

# HEALTHY HABITAT, HEALTHY OCEANS

## PROTECTING THE U.S. WEST COAST SEAFLOOR

### Essential Fish Habitat

Some areas of the ocean floor look like an underwater forest, decorated with colonies of slow-growing, delicate animals that create habitat for commercially and recreationally important fish species as well as a variety of other marine life like sea stars and octopus. Corals and sponges are animals that form complex seafloor structures which provide fish with shelter, protection from strong currents and predators, and important areas for feeding, spawning, resting, and breeding. Underwater canyons and rocky reefs are equally important gathering places for diverse marine life.

This living seafloor is called Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Recognizing the importance of healthy ocean habitats to sustainable fisheries, Congress amended the MSA in 1996, requiring federal fishery managers to identify and describe these EFH areas for managed fisheries and minimize the adverse effects of fishing on that habitat.

Off the U.S. West Coast, current EFH conservation areas are principally designed to protect seafloor habitats from bottom trawling – the most damaging fishing practice to seafloor habitats. Bottom trawls are large, weighted nets that are dragged along the seafloor to catch rockfish, flatfish, lingcod, and other fish that live on and near the seafloor. The heavy trawl doors and cables topple delicate corals, sponges, and other living seafloor structures. Once destroyed, these habitats may take centuries to recover, if at all.

Based on recommendations by the Pacific Fishery Management Council, in 2006 NOAA Fisheries implemented a coastwide approach that protected more than 135,000 square miles of living seafloor.

### Oceana's Coastwide Conservation Proposal

As part of the Council's EFH review process, Oceana and other groups submitted a coastwide conservation proposal designed to protect corals, sponges and other priority habitats from bottom trawling while avoiding significant economic impacts to the trawl industry. Our proposal is now being considered by the Council as a distinct alternative. It incorporates new scientific information about the location and extent of corals, sponges and offshore reefs, including areas we documented during our at-sea expeditions. Our proposal identifies sixty-three new or modified EFH conservation areas in which bottom trawling would be prohibited. The proposed new or expanded EFH conservation areas are balanced with areas that would remain open to bottom trawling because they are important to the trawl industry and will support vibrant fisheries.

We invite you to explore some of the most amazing, sensitive living seafloor areas at risk by embarking on this digital tour:

[www.oceana.org/PacificSeafloorTour](http://www.oceana.org/PacificSeafloorTour)

Rockfish find shelter in and around a sponge at Daisy Bank, offshore Oregon.



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## Rockfish Conservation Areas

In 2002, in order to help recover overfished rockfish populations, the Council began to implement a system of Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs) closed to bottom trawling spanning the West Coast. Some of the depleted fish populations are now considered to be at healthy levels (e.g. canary and darkblotched rockfish) and others (e.g. yelloweye rockfish and Pacific ocean perch) will be rebuilding for years to come.

Because fishery managers are now able to more precisely track and manage catch in the trawl fishery, the Council is considering reopening parts of, or the entire trawl RCA. As the Council considers designating new EFH conservation areas to close to bottom trawling, it may also open areas that have recovered from bottom trawl scars over the last decade that may now contain sensitive living habitats. This could result in a net loss of habitat protections and reopening sensitive areas that are currently closed. By adopting Oceana's EFH proposal, even with the potential for concurrent action to remove part or the entire trawl RCA, the Council can actually significantly increase both habitat protection and fishing opportunity – a win-win outcome for habitat and fisheries. It is crucial that sensitive areas inside the trawl RCA remain closed for the purpose of habitat protection and to minimize adverse impacts of fishing.

## What You Can Do

The Pacific Fishery Management Council is currently deciding whether to increase protections for newly identified coral and sponge sites, deep-water ecosystems, and newly explored areas, or whether to chip away at landmark conservation efforts that went into place over a decade ago. Please support action by the Council that maintains and enhances protections for the living seafloor from bottom trawling, including:

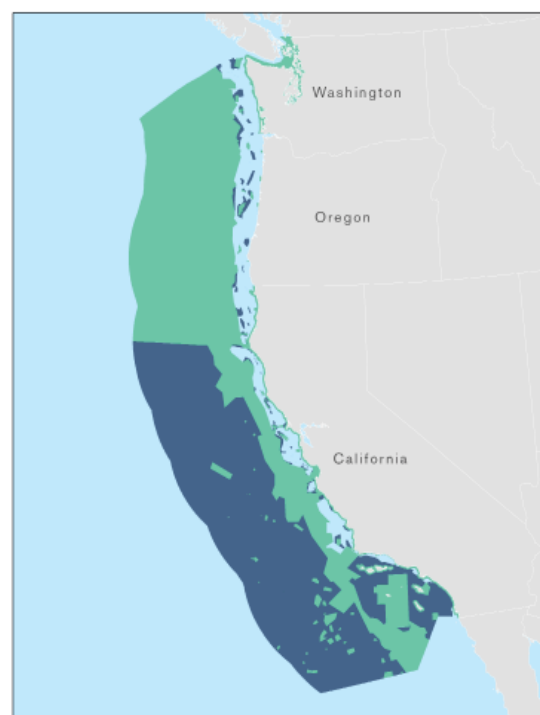
1. Establish new and modified EFH conservation areas that result in an overall net increase in habitat protection, coastwide and regionally, in light of trawl RCA and EFH conservation area reopenings.
2. Protect priority habitat types such as areas known to have cold-water corals, sponges, rocky reefs and underwater canyons.
3. Do not open any existing EFH conservation areas or RCAs to bottom trawling where priority habitats are known or likely present.
4. Protect the deep-water ecosystem off California (>3,500 meters) from all bottom contact gear.
5. Protect Southern California where the coastline curves from Point Conception to the Mexico border.

### LEARN MORE:

Website: [www.oceana.org/PacificSeafloor](http://www.oceana.org/PacificSeafloor)

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Current and proposed areas closed to bottom trawling: (left): existing EFH, RCA and state-water bottom trawl closures and (right): proposed new and expanded conservation areas denoted in dark blue, with coastwide removal of the trawl RCA.