

## Vulnerable habitats and marine protected areas

QSR 2000 had underlined the importance of protecting habitats from physical disturbance by fishing gear, and this is a field of work where considerable progress has been achieved although further work is still required. OSPAR has drawn the attention of fisheries management authorities to the need for protection of cold-water corals, such reefs of *Lophelia pertusa*, from bottom fishing gear. OSPAR has also identified deep-sea sponge aggregations, coral gardens, carbonate mounds, hydrothermal vents and seamounts as priority deep sea habitats for protection from the effects of human activities in the deep seas by including these habitats on the OSPAR List of threatened and/or declining species and habitats

In the context of the EU, environmental legislation<sup>1</sup> requires that Member States should establish a network of protected sites with the aim either to safeguard some pre-defined habitats or to give additional protection to some threatened species. The establishment of such networks (commonly known as the Natura 2000 network) in the terrestrial zone and in the territorial waters is nearly completed, but much work is still to be done to complete the network in the EEZ's of Member States. Natura 2000 sites should have associated management programmes or measures which, in the case of marine sites, very often include fishery management measures. In the case of marine sites beyond territorial waters, these measures are in practice taken in the context of the common fisheries policy. The CFP also foresees the setting of restrictions for the protection of certain features of the seabed in the context of the ecosystem approach, and it has done so in a large area around the Azores Islands, where fishing with bottom trawls and gillnets is banned. It has also adopted a system to detect and protect vulnerable habitats in the high seas from the activity of EU vessels<sup>2</sup>, giving unilateral response to the UN Resolution 61/105 of 2006 in areas not covered by RFMOs.

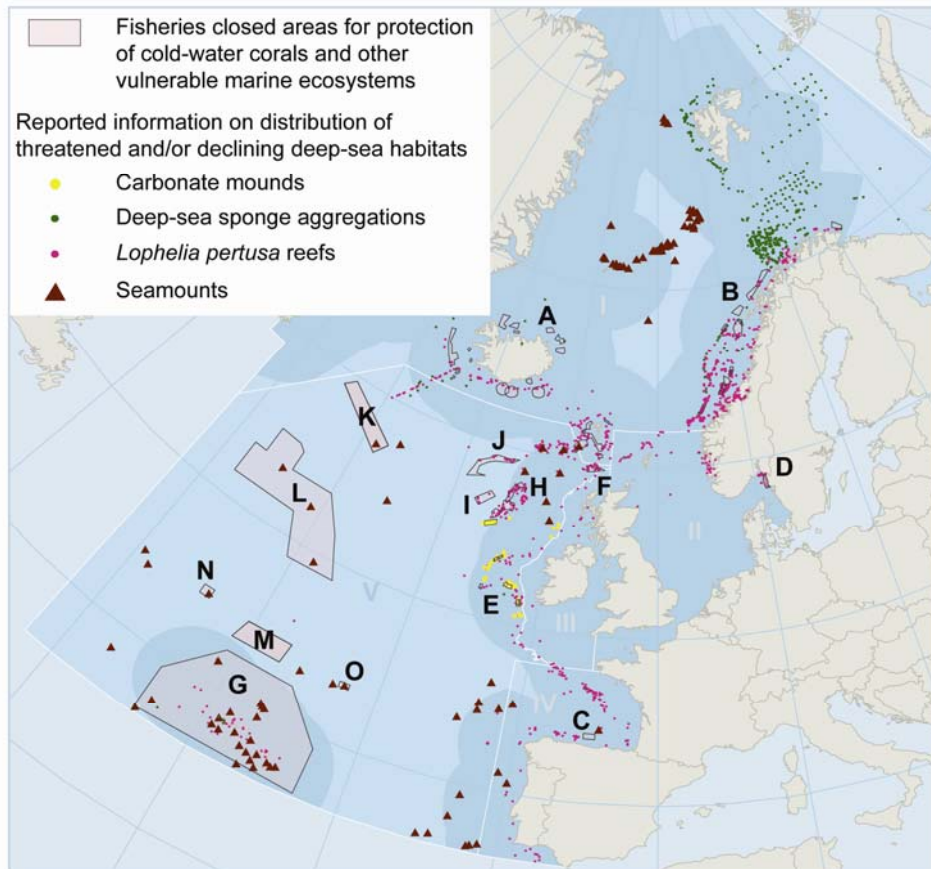
Norway initiated investigations of deep-water corals in 1997. Although the precise number of Norwegian reefs is not yet known, several hundred locations have been mapped with an estimated total spatial coverage of about 2000 km<sup>2</sup>. However, scientific research as such - and mapping of coral reefs in particular - is very time-consuming and expensive. Mapping of coral reefs in the Norwegian Economic Zone is still expected to continue for many years. Pursuant to the Sea Fisheries Act and the Act related to its EEZ, Norway has concluded in 2007 a process to set an important network of protected areas in its EEZ aiming at safeguarding *Lophelia pertusa* reefs extending along the Norwegian Sea and in the Norwegian Trench of the North Sea. Norway has also taken the lead in elaborating proposals for the protection of seamounts and hydrothermal vents in the high seas. These proposals have been approved within NEAFC and provide an adequate response to UN Resolution 61/105 in the multilateral (RFMO) context. Norway has also set a procedure to avoid gear loss, whose continuity in the sea bed may produce damage to the seabed communities, and has further initiated programmes for the retrieval of lost gear.

As a result of this process, NEAFC has approved restrictions on the use of bottom gear in a number of high sea areas, including a large section of Mid-Atlantic Ridge (see figure 4.3). NEAFC has further adopted a system to map vulnerable habitats so as to avoid these areas being fished by vessels using bottom gear. NEAFC has also adopted a recommendation to ban the use of gillnets beyond 200 m of depth, with the aim of avoiding habitat damage and ghost fishing.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, Directives 79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC

<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EC) No 734/2008



**Figure 4.3.** Fisheries closures for the protection of cold-water corals and other vulnerable deep-water habitats. There has been significant progress in establishing closed areas to fisheries around known reefs, with almost 600 000 km<sup>2</sup> of the OSPAR area currently protected. Protected areas within Icelandic (A), Norwegian (B), Spanish (C) and Swedish (D) waters have been included in the OSPAR MPA network and some fisheries closures have been introduced in Faroese waters. Certain reefs have been jointly designated by EU Member States under the Habitats Directive and the OSPAR network, including four areas in Irish waters (E) and the Darwin Mounds (F) in UK waters. Initial restrictions on fishing gear in these areas were introduced through provisions under the Common Fisheries Policy. This approach has also been used to protect reefs around the Azores (Portugal) (G) and on North West Rockall Bank (UK) (H). One of the most significant conservation measures in the OSPAR area is the NEAFC temporary closure of an area comprising 330 000 km<sup>2</sup> to bottom trawling for the purpose of protecting vulnerable deep-water habitats. This includes closure of three areas to the west and south of the Rockall Bank (I), a part of the Hatton Bank (J), three large areas on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge (K,L,M) and two isolated seamounts (N,O). The map above includes known distribution of four threatened deep-sea habitats included on the OSPAR List of threatened and/or declining species and habitats based on the OSPAR habitat-mapping programme (*Lophelia pertusa* reefs, Carbonate mounds, deep-sea sponge aggregations and seamounts).

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