

Roger Crofts



Protecting Scotland's marine areas: right idea, wrong approach

Lessons need to be learnt over the highly protected marine areas scheme — starting with consulting the fishermen who will be affected

The Scottish government's ill-fated proposal for protecting 10 per cent of Scotland's marine environment might have seemed perfectly reasonable to anyone who understands this well tried and tested international approach.

But that was not the case here. Last year it proved to be a disastrous approach, with claims that the livelihoods of fishermen will disappear and the existence of whole fishing communities will be threatened.

Leading the charge against it was the redoubtable [Fergus Ewing](#), a former Scottish cabinet secretary with responsibility for the fishing industry and presumably therefore for its long-term viability and hopefully its environmental sustainability. But why all of the hoo-ha over the highly protected marine areas scheme?

Blunderbuss approaches to setting up new forms of environmental protection, on land or at sea, never work. Indeed, they usually set the cause of protection back many years. While the Scottish government's approach was a well-intended "consultation", it sank and quite rightly had to be taken off the agenda last autumn.

Many lessons have been learnt by nature protection agencies in Scotland and further afield about engaging with the key interests that will be affected. These interests must be partners in the new solution, as opposed to wreckers of any change.

It seems that Marine Scotland had not learnt this pragmatic lesson. And yet some years ago Richard Lochhead, when he was cabinet secretary for fisheries, obtained parliamentary approval for prohibiting the use of certain types of fishing operations in areas justifying protection for the future of the stock.

So what needs to be done now? First and foremost, involve fishermen in developing the solution. It is easy to demonstrate that these protection approaches work in other parts of the world by interacting with fishermen. There are plenty of examples.

For instance, fishermen in the Great Australian Bight were promoters of a scheme to protect the prawn fishery breeding grounds. So why not invite them or others with similar experience over to work with Scottish fishermen on how protecting fish breeding grounds and fishermen's livelihoods can work in tandem?

Second, make sure both scientific and traditional knowledge are shared and understood. Third, after a cooling-off period, why not set up working groups of local and national interests to jointly identify the issues and fashion the solutions? Remember what we did in the preparations for establishing Scotland's first two national parks: establish two working parties a decade before the government's decision.

The Scottish government has already shown it has learnt a lesson by revoking the proposals. I just hope that [Marine Scotland](#) has learnt a lesson like we had to do at Scottish Natural Heritage decades ago about protecting Loch Creran, the sea loch north of Oban, which in 2014 was declared a nature conservation marine protected area and is now flourishing.

Roger Crofts is a former chief executive of Scottish Natural Heritage and is a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature world commission on protected areas