

# Industrialised fishing can be reeled in using creels

## BALLY CROFT

Creel fisherman out of Kyleakin, Isle of Skye

**T**HROUGH most of history fishermen on the Scottish west coast used static gears such as lines, traps and nets to catch fish from the seemingly endlessly abundant waters. Although it was possible to trawl (tow a net along the sea bed), trawling was not favoured because it was considered by many fishermen to be destructive and led to discarding unwanted fish. Industrialisation saw a boom in the demand for fish and the use of sail-trawl vessels increasing.

Due to trawls damaging static gears and declines in fish stocks, the Fisheries Board in 1889 legislated to prohibit trawling within three miles of land. The three-mile limit was further bolstered by closures to trawling in the firths of Clyde, Forth, Moray and Lorne. The industrialised fleet targeted herring and ever more efficient methods were developed to catch ever larger quantities. Engines were introduced, as were synthetic nets and mechanical winches.

As the herring became scarce the fleet moved to trawling for whitefish species, such as cod. This produced a significant by-catch of nephrops (scampi) so, as the whitefish in turn succumbed to the ravages of the industrial fishery, a targeted fishery for nephrops emerged.

The fleet was suffering from overcapacity and the grounds from overfishing. So the industry lobbied for the firths to be reopened to trawling and, in the 1960s, the outer closed areas were reopened.

The three-mile limit area soon became the focus of the trawlers; they argued the static-gear fleet within three miles was inefficient compared to the trawl sector and better profits would arise if the three-mile limit were opened to the trawling vessels.

This was during the Thatcher era and the Government in 1984 opened the formerly closed areas to the trawlers. The result was sadly predictable and, by the early 1990s, all inshore fish landings had declined to practically zero. Introduction of

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quotas in the 1990s via the EU fisheries policy and substantial fleet decommissioning did little to resolve the issue. Similarly, the cod recovery plan failed to yield results.

The Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation (SCFF) has been looking at the potential benefits of reinstating the three-mile limit. It has concluded there is an opportunity to boost employment among fishermen and the value of catches from inshore waters; and to do so without catching more. This is a result of the high value of static gear produce when compared to the low value and high impacts associated with trawl catches. There are some potential problems, however.

The high value of the creel-caught nephrops is due to a niche market. Any transition would have to be paced with corresponding increases in market capacity.

Another issue is the small trawlers that rely on the near-shore zone for their livelihood. Not all would be suitable to convert to creel vessels and the SCFF argues that some compensation and funded restructuring would be required to ensure there was no loss of jobs. The good news is if the SCFF is right; not only would there be a good chance of inshore fish populations and habitats recovering, there could also be an increase in fishermen's jobs.

The SCFF has worked with community and environmental groups to lobby for political support in tackling the legacy of mismanagement. There is an evidence base and a proposed solution. If we can muster the political will, we will have the opportunity to turn round the legacy of industrial fisheries and give future generations something they deserve: to inherit a recovering, if not a healthy, marine ecosystem, at least within three miles of land.

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