



Global Marine Programme

Restoring the balance

June 2005

Saving Europe's Coral Reefs A Matter of Urgency

A Promise to be Fulfilled

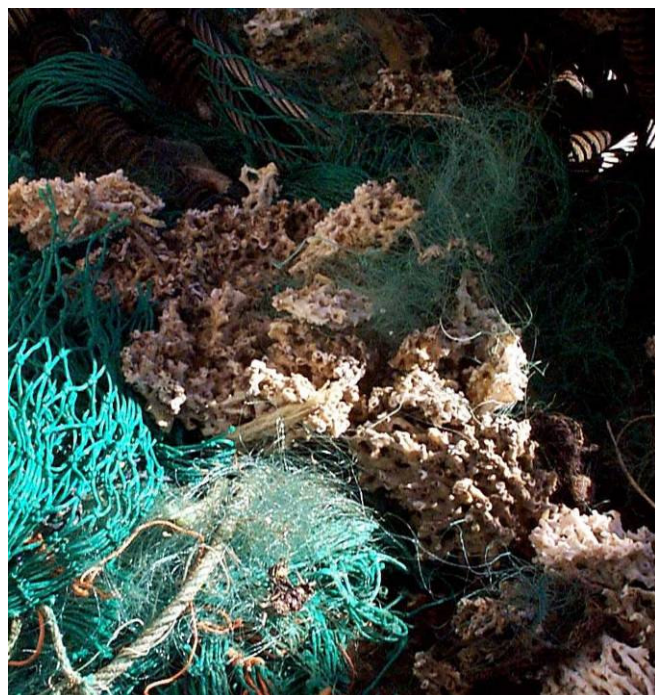
In 2003, Europe's Environment Ministers made a clear commitment to protect cold-water coral reefs at the OSPAR Ministerial Meeting in Bremen and to:

"...take immediate measures to protect coral reefs from further damage due to use of active fishing gear on the reefs. Furthermore, we shall ensure that steps are taken by 2005 to identify additional threats to the cold-water reefs and that measures are taken to protect the reefs against these threats."

(§12 Bremen Ministerial Statement)

Cold-water Corals are Vulnerable

Cold-water corals are vital for fish stocks and as biodiversity resources. They can build intricate reefs hosting a multitude of invertebrates and fish, including commercially important species such as the redfish. But cold-water corals are also particularly vulnerable to physical destruction.



The global fishing fleet is presently causing extensive damage to deep-water coral reefs. Here coral is caught in a commercial trawl from 300m depth off Rockall Bank, UK [1].

1. Hall-Spencer JM, Allain V, Fosså JH, 2002. Trawling damage to Northeast Atlantic ancient coral reefs. *Proceedings of the Royal Society London, B.* 296: 507-511
2. ICES ACE 2005
3. Fosså JH, Mortensen PB, Furevik DM, 2002. The deep-water coral *Lophelia pertusa* in Norwegian waters: distribution and fisheries impacts. *Hydrobiologia* 471: 1-12



© Research Centre Ocean Margins, Bremen

Irish cold-water coral areas host a huge diversity of species and life-forms - such as this crab resting on a coral branch.

Increasing scientific research efforts in northern Europe reveal a pattern of degradation and destruction of coral habitats, with a clear correlation between bottom trawling and coral destruction. In the waters of the Faroes and Norway, for example, an estimated 30-50% of coral habitats are already lost through bottom trawling [2,3].

Almost All are Unprotected

In Europe, cold-water corals occur from northern Norway to southern Portugal along the European continental shelf and islands – and almost all are unprotected.

Two years have passed since the promises made in Bremen – and ancient coral reefs are still being bulldozed by trawlers. Apart from a handful of permanent fisheries regulations (Darwin Mounds (1,300 km²), Tisler reef (1.8 km²) Fjellknausene reef (1.9 km²), Koster-Väderö trough and archipelago (426 km²), no measures have been taken to protect coral areas from harmful fishing practices. Only Sweden and Norway have nominated coral areas as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to OSPAR.

Time is Running Out

WWF calls upon OSPAR Contracting Parties to follow up on their 2003 commitment and take urgent action to designate Europe's coral reefs as MPAs, and to continue to work with the relevant bodies for immediate fisheries measures to halt the destruction of cold water coral.

There is no time to lose!

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Ireland – First Steps Towards Coral Conservation

Irish waters are particularly rich in offshore marine treasures. In Bremen, WWF was particularly delighted to hear the statement from the Irish delegation:

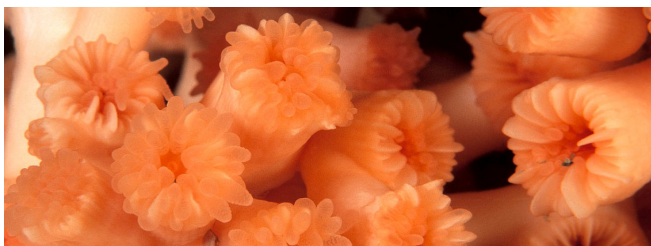
“Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the UK highlighted the need for protection of deep-water coral reefs. ... Ireland was presently in the process of identifying coral reef areas within its waters. Four that had been identified would be proposed as Special Areas of Concern and OSPAR Marine Protected Areas.”

(§3.4 Summary Record Part B, Bremen, 2003)

The announcement was extended to seven sites in early 2005. WWF appreciates Ireland’s progress towards the selection of the most suitable and important coral areas for designation of MPAs. However, these areas have still not been granted any conservation measures.

Ireland Must Act Now to Save Its Corals

WWF asks Ireland to nominate the selected cold-water coral sites as protected areas for the OSPAR network of MPAs and the European Natura 2000 network. WWF expects Ireland to have published the intended sites’ boundaries and protective measures by the end of 2005. There should be no delay in Ireland requesting fisheries measures to achieve immediate protection from harmful fishing practices.



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Close-up of *Lophelia pertusa* cold-water coral polyps.

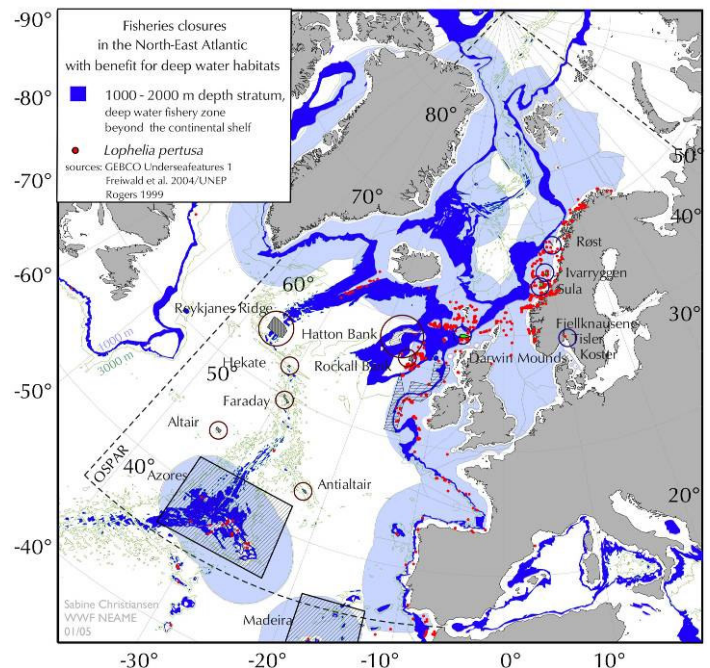
European Fisheries Measures – Limited Progress

European fisheries measures for coral protection have to date been half-hearted and limited by short-term economic interest. However, a few commitments have been made:

In November 2004, the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), encouraged by the Norwegian government, took unprecedented action in granting five areas interim protection from destructive fishing practices. The decision was postponed on two further large areas, the Hatton Bank and the western part of the Rockall Bank, for which the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) was asked to review the scientific evidence of coral habitat. ICES shall also indicate appropriate boundaries for future conservation areas.

In 2003, the restrictive fisheries management regime of the Azores was lifted when the region’s waters became part of the EU fisheries zone by a change in legislation. Since then, only a temporary bottom-trawling ban is in force until end 2005.

The Darwin Mounds remains the only coral site where, since 2004, bottom trawling is permanently prohibited under the reformed EU Common Fisheries Policy. This was the first time such measures had been taken to protect the environment from harmful fishing practices.



WWF is advocating for a network of MPAs across the North East Atlantic. Red dots are known *Lophelia pertusa* cold-water coral areas, and hatched areas indicate where temporary fisheries measures have habitat protection benefits. Only Sweden and Norway have protected coral areas as MPAs.

National Waters – Measures Taken To Date

France: No steps have been taken to conserve the reefs along the Celtic Shelf, known to science since the 1940s, or elsewhere.

Iceland: Substantial research on cold-water coral distribution in relation to fishing activities. However, no protective measures targeting coral areas have been taken.

Ireland: Scientific evidence reveals substantial extent of coral reefs in Irish waters, also demonstrating severe impacts from static fishing gear. No measures taken yet.

Norway: Pioneering cold-water coral protection, five sites covering almost 2,000 km² closed to bottom trawling under national fisheries legislation, including the world’s largest known reef, the Røst reef. A marine national park is being developed, which may lead to protection of corals in eastern Kattegat/Skagerrak.

Portugal: No activities to study or protect cold-water corals are known to have been taken by mainland Portugal. In the Azores, the substantial cold-water coral coverage on seamounts benefits from a permanent ban to bottom trawling up to 100 nm from the islands.

Spain: Only recently, Spain initiated cold-water coral research, with a view to develop MPA proposals. The declaration of the Galicia Bank as the country’s first MPA beyond territorial waters is under consideration.

Sweden: All known coral areas protected from bottom trawling. However, in some cases the exclusion zones agreed with stakeholders have proved too small to prevent further destruction. Plans for establishing a marine national park in the northern Kattegat/Skagerrak are under way.

UK: The UK has yet to deliver on their 2001 commitment to nominate the Darwin Mounds (and other cold-water coral areas) for inclusion in the European Natura 2000 network and the OSPAR network of MPAs.

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