

Stop Bottom Trawling Campaign

BACKGROUND:

The extensive use of bottom trawls and dredges for fishing causes more damage to the ocean floor than any other human activity in the world. By design, bottom trawls and dredges are towed along the seafloor, indiscriminately smashing everything in their way and catching, crushing, killing, burying and exposing to predators a wide variety of marine life. Bottom trawling and dredging cause physical and biological damage that is frequently extensive and long-lasting. Advances in marine electronics for navigation and identification of fish location, along with the introduction of increased horsepower on boats and new net designs have opened up many previously untrawled areas to full-scale industrial fishing.

The destruction of complex seafloor communities contributes to fisheries declines, since these areas provide nurseries and shelter for a variety of juvenile fish and shellfish. In addition, it is increasingly apparent that bottom trawling directly contributes to the loss of marine biodiversity. For example, deep-sea corals off the U.S. coasts, some of them centuries old, live at depths that are unaffected by storms and other large-scale natural disturbances. But these beautiful colonies of living animals are increasingly subjected to invasion, destruction and death by trawls and dredges. *According to scientists, the single largest threat to corals is destructive fishing gear such as bottom trawling. A single pass of a trawl can crush centuries of growth.*

WHAT OCEANA IS DOING:

Oceana's long term objective is to restrict bottom trawling in all U.S. waters except where it can be demonstrated that it does not harm seafloor communities. Our short term goal is to seek bans on the worst trawling gear—rockhopper and roller gear—and to protect complex and biodiverse communities, such as deep-water coral and sponges.

Oceana is pursuing these goals in a variety of different arenas:

- On the policy front, Oceana is promoting legislation to ban the worst trawl gear, which would serve to protect coral and sponge communities, as well as other complex bottom habitats. The bill (HR1690) has been introduced in the US House of Representatives, with 12 cosponsors. Four additional environmental organizations are working with Oceana this year to seek additional cosponsors and push for passage of the bill.
- In California, Oceana recently generated over three thousand email action alerts in support of a proposal to terminate bottom trawling for spot prawns and another to introduce legislation to limit the use of bottom trawls in other fisheries. In addition, we distributed public education materials, including reports and “before and after” bottom trawling CDs. The California Fisheries Commission issued its final decision to prohibit bottom trawling for spot prawns in April.

- Oceana introduced a proposal now under consideration by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council to protect more than 200,000 square miles of ocean floor containing recently discovered unique and productive deep-water coral aggregations in the Aleutian Islands. Because National Marine Fisheries Service is operating under court imposed requirements as a result of an Oceana lawsuit, we have a significant opportunity to influence this process.
- As a direct result of the work of Oceana scientists analyzing and refining bycatch data for fisheries off the coast of Oregon, Washington and California, the Pacific Fisheries Management Council in April 2003 voted 10 to 2 to act immediately to protect more than 4,000 square miles of ocean floor from bottom trawling, rather than delay for an additional year or more as proposed by the fishing industry.
- This summer Oceana will launch and coordinate a major effort to map deep-water coral sites in the Pacific.
- The Oculina Banks off the coast of Florida is a unique deep-water coral reef that has been severely degraded by bottom trawling. Only a small remnant patch of this reef—approximately 20 acres - remains. Oceana is developing a petition to list this rare species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) which would be the first listing of a coral under the ESA.