



## CASE STUDY

### SSMO closed areas

**Project Partners:** Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation (SSMO) and UHI Shetland (formally NAFC Marine Centre UHI)

**Aim:**

- Protect sensitive inshore seabed habitats from damage by mechanical dredging by scallop fishing boats



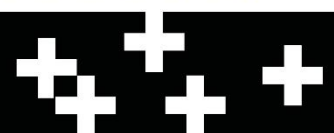
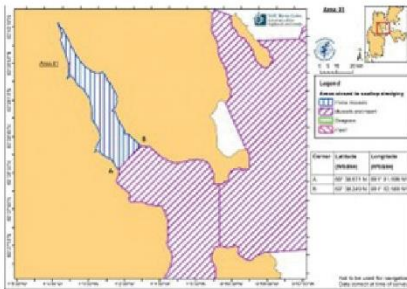
The SSMO closed areas are widely distributed around Shetland, stretching from Unst in the north to Mousa in the south. The SSMO worked closely with local inshore fishermen and UHI marine scientists at UHI Shetland to identify and protect areas of seabed which supported sensitive species and habitats. The key protected species are horse mussel beds, seagrass meadows and maerl beds, all of which are sensitive to disturbance and increasingly recognised as important sources of carbon capture. These habitats also act as nursery grounds for fish and shellfish and help stabilise soft seabed sediments.

#### Approach

This is an example of fishermen, scientists and managers in Shetland working together proactively for the benefit of a healthy and diverse marine environment. The areas were initially closed voluntarily to scallop dredging in 2011 prior to being surveyed by UHI marine scientists. This involved multi-beam acoustic surveys and use of drop-down camera equipment to verify the spatial extent and abundance of the habitats. Once the data were assessed, the SSMO was able to refine the areas, then use its shellfish management powers delegated from the Scottish government to implement a formal ban on dredge fishing. Further surveys have taken place since 2011 when new reports of maerl and horse mussels have emerged, and these have been surveyed by UHI Shetland, and subsequently protected by the SSMO.

#### Outcome

As of 2025 a total of 26 closed areas were identified covering 29.9km<sup>2</sup> of inshore seabed. These closed areas sit among other statutory marine planning protections within the Shetland Islands Regional Marine Plan, helping safeguard against harmful man-made developments or activities. They are an extra layer of habitat protection for Shetland not widely replicated elsewhere in Scotland.



This case study was co-written with the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation (SSMO) and forms part of a wider document produced by UHI Shetland, co-developed with the Shetland community and funded by the Marine Fund Scotland.

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