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CHARITY BELIEVES ILLEGAL DREDGING TOOK PLACE IN THE SOUND OF MULL

A boat acting suspiciously in the Sound of Mull has been spotted by a charity. Open Seas believes a boat was illegally dredging in the Marine Protected Area (MPA) on January 26. The vessel was tracked travelling at a 'walking speed' and in a long circular motion – looping repeatedly into the protected area.

In conclusion, Open Seas said: 'It is highly likely that the skipper was deliberately and illegally dredging inside the MPA. We cannot see that there is another plausible explanation.'

One week later, three concerned divers searched the seabed, noting that the area was largely barren, but spotted smashed shells.

In December last year, we reported about a similar incident in the Firth of Lorn.

Alasdair Firth, chairman of the Community Association of Lochs and Sounds, wrote to the Scottish Government recently to relay his concerns.

In response, Jim Watson, head of domestic fisheries management, said: 'The Scottish Government takes the enforcement of fisheries management and protection of the wider marine environment seriously.'

He added: 'That is why at the Inshore Fisheries Conference in October last year, the cabinet secretary announced a £1.5 million investment in fishing vessel tracking and monitoring technology.'

Mr Firth said: 'I think it is pretty clear that Marine Scotland have not done what they should be doing. They need to get their act together in the protected areas to properly police them.'

Nick Underdown, from Open Seas, said: 'We are really disappointed and we think the Scottish Government does not understand the depth of concern about the problem.'

'We think they have misjudged just how important the health of the marine environment is to people who live and work in coastal areas and that is a problem for communities and the reputation of our seafood industry.'

Open Seas is calling for effective vessel tracking to be made mandatory.

The charity says the tamper-proof device should contain GPS, should record locations at a minimum of one-minute intervals, should be able to transmit data using mobile networks and be able to store data for up to three months when out of signal, and the device should be able to detect when dredging gear is being deployed.