



**ROYAL COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION**  
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From the Chairman of the RCEP  
Sir John Lawton

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Mr Ben Bradshaw MP,  
Defra,  
17 Smith Square,  
London .  
SW1P 3JR

17 October 2005

Dear Mr Bradshaw,

**SUPPORT FOR THE OPEN LETTER FROM SCIENTISTS CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF DEEP-SEA BIODIVERSITY**

On behalf of the Royal Commission, I am writing to you to say we share the concerns raised in the recent open letter from scientists to you, dated the 13<sup>th</sup> October, about securing appropriate protection for deep-ocean ecosystems on the high seas. In our Twenty-fifth report, Turning the Tide: Addressing the Impact of Fisheries on the Marine Environment, we recommended that the UK and EU should take action to halt damaging deep sea fishing (paragraph 9.51) and that:

**‘We recommend that the UK government should promote measures to prohibit destructive deep-sea fishing practices and promote the establishment of a system of marine protected areas on the high seas. In addition, it should press for international controls on high seas bottom trawling, and for their proper implementation and enforcement under, for example, the UN Straddling Stocks Agreement and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.’ (Paragraph 9.53)**

As we noted in our report only a very few vessels are involved in deep sea fishing, and constitute 0.2 – 0.3% of global marine fisheries production. Such a ban would therefore have negligible economic and social impacts. Nevertheless, deep-sea fishing activity does have serious environmental impacts and is for the most part unregulated. Sea-mounts, ridges, continental slopes and other deep-sea habitats targeted by fishing vessels support rich and distinct assemblages of organisms like corals, sea-fans, hydroids and sponges. These organisms often have highly specific habitat requirements, are very long-lived and have localised distributions or are endemic to a specific deep-sea feature. The ecosystems they are part of may have taken millennia to develop, and the damage done to these ecosystems by trawling may be irreparable on human timescales. In addition, the deep-sea fish species targeted, and those fish species caught as by-catch, are non-renewable resources as they are usually long lived, late to reach reproductive maturity and have low reproductive rates and high seas bottom trawling has often led to the serial depletion of deep-sea fish stocks.

Protection of the deep seas, on the basis of sound scientific analysis including the application of precaution, needs to be urgently incorporated into international law. We therefore endorse the call for you to exercise your leadership during the UK Presidency of the European Union to negotiate a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawl fishing at the United Nations General Assembly this year to protect vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems and species from irreversible damage and loss.

Yours sincerely

**Sir John Lawton**

Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution