**Marine Scotland investigation underway into alleged scallop dredging in Wester Ross Marine Protected Area - local people urged to be aware of possible dredging around the Summer Isles and report any suspicious activity.**

The Wester Ross Marine Protected Area (MPA) which includes Loch Ewe, Gruinard Bay, Little Loch Broom, Loch Broom and the Summer Isles archipelago was set up to protect special features and in particular maerl and flame shell beds. Mearl is a brittle pink coral like seaweed which provides nursery areas for all kinds of marine species such as cod, crab, scallops and herring. Dredging is specifically prohibited from the whole of Wester Ross Marine Protected Area. Prawn trawling can still take place in the MPA but only in specific zones. Creel and dive fishing is allowed in all areas.

Before the MPA was created many areas around the Summer Isles were heavily dredged by boats which were not local. These areas included maerl beds. For these reasons there was considerable local community support to ban dredgers from the MPA. Since the ban some monitoring has been taking place and recovery was evident in some areas where the dredgers had once fished. Divers were also anecdotally reporting seeing more juvenile fish, scallop spat and even bottom dwelling skate.

There have been numerous incidents of illegal dredging in Scotland with very little repercussion.

In the winter of 2018, after illegal dredging in Loch Gairloch forty groups gathered to form a coalition. Amongst these 40 groups were the Scottish Creel Fishermen’s Federation, Wester Ross Area Salmon Fisheries Board and Sea Change, a local community group, working together to push for more Government action to protect our Marine Protected Areas. The letter to the First Minister can be read here.

<http://seachangewesterross.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Oban_Joint_Letter_FirstMinister_17122018.pdf>

Wester Ross MPA is not the only Marine Protected Area where incidents of illegal dredging are being investigated. There are many other incidents around Mull and Jura which have been recently reported. The letter written by the coalition of 40 groups, is based on concerns that the socio-economic benefits to the community of recovery are being jeopardised. Urgent means to safeguard MPAs from illegal fishing, particularly dredging are needed. Not just for rebuilding the sustainability of diver caught scallops and other marine species which are important for local fisheries, but to secure recovery for the benefit of marine tourism. Recently fishermen and members of the community have been involved in collecting evidence to support Marine Scotland’s investigation.

If you see any suspicious activity particularly around the Summer Isles please report it to Marine Scotland Fisheries Compliance Ph 0131 2719700 (24hrs) and if possible call while you are viewing activity and film it so as to reference the location. (email UKFMC@gov.scot)

Link to MPA chart of zones <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00491431.png>