

Petitions Committee

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## **Live Ocean Submission: Petition to End Bottom Trawling**

### **SUBMITTER DETAILS**

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### **Introduction**

1. This is a submission on the Live Ocean Petition calling for a phased end to bottom trawling as a commercial fishing method.<sup>1</sup>
2. The Environmental Defence Society (**EDS**) is an independent not-for-profit organisation conducting interdisciplinary policy research and litigation. It was established in 1971 with the objective of bringing together the disciplines of law, science and planning to promote better environmental outcomes.
3. EDS has a special interest in the marine environment and recently completed a multi-year project looking at issues within the national oceans management system and options for future reform, which had (among other things) a focus on fisheries matters.<sup>2</sup>
4. The broad range of damage caused by bottom trawling is well understood.<sup>3</sup> Trawl gear destroys benthic habitats and reduces biodiversity, with high levels of bycatch and valuable seamount ecosystems being at particular risk.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, trawling

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<sup>1</sup> Live Ocean Foundation *Live Ocean Petition submission: Call for a phased end to bottom trawling as a commercial fishing method* (10 June 2026), available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> G Severinsen, R Peart, B Rollinson, T Turner and P Parson *The breaking wave: Oceans reform in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Environmental Defence Society (**EDS**), May 2022), available [here](#); R Peart *Pathways to oceans reform* (EDS, September 2025) available [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Ministry for the Environment and Stats NZ *Our Marine Environment 2025 Tō Tātou Taiao Moana* (New Zealand's Environmental Reporting Series, 2025), available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see M R Clark and others "Little evidence of benthic community resilience to bottom trawling on seamounts after 15 years" (2019) 6 *Frontiers in Marine Science*; B Hall and others "Identifying high risk seafloor areas to bottom trawling in Aotearoa New Zealand to support marine spatial management" (2025) 34(10) *Biodiversity and Conservation* 3481; Owen Anderson, Shaun Carswell and Amelia Connell *Understanding coral bycatch*:

disturbs seafloor sediment, releasing carbon that has been sequestered, some of which may re-enter the atmosphere.<sup>5</sup>

5. The 73,647 signatories to the Live Ocean Petition provide a strong indication that bottom trawling is no longer regarded as acceptable within Aotearoa. This aligns with the international call to end bottom trawling, which Aotearoa has failed to meaningfully respond to. EDS supports Live Ocean's call to:
  - a. Immediately stop permitting the trawling of seamounts on the high seas;
  - b. Protect all seamounts in Aotearoa's waters by 2027;
  - c. Support the industry to rapidly transition away from bottom trawling.<sup>6</sup>

### **Immediately stop renewing permits for trawling seamounts on the high seas**

6. Aotearoa is currently the only state permitting the trawling of seamounts in the high seas of the South Pacific. Currently, Aotearoa has permitted one vessel, the *Tasman Viking* (owned by Westfleet) to trawl seamounts in the South Pacific, with said permit being renewed in June of 2026.<sup>7</sup> This follows the *Tasman Viking* coming under scrutiny for failing to report catch of protected coral in the South Pacific on multiple occasions.<sup>8</sup> This included an event in 2024 which triggered the closure of the Lord Howe Rise seamount under South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (**SPRFMO**) rules.<sup>9</sup>
7. Aotearoa's fishing effort in the South Pacific primarily targets orange roughy.<sup>10</sup> The South Pacific stocks of orange roughy show evidence of decline due to exploitation, following a similar trajectory to the North Atlantic orange roughy fishery that has collapsed and effectively closed.<sup>11</sup> The economic case for continuing to permit trawling is unsustainable.
8. Due to the decline in stocks and the presence of important benthic habitat and seamounts, the SPRFMO has implemented measures to regulate and reduce

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*Assessing large catches* (NIWA, Report prepared for Project INT2023-10, Conservation Services Programme, Department of Conservation, May 2025), available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Pooran Khedri and others "Reconciling the impact of mobile bottom-contact fishing on marine organic carbon sequestration" (2025) 82(9) ICES Journal of Marine Science; Scott Nodder and others *Organic carbon stocks and potential vulnerability in marine sediments around Aotearoa New Zealand* (NIWA, Report Prepared for Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, June 2023), available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Live Ocean Foundation, above n 1.

<sup>7</sup> South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (**SPRFMO**) "Record of Vessels" SPRFMO Integrated Management Information System <[sprfmo.org](https://sprfmo.org)>.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry for Primary Industries (**MPI**) "Nelson fishing company, skipper and first mate fined nearly \$70,000 for failing to assess and weigh coral when bottom trawling" (media release, 13 June 2023), available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Morrah "New Zealand trawler catches coral, triggering fishing suspension in Lord Howe Rise" *The New Zealand Herald* (online ed, 1 November 2024), available [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> MPI *Fisheries Assessment Plenary May 2026 Volume 2 – Orange Roughy Outside the EEZ (ORH ET)* (May 2026), available [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> M J Roux and others *Low information stock assessment of orange roughy *Hoplostethus atlanticus* in the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation Convention Area* (MPI, New Zealand Fisheries Assessment Report 2017/1, January 2017) at 11-12, available [here](#); Geoffrey Tingley and Matthew Dunn *Global review of orange roughy (*Hoplostethus atlanticus*), their fisheries, biology and management*. (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper 622, 2018) at 24, available [here](#).

bottom trawling in the South Pacific.<sup>12</sup> This aligns with the international movement towards protecting seamounts in the high seas.<sup>13</sup> When Aotearoa brought forward a proposal to increase the permissible levels of bycatch of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystem (VME) indicator species, namely taxa of corals and sponges that indicate fragile, deep-sea habitats that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of trawling,<sup>14</sup> it was not adopted. Other SPRFMO members noted the increased risk and lack of alignment with the level of precaution required around VMEs.<sup>15</sup>

9. EDS supports Live Ocean’s call for an immediate end to the permitting of bottom trawling in the South Pacific. Aotearoa is increasingly out of line with international standards by continuing to trawl collapsing stocks, and in doing so, damaging vital benthic habitats.

### **Fully protect all seamounts in Aotearoa’s waters by 2027**

10. Seamounts are ecologically valuable benthic features.<sup>16</sup> Where previously, seamounts have been classified as features with elevations greater than 1000 m, it is clear the value of a feature is not solely based on its elevation.<sup>17</sup> As a result, international calls for the protection of seamounts have included all features with elevations greater than 100 m, including those traditionally classed as hills (elevation of < 500 m), knolls (elevation of 500 m to 1,000 m), and seamounts (elevation of > 1,000 m).<sup>18</sup>
11. Around Aotearoa, there are approximately 3,000 of these features, shown below in the Figure.<sup>19</sup> Of these, 1,996 are within the exclusive economic zone and territorial sea (EEZ and TS).

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<sup>12</sup> SPRFMO “Bottom fishing science” (2020) <[www.sprfmo.org](http://www.sprfmo.org)>.

<sup>13</sup> IUCN Resolution 3.066 *The protection of seamounts, deep-sea corals and other vulnerable deep-sea habitats from destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling, on the high seas* (World Conservation Congress, 2004), available [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> SPRFMO COMM 14 – Prop 07 to Amend CMM 03-2025 Bottom Fishing (14<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the SPRFMO Commission, March 2026), available [here](#).

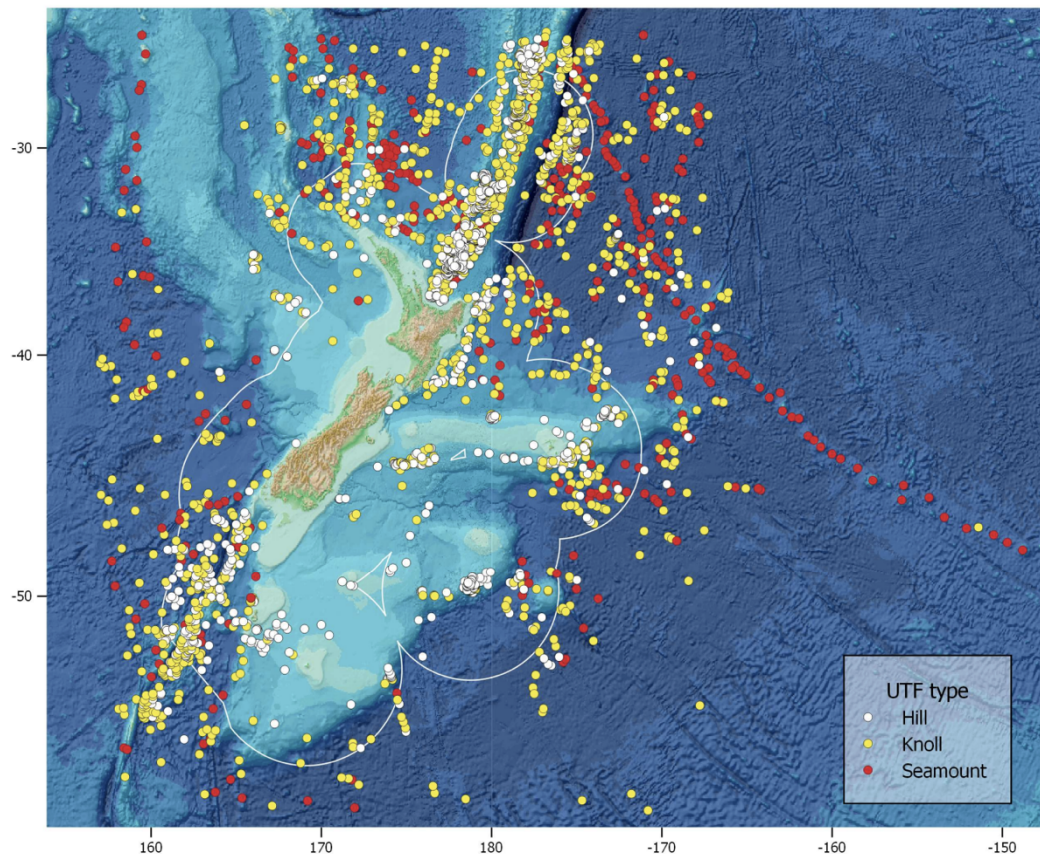
<sup>15</sup> SPRFMO COMM14-Report (14<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the SPRFMO Commission, March 2026) at [76]-[81], available [here](#).

<sup>16</sup> For example, see M R Clark and others “The ecology of seamounts: Structure, function, and human impacts” (2010) 2(1) Annual Review of Marine Science 253.

<sup>17</sup> Hubert Staudigel and others “Defining the word “seamount”” (2010) 23(1) Oceanography 20.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see M R Clark and others *Identifying ecologically and biologically significant areas on seamounts* (IUCN, 2011), available [here](#); Maurizio Würtz and Marzia Rovere (Eds) *Atlas of the Mediterranean Seamounts and Seamount-like Structures* (IUCN, 2015), available [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> M R Clark and others *Underwater Topographic Features in the New Zealand region: development of an updated ‘SEAMOUNT’ database and information on the extent and intensity of deep-sea trawl fisheries on them* (Fisheries New Zealand (FNZ), New Zealand Aquatic Environment and Biodiversity Report No. 291, September 2022), available [here](#).



**Figure.** “Distribution of Underwater Topographic Features (UTFs) in the New Zealand region.”<sup>20</sup>

12. Of the seamounts within Aotearoa’s EEZ, 613 have summits within 1,600 m of the surface, meaning they are shallow enough to be impacted by bottom trawling.<sup>21</sup> Of these fishable seamounts, 37% (229) had been impacted by trawling as of 2022. At least 86% of seamounts that have been fished, have been impacted by trawling since 2012. Only 3 of the 229 seamounts that have been fished are now closed to trawling.

13. Seamounts are highly vulnerable to trawling damage. Around Aotearoa, sponge and cold-water coral species form important biogenic habitat that is the foundation of many seamount ecosystems.<sup>22</sup> These species are fragile and easily destroyed by trawling gear.<sup>23</sup> The loss of habitat, as a result of trawling, shifts seamounts away from these productive ecosystems. This, in turn, impacts the fish species that aggregate around seamounts and which trawl fisheries target.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid at 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid at 19.

<sup>22</sup> T D O’Hara, A A Rowden and A Williams “Cold-water coral habitats on seamounts: Do they have a specialist fauna?” (2008) 14(6) *Diversity and Distributions* 925 at 932; D Tracey and others “Habitat-forming cold-water corals show affinity for seamounts in the New Zealand region” (2011) 430 *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 1 at 16.

<sup>23</sup> M R Clark and A A Rowden “Effect of deepwater trawling on the macro-invertebrate assemblages of seamounts on the Chatham rise, New Zealand” (2009) 56(9) *Deep Sea Research Part I: Oceanographic Research Papers* 1540 at 1541; Rogers and others “Corals on Seamounts” in T J Pitcher and others (eds) *Seamounts: Ecology, fisheries and conservation* (John Wiley and Sons, 2008) 141 at 148, 160-161; Hall and others, above n 4, at 2.

<sup>24</sup> A D Rogers “The biology of seamounts: 25 years on” (2018) 79 *Advances in Marine Biology* 137.

14. Studies of trawled seamounts on the Chatham Rise have found little evidence of recovery after fifteen years of closure.<sup>25</sup> Given that species such as Aotearoa’s cold-water corals can grow as slowly as one millimetre a year, the full recovery of these ecosystems may take centuries.<sup>26</sup>
15. These vulnerabilities and impacts have driven a number of international calls to action to end bottom trawling on seamounts, including from the IUCN.<sup>27</sup> In continuing to trawl seamounts, and with very few of those trawled being given a chance to recover, Aotearoa is failing to meet the international standard.
16. The case for continuing this destruction, ignores the fact that the trawling of seamounts is actively diminishing the economic value of deepwater fisheries. Analysis by the Ministry for Primary Industries (**MPI**) in 2023 showed that, based on data between the 2007-08 and 2021-22 fishing years, catch from seamounts represents an estimated \$45.2 million in exports, or around 7% of deepwater export value. This is predominantly from orange roughy fisheries, which were estimated to account for three-quarters of this catch. Given the current status of orange roughy, this value is likely to have significantly declined since these estimates were compiled.
17. The orange roughy fishery is in a state of collapse. When the spawning aggregations that form around Chatham Rise (ORH 3B) seamounts began to be fished, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was common for catch rates to be so high that trawl nets would burst.<sup>28</sup> Today, in key seamount fisheries, orange roughy stocks have collapsed, and spawning aggregations now form away from seamounts due to fishing disturbance and the serial depletion of seamount aggregations.<sup>29</sup> Since the 2021-22 fishing year used in MPI’s estimate, stock assessments have found the Chatham Rise orange roughy has further declined, resulting in the recent spawning closures on the Chatham Rise.<sup>30</sup>
18. The destruction caused by trawling as a fishing method, and the disruption of spawning aggregations forming around seamounts, has most likely contributed to the depletion of these stocks, and thus of the value of seamount trawl fisheries. Allowing trawling on seamounts to continue is neither ecologically or nor

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<sup>25</sup> Clark and others, above n 4.

<sup>26</sup> Clark and others, above n 4; S J Fallon, R E Thresher and J Adkins “Age and growth of the cold-water scleractinian *Solenosmilia variabilis* and its reef on SW Pacific seamounts” (2013) 31(1) Coral Reefs 31

<sup>27</sup> IUCN Members’ Assembly *Motion 032 Protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive practices* (IUCN World Conservation Congress, 2025), available [here](#).

<sup>28</sup> Tingley and Dunn, above n 11, at 15.

<sup>29</sup> MPI Fisheries Assessment Plenary May 2026 Volume 2 – Orange Roughy, Chatham Rise and Southern New Zealand (ORH 3B) (May 2026) available [here](#); MPI Fisheries Assessment Plenary May 2026 Volume 2 – Orange Roughy West Coast South Island (ORH 7B) (May 2026) available [here](#); Tingley and Dunn, above n 11, at 17-20.

<sup>30</sup> MPI Fisheries Assessment Plenary May 2026 Volume 2 – Orange Roughy, Chatham Rise and Southern New Zealand (ORH 3B), above n 29; Shane Jones 2026 Orange roughy ORH 3B spawning area closure decision (MPI, 29 May 2026), available [here](#); See also Raewyn Peart Review of proposed spawning area closure to orange roughy fishing in East and South Chatham Rise (ORH 3B) from 1 June 2026 (EDS, 26 March 2026), available [here](#).

economically sustainable. For this reason, EDS supports Live Ocean’s call for the full protection of seamounts from bottom trawling by 2027.

### **Support the industry to rapidly transition away from bottom trawling**

19. The damage caused by bottom trawling is not limited to features such as seamounts. The benthic environment throughout the fishable areas of Aotearoa’s EEZ and TS has been intensely trawled. While vulnerable ecosystem engineers such as sponges and corals were once prominent features across Aotearoa’s continental shelf, today they are pushed to the margins.<sup>31</sup> This aligns with the continental shelf being a region with a consistent, high-intensity trawl footprint.<sup>32</sup>
20. For this reason, EDS calls for an immediate freeze to Aotearoa’s trawl footprint. A single trawl tow is capable of significantly damaging the benthic environment, with studies finding that, among other impacts, it may reduce the mean abundance of animals by up to 55% and impact organic carbon storage in surface sediment.<sup>33</sup> Given what we know now about the damage that occurs from trawling, the time taken to recover, and the already extensive area of seabed which has been impacted, it is unacceptable to allow new areas to be bottom trawled.
21. In addition to this, EDS supports Live Ocean’s call for ending bottom trawling entirely as soon as possible. There are a wide range of efforts being made locally and globally to develop trawl technologies that reduce and eliminate seafloor contact.<sup>34</sup> However, it has been noted internationally that the widespread change in industry practice and gear use is rarely achieved through voluntary measures.<sup>35</sup>
22. A shift away from bottom trawling needs to be clearly signaled by government, with an end date for the use of the method specified. Financial support for innovation and the development of new fishing methods should also be provided. This will help align Aotearoa’s fisheries with the international standard and allow valuable ecosystems to begin to recover.

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<sup>31</sup> E G Jones and others *Biogenic habitats on New Zealand’s continental shelf. Part 1: Local Ecological Knowledge* (MPI, New Zealand Aquatic Environment and Biodiversity Report No. 174, October 2016), available [here](#); Hall and others, above n 4.

<sup>32</sup> D J MacGibbon, B A Wood and R Mules “The extent and intensity of seabed contact by trawl gear using fisher-reported and geospatial position reporting data, 1990 to 2023” (FNZ, New Zealand Aquatic Environment and Biodiversity Report No. 372, April 2026), available [here](#).

<sup>33</sup> Jeremy S Collie and others “A quantitative analysis of fishing impacts on shelf-sea benthos” (2001) 68(5) *Journal of Animal Ecology* 785; Wenyan Zhang and others “Long-term carbon storage in shelf sea sediments reduced by intensive bottom trawling” (2024) 17 *Natural Geoscience* 1268.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Katchi Precision Fish Harvesting <katchi.tech>.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Eayrs and Michael Pol “The myth of voluntary uptake of proven fishing gear: investigations into the challenges inspiring change in fisheries” (2019) 76(2) *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 392.