



Letter from Caledonia

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Drive or sail south along the coast of Ayrshire – you're in Burns country – and look to your right across the sea. At two o'clock is the conical island of Ailsa Craig, an outcrop of granite so fine that as Blue Hone or Common Green it yields the sliding stones used in our national sport of curling. At three o'clock, perpendicular on your right or starboard side, is Arran – Scotland in miniature, the isle is often called, combining high hills, fast rocky rivers and arable fields renowned for their early potatoes.

The fourteen-mile-wide strip of sea between is the lower Firth of Clyde. Known the world over for building fine ships, for centuries the Clyde was famous also for the quality of its fish. Herring were caught and kippered here, a twenty-thousand-ton fishery supporting hundreds of boats. Cod and haddock thrived. Whiting abounded. Large volumes of turbot and flounder were landed, hake and halibut, too. Dover sole and lemon sole, skates and rays, ling, saithe, pollack and plaice were caught. Spurdog, dogfish, conger eel and even sturgeon were here. Not forgetting mackerel. This abundance and variety of finfish was perhaps the most valuable in Europe.

Lamlash Bay, on the south-east coast of Arran, became famous among sea anglers. Over two seven-hour days in May its annual fishing tourney brought entrants from far and wide, drawn by the quality of the sport and size of the quarry. At its peak in the 1960s around two hundred competed. In 1968, when the klaxon sounded for the finish, catches on rod and line topped seven tons.

Meanwhile thousands of tons were landed annually by commercial fishers. The boats got bigger and better at catching, so the fish became fewer, smaller and less fertile. As catches fell, fishing regulations were changed to allow more invasive techniques. Catches fell further, then collapsed. The folk of Lamlash Bay abandoned their fishing competition in the 1990s. The annual haul had fallen to under two hundred pounds, less than one eightieth of the peak some thirty years before.

Bemused and disappointed at the destruction of their sport, some donned diving gear and got down among the few remaining fish. They found a seabed ravaged by industrial fishing. On the muddy seafloor, a rich ecology had been razed by prawn trawls. On the shingles, the seabed was ploughed bare by dredging for scallops.

Those self-same islanders have led the recovery. In the mid-1990s they formed the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST), advocating that small areas of the Clyde be spared from industrial damage. After 13 dispiriting years, they triumphed with the creation of a small

protected area: at less than three square kilometres, part of Lamlash Bay became the first no-take zone in Scotland.

Then they studied the results. At the start, changes were slow. Certain habitats expanded, including sponges and large seaweeds. Gradually juvenile scallop numbers increased. The juveniles grew, and by 2019 mature scallops were almost four times as numerous as in neighbouring areas still open to fishing. Lobsters showed a similar effect – a remarkable increase in both numbers and size, with over four times as many inside the no-take zone as outside. With larger numbers and average sizes of both species, their breeding capacity increased dramatically – seeding neighbouring areas with the young of the species, benefiting the very fishing businesses that had so vigorously opposed efforts of COAST.

The benefits to fisheries of closed areas are well proven elsewhere. On the Isle of Man, in areas off limits to dredging, after 17 years of recovery scallop densities were thirty times greater than when protection was first implemented. This is no surprise: it is a commonplace of fisheries science that closed spawning and nursery areas can yield huge dividends. That fishers, in the main, still oppose them is significant of the psychology of the hunter-gatherer, not the authority of the science.

The capacity of the sea to regenerate underlay a 2014 report to the Scottish government. Considering the potential benefits of restricting industrial or mobile fishing – the trawling and dredging with gear dragging over or excavating the seabed – 'the results suggest,' it concludes, 'that Scotland as a whole would be better off with a more diverse and productive marine environment.'

Reducing inshore industrial fishing 'is expected to deliver more economic benefits to broader sections of the population. The expansion of the marine recreational sector could thus create large numbers of jobs. All areas apart from the North West and Outer Hebrides generate an excess of benefits over costs. For the South West and East Coast areas restricting mobile gear use would create many more jobs than it loses.'

That's clear enough. But the report made no headway. Arran's no-take zone, despite its inspirational effects, remains unique. Official policy favours highly destructive fishing. In its management of fisheries, Scotland remains a shamefaced and outlying laggard in Europe.

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