

Protecting Deep-Sea Canyons and Habitat from Destructive Fishing Gear

Region

New England and
Mid-Atlantic

Timeframe

2005-2021

Fisheries Affected

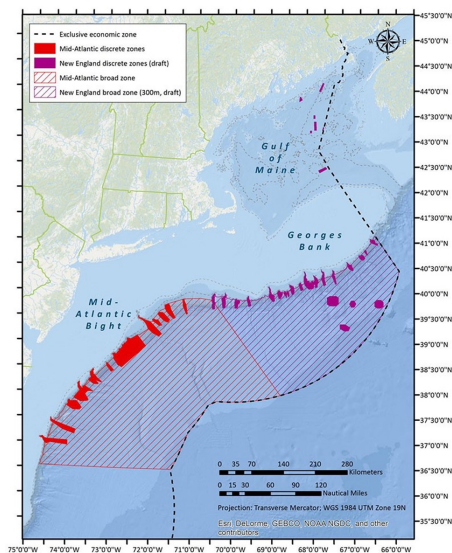
All fisheries with
bottom-tending gear

Target Species

All species

Gear Types

All bottom-tending gears



The New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council have taken significant steps to identify and protect deep-sea corals from the effects of fishing gears.

In the 1970s, scientists began to explore the seafloor in and around the dozens of submarine canyons that fringe the U.S. Atlantic continental shelf, finding long-lived, fragile deep-sea coral and sponge communities in these areas. These communities are rare and vulnerable to the effects of trawling and other bottom-tending mobile gear; a single pass of gear can cause centuries' worth of damage. Deep-sea corals are important habitats and are being explored for pharmaceutical properties for next-generation medicines.

In 2005, Oceana launched a campaign to protect deep-sea coral from destructive fishing gear like bottom trawls where nets are dragged across the sea floor, destroying corals and sponges in their path. Oceana lobbied Congress to protect deep-sea corals and in 2005 Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey introduced the Bottom Trawl and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act (S.1635). This bill gave the regional Fishery Management Councils the discretion to identify deep-sea coral areas and protect them. This bill title was passed as part of the 2006 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Oceana developed a “freeze the footprint” of bottom trawling approach to protect deep-sea corals in the Northeast. Oceana worked with the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, along with other stakeholders to implement this precautionary management strategy for deep-sea coral conservation. Freeze the footprint earned support from the industry in the Mid-Atlantic and ultimately had broad support in the Councils. The Councils created “broad” coral conservation zones from Maine to North Carolina that extend from a set depth on the continental shelf break to the edge of the U.S. EEZ and prohibited bottom-tending gear, with the exception of deep-sea red crab traps, from these areas. Additionally, the Councils established “discrete” coral zones in individual canyons that extend shallower than the depth bounding the broad areas.

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council first prohibited destructive bottom-tending gear in the Frank R. Lautenberg Deep-Sea Coral Protection Area in 2016. The New England Fishery Management Council later created the Georges Bank Deep-Sea Coral Protection Area that went into effect in 2021.