

BENTHIC HABITATS AND THE INTEGRITY OF THE SEAFLOOR

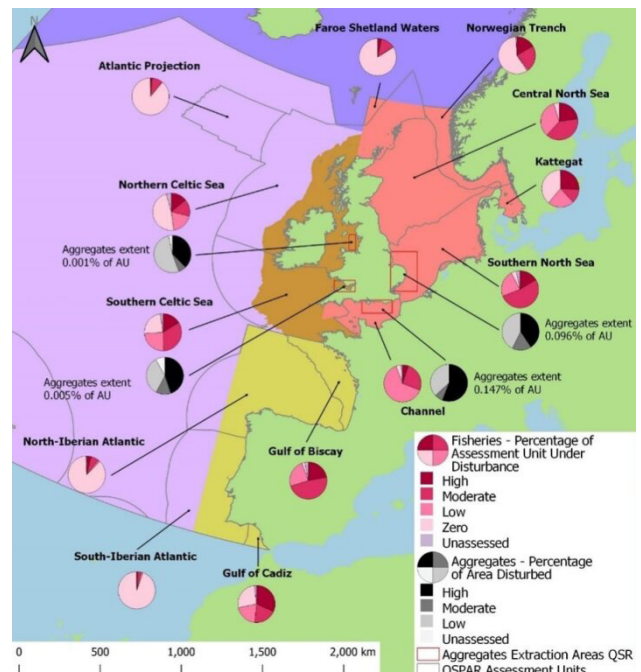
OSPAR's QUALITY STATUS REPORT 2023 BRIEFING NOTE SERIES

Many benthic habitats within the OSPAR Maritime Area are under threat from various pressure such as physical disturbance, modification of substrate, and chemical and biological impacts. Their impact is not uniform, and thus the state of benthic habitats and the level of threat varies across the OSPAR Regions.

This assessment shows that many benthic habitat types are in poor status, although some areas also show good status for a specific pressure and impact (eutrophication). All but one of the 18 benthic habitats that OSPAR has identified as threatened and/or declining show no signs of improvement in the Regions where they occur. Some habitats (e.g. oyster beds and seagrass beds) also show a decrease in distribution and extent in some Regions.

In assessed areas physical disturbance remains the main pressure contributing to a widespread reduction in diversity and changes in sensitive benthic communities. The assessment of physical disturbance to the seabed by bottom trawling and changes to sensitive species showed that most benthic habitats in areas where such fishing activities take place are under significant threat or impact. The diversity of benthic communities is particularly poor in inshore habitats of the Greater North Sea Region. Coastal waters show mainly high/good status for benthic vegetation and invertebrates with regard to eutrophication, but this remains an issue in the eastern part of the Greater North Sea, including the Kattegat and the English Channel. However, in Arctic Waters climatic factors are the most significant variables driving the trends detected in benthic habitats.

There is more than ever an urgent need to lower the pressures on benthic habitats. This can be achieved through a combination of the responses detailed in the assessment. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of measures due to the multiple activities and pressures involved. In addition, the effects of measures on the recovery of habitats may take a long time to become evident. However, the lack of clear signs of improvement reported suggests that current measures have been inadequate or ineffective, and this assessment provides an evidence base to help develop future response measures, which need to be supported by improved monitoring and access to data.



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