

Justice in secret for skippers who flout laws at sea

Demand for naming and shaming as rule-breakers given 'anonymous' fines

EXCLUSIVE
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SKIPPERS who break fishing laws are escaping damaging publicity by agreeing to "anonymous" fines, environmental campaigners have warned.

Charity Open Seas has called for those who commit crimes at sea to be named and shamed amid fears current penalties do little to deter wrongdoing.

Its demand comes after the charity tried and failed to discover the identity of those responsible for illegal scallop dredging in the Gairloch earlier this year.

Fishing watchdog Marine Scotland confirmed it had issued two fixed penalty notices (FPNs) of £2,000 for what were first offences. However, it refused to name the vessel or vessels involved, citing data protection laws.

Some fishing insiders now fear unscrupulous skippers and companies are ready to pay the occasional fine - £2,000 is about the worth of a single haul - as one of their costs of doing business.

However, a previous investigation by the website The Ferret found most infringements dealt with by Marine Scotland were not considered to merit a fine.

A spokesman for Open Seas, which campaigns for sustainable fishing practices, said: "Some fisheries offences amount to serious environ-

mental crimes. Dredging across the seabed in a closed area is no different from illegal logging or polluting.

"Unlawful scallop dredging and trawling in protected areas destroys fragile seabed habitats and is hugely unfair to the sustainable, low impact fleet that depend on healthy seas to harvest seafood responsibly.

"Our justice system needs to reflect the rising importance of environmental sustainability and be set up to properly penalise damaging and illegal fishing. Currently, there is no effective financial and reputational disincentive.

"It is far too easy for a vessel owner to treat the risk of a minor fine as just part of their business model. The fine is often not much more than the value of seafood caught. Who wants to buy seafood from a company that has a record of fishing illegally and destroying the environment?"

Open Seas said it is asking the Scottish Government to provide full transparency on FPNs.

The main commercial fishing lobby, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, refused to comment on the charity's calls. Open Seas is openly loathed by some skippers and owners.

Some fishing industry figures are understood to back a Marine Scotland position that seeks to nudge skippers to compliance rather than adopt a punitive stance. The Scottish Government defended anonymous