Sealife doing swimmingly after Arran's Lamlash Bay fishing ban

More than a decade after it was introduced, a no-take zone in the Firth of Clyde is helping lobster and scallops bounce back from the brink, reports **Jody Harrison**

Lamlash Bay, where a fishing ban has been in place Picture: Education Images/Universal Images Group via Getty

IT was the first slice of Scotland's coastal waters to bring in a total ban on fishing of any type.

More than a decade ago, a 'no-take' zone was established at Lamlash Bay in Arran, North Ayrshire, in a bid to improve an undersea ecosystem which had suffered years of degradation at the hands of trawlers and dredgers.

No fish or shellfish were allowed be taken from the two-and-a-half square kilometre site by any means, and marine life was allowed to continue unimpeded by the impact of man.

It was hoped that the environment would rebound and that life would once again become abundant in an area which, like much of the Firth of Clyde, had become a marine desert.

And now a fresh investigation has found booming populations of sea creatures within Lamlash Bay and experts are hailing the no-take zone's success, saying it is even spilling over into other areas of seabed nearby.

The zone was set in force by the Scottish Government in 2008 after years of campaigning by the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (Coast).

The eco group had been charting major declines of fish stocks all around the island, which led to the ban on all forms of fishing from its waters or seabed at the bay.

A study by the University of York has revealed populations of king scallops and lobsters have exploded since the ban and increased exponentially in recent years, with nearly four times as many king scallops recorded inside the site than before the no-take zone was created.

In 2010 the density of king scallops in the zone was 6.17 per 100m2 and by 2019 this had increased to 23 scallops per 100m2 –nearly four times more.

Bigger adult scallops have also been found, as well as greater numbers of juveniles, indicating that the regrowth of the ecosystem will continue.

Lobsters in the area have also benefited, with an increasing percentage of larger specimens being found and evidence the population has grown enough to overspill into other areas.

Dive surveys showed the seabed is recovering after damage caused by fishing with trawls and dredges.

'Nursery habitats', which provide refuge for juvenile marine life have also grown, the study revealed.

The bay's ecosystem is also showing signs of greater complexity, with a huge variety of fish, shellfish and other sealife sheltered by its slate-grey waters.

Divers have uncovered the presence of exotic species such as colourful sea slugs, long-clawed lobsters, sea pens, underwater worms and even octopus, as well as juvenile cod and haddock.

The area is also home to vibrant beds of Maerl – a very slow-growing, coral-like calcareous red algae which harbours other marine life.

Results from Lamlash Bay have been pivotal in the establishment of a larger marine protected area around the south of Arran in 2014.

The researchers say the project has kick-started a national movement to protect UK coastal waters from over-fishing and loss of biodiversity.

Environmentalist Howard Wood, co-founder of Coast, says the project's success is "underpinned by 10 years of science".

Mr Wood said: "We have clear evidence that marine biodiversity in the protected area is improving.

"We have a solid scientific platform which allows other coastal communities, alongside the Scottish and UK governments, to confidently move forward with marine reserve designation and management.

> "Arran's conservation success has been recognised internationally and is inspiring greater involvement of local communities around the UK

"Coast's most important message is that any environment can benefit from better protection, and every community has the right to a better environment if they want one.

"If that is embraced on a global scale then we truly will see a sea-change in the health of our seas."

As well as influencing national marine protection policy, the project has won several environmental awards.

Dr Bryce Stewart, from the University of York, said: "Arran's conservation success has been recognised internationally and is inspiring greater involvement of local communities around the UK .

"Evidence from Lamlash Bay has supported the development of strong protection for marine protected areas, at times seeing off lobbyist efforts to weaken management.

"Local communities around the UK have looked at the story unfolding in Lamlash Bay and have decided to take the destiny of their coastal waters into their own hands.

"The lesson from Arran is that, with community support, strong science and political will, we can start to recover our seas."

Country projects to share £34m

RURAL projects across Scotland that tackle climate change and protect the environment will share £34 million in a new round of funding.

A total of 472 businesses will benefit from the latest Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) awards.

The initiative promotes environmentally friendly land management practices and aims to protect and enhance Scotland's natural heritage.

Rural Economy Secretary Fergus Ewing said: "Facing a global climate emergency, the AECS has proven to be a successful way of supporting farmers, crofters and land managers to promote environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

"Rural Scotland holds one of the key assets we will need to tackle climate change and address biodiversity loss, our land, which is why I am clear that future agri-environment support will continue as we transition to a low carbon future."

The previous award of £39.5 million came in December 2018 and went to 580 rural businesses.

This latest round of funding brings the total committed under AECS since 2015 to more than £211 million, going to almost 3,000 applicants.

The money is used for projects such as managing flood risks and promoting biodiversity.

Francesca Osowska, Scottish Natural Heritage chief executive, said: "This extra funding will also ensure that work to reduce the risk of flooding and improve water quality will continue."