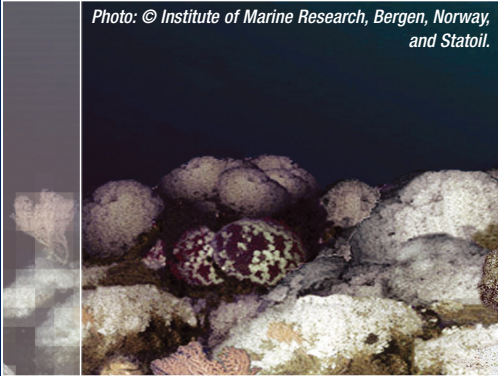


A moratorium on High Seas bottom trawling would provide the United Nations with the space to coordinate the development and implementation of legally binding regimes to protect deep-sea biodiversity in the long-term, and to conserve and sustainably manage the bottom fisheries of the high seas.

Photo: © Institute of Marine Research, Bergen, Norway, and Statoil.



End the biggest threat to deep sea life –

High Seas bottom trawling.

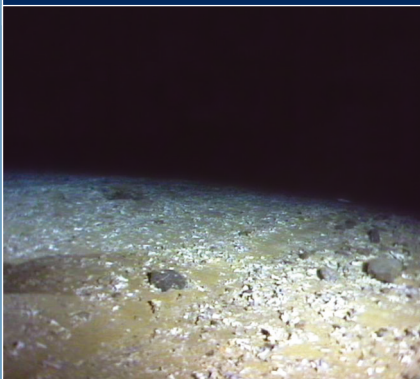
Effective enforcement and monitoring are key to safeguarding the sustainable management of high seas marine biodiversity.

For the last two years, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has called for urgent action to conserve vulnerable High Seas ecosystems. In 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development also called for urgent action, and in February, 2004, the Convention on Biological Diversity called for urgent short, medium and long term measures to be taken to conserve vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems.

Greenpeace believes that the UNGA must act now by taking effective actions to ensure the long-term viability of vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems. The first of those actions must be to pass a Resolution declaring an immediate moratorium on High Seas bottom trawling. Once a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling is in place, we can begin to address the destruction of deep-sea biological diversity, assess the extent of that diversity, and

develop the measures necessary to conserve and regulate its use, both equitably and sustainably.

Scientific research indicates that bottom trawling has by far the most immediate, indiscriminate and highly destructive effect on deep sea biological diversity. Bottom trawling is a fishing method which involves dragging large nets fitted with heavy chains and steel plates across the ocean floor. Bottom trawls not only catch the target fish species, but anything and everything in the path of the net. In some areas, repeated bottom trawling has significantly changed the geography of the seafloor, as well as the composition of the bottom dwelling animal communities, making their recovery unlikely if not impossible. Typically, within 5-10 years, bottom trawling depletes fish stocks to 15-30% of their initial biomass.

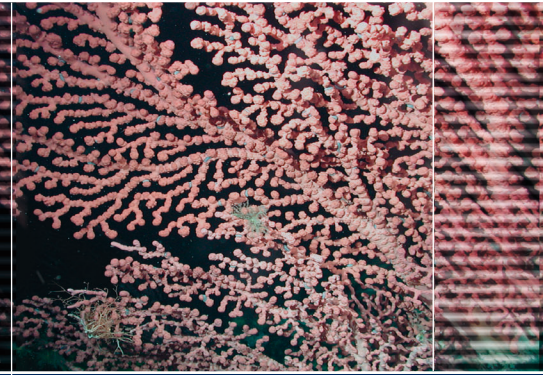


Video photograph from Sørmannsneset at the Norwegian continental break, 220 m depth (16 May 1998), showing a barren landscape with crushed remains of Lophelia-skeleton spread over the area. A track can be seen stretching from bottom-left to up-right of the photograph, indicating the path of a trawl.

Currently, as bottom trawling on the High Seas by definition occurs in areas beyond national jurisdiction, it is a largely unregulated industry, and much of the catch is unreported. As most of the fish caught by bottom trawlers congregate around seamount ecosystems, these highly biodiverse deep-sea features are the most severely affected. Less than 50 deep sea seamount ecosystems have been extensively studied, yet scientists are united in their belief that even these small sample areas illustrate such high degrees of endemism that destroying a single vulnerable deep-sea area by bottom trawling may actually cause the extinction of an undiscovered species. Until more is known about these vulnerable deep-sea areas and the extent of their location has been assessed, the international community must act immediately to stop their destruction.

A moratorium is
the only way to take
 positive, urgent action.

Image courtesy of NOAA



A temporary halt on all High Seas bottom trawling may seem like a radical and blunt approach to addressing this issue. It is not, however, an unprecedented measure, nor is it one that is unjustified in scientific or management terms. In late 1991, the United Nations adopted a number of General Assembly Resolutions establishing a worldwide moratorium on all high seas pelagic driftnet fishing to take effect at the end of 1992.

This moratorium, was implemented in response to direct concerns over the huge impact driftnet fishing was having on living marine resources (in particular non-target species such as sharks, turtles, whales and dolphins), and reports of the further expansion of this type of fishing activity. Like the moratorium on bottom trawling that we are calling for, the driftnet moratorium applies only to international waters and not to waters under national jurisdiction.

Scientifically, as it is unclear where all the particularly vulnerable areas are located on the High Seas, the 'time-out' provided by a moratorium, would allow for the co-ordination of a multi-organisational assessment of the extent of deep-sea biodiversity and ecosystems, including populations of fish species, and their vulnerability to deep sea fishing.

In management terms, a moratorium covering the whole of the High Seas simplifies monitoring, control and enforcement. No state would be able to license its vessels to bottom trawl on the high seas. Thus, any vessel entering a port with bottom-trawling equipment onboard, or carrying fish that would normally be caught by bottom trawling, would have the burden of proving to enforcement officials that they had not been bottom trawling on the High Seas.

Effective enforcement and monitoring are key to safeguarding the sustainable management of high seas marine biodiversity. But this assumes that a sustainable fishery currently exists. To date the validity of this assumption is unknown with regard to High Seas fish stocks that are being bottom-trawled. This is part of the reason why a moratorium is viewed as an immediately necessary short-term measure.

However it must be coupled with medium-term measures (such as greater regulation by flag states, addressing the issue of Flags of Convenience and assessment of the biodiversity of the high seas), and long-term measures (such as the development of internationally binding protocols or conventions to govern High Seas fishing and the creation of High Seas Marine Reserves): it is a package deal.