Europe. These Directives allow Member States to set up two types of protected areas; Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for wildlife habitats and species and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds.

Until recently, Member States had only applied the Directives to territorial waters (up to 12 miles from the coast) thereby excluding cold-water coral reefs which are generally further offshore. But, following a court ruling in 1999, the UK government - subsequently followed by most other EU governments - accepted that the EU Habitats and Birds Directives applied to their waters out to 200 nm offshore. This effectively means that legal protection of cold-water coral reefs, through Special Areas of Conservation, is now a possibility.

What is cold-water coral?

Europe’s cold-water coral reefs are similar to coral reefs in tropical seas except that they don’t need sunlight to survive and so can live in the depths of the North Atlantic Ocean. Unlike their tropical relatives that mainly rely on microscopic algae in their tissues for sustenance, cold-water corals feed by capturing food particles from the surrounding water.
**Lophelia pertusa** is the most common cold-water coral species and is formed by a colony of organisms called polyps that produce a hard carbonate skeleton. It is normally found at depths of between 200 and 1000 metres. On average the coral structure grows at the rate of 1mm in height per year and the highest reefs found so far have been measured at an impressive 35m at Sula Ridge off the Norwegian coast. Reef structures take centuries to form and fragments taken from the reef at Sula have been dated as being 8500 years old.

**Further information:**

To access the ICES report on cold-water corals go to [www.ices.dk/aboutus/pressroom.asp](http://www.ices.dk/aboutus/pressroom.asp)

For further information about ICES please contact:

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[www.ices.dk/aboutus/pressroom.asp](http://www.ices.dk/aboutus/pressroom.asp)

**NOTES FOR EDITORS**

**International Council for the Exploration of the Sea**

ICES is the organisation that coordinates and promotes marine research in the North Atlantic. This includes adjacent seas such as the Baltic Sea and North Sea. ICES acts as a meeting point for a community of more than 1600 marine scientists from 19 countries around the North Atlantic.

Scientists working through ICES gather information about the marine ecosystem. As well as filling gaps in existing knowledge, this information is also developed into unbiased, non-political advice. The advice is then used by the 19 member countries, which fund and support ICES, to help them manage the North Atlantic Ocean and adjacent seas. The annual budget is 24 million dkk.
ICES plans and coordinates marine research through a system of committees, more than 100 working groups, symposia, and an Annual Science Conference. Most meetings take place either at the ICES Headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark, or in the member countries.

ICES has been based in Copenhagen, Denmark, since 1902. Today, we have a Secretariat of 35 staff who provide scientific, administrative and secretarial support to the ICES Community of over 1600 marine scientists. http://www.ices.dk
Press Release
Not for distribution before 00:01 GMT on 26 February 2002

Protect Europe's coral reefs from industrial fishing says WWF

Brussels, Belgium - WWF, the conservation organization, is calling for the EU to protect its deep-water coral reefs that are being severely damaged by modern fishing equipment.

WWF's call comes as the Royal Society's Proceedings B publishes a new report by Jason Hall-Spencer, Valerie Allain and Jan Helge Fossa on the damage to coral reefs off the West Coast of Ireland. The report finds that modern fishing equipment, which is dragged along the sea-bed, has severely damaged four and a half thousand-year-old coral reefs along the edge of the European continental shelf. Though these non-tropical cold water reefs have only recently been discovered, and little is known about their ecology, scientists say that they are fragile and easily reduced to rubble by modern fishing gear. Deep water trawling not only destroys patches of coral but flattens the seafloor, damaging or wiping out delicate soft bottom species like seapens, sponges or the giant single-celled Xenophyophores.

WWF is calling for the reefs throughout EU waters to be protected from current industrial fishing practices under the European Union’s Habitats Directive. The conservation organization also demands that this year’s review of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) add specific environmental protection clauses to the CFP to prevent the destruction by fishing gear of unique natural wonders such as deep-water coral reefs.

"These magnificent coral reefs should be off limits for fishing," said Stephan Lutter, Director of WWF’s North East Atlantic Programme. "This year, the list of marine sites to be protected under the Habitats Directive is supposed to be finalized and the Common Fisheries Policy is up for review. Both provide excellent opportunities to safeguard our amazing underwater natural heritage."

Last year, WWF published an initial list of all offshore sites presently known to be eligible for protection under the European Habitats Directive. According to this list, at least two thirds of the known cold water reefs occur in Irish waters. WWF urges the Irish government to act quickly and designate offshore coral reefs for protection under the European Habitats Directive.

Though large scale fishing did not extend to the outer parts of the North Eastern Atlantic continental shelf until the 1980s, recent photographic and acoustic surveys have documented damage caused by dragging weighted trawl nets along the sea bottom off the western coast of Ireland, Scotland and Norway, demonstrating the intensity of fishing in the area. Hall-Spencer, Allain and Fossa note in their report that corals and large amounts of sponges were formed part of the 229 ‘hauls’ of two French deep-sea trawlers. This not thought to be an isolated example, even though accidental destruction of coral is known to reduce fish catches.

"We know that corals have been damaged accidentally by trawling when reviewing deep water trawl fishery survey bycatch records," said Dr Anthony J. Grehan, Chairman of the Irish Coral Task Force, which was set up last year, following (unconfirmed) allegations of deliberate trawling over corals in Ireland. "We are actively pursuing action in terms of the national application of the Habitats Directive and the inclusion of a suite of coral conservation measures in the next Common Fisheries Policy."

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