

2026 Scottish Elections: Manifesto asks

The Marine Conservation Society is calling for:



A new Water Bill within 12 months in the next parliamentary session

Scotland urgently needs major reforms to its water system. Monitoring of sewer overflows is falling behind the rest of the UK, and our drinking water faces growing risks from PFAS 'forever' chemicals. Despite the scale of these challenges, the Scottish Government has taken any reforms off the table. We are calling for the next Scottish Government to make clean water a national priority by introducing a Water Bill within the first 12 months of the next parliamentary session.



Speed up Scotland's transition to a circular economy to tackle marine litter

When litter enters the marine environment, it can damage sensitive marine habitats and harm Scotland's iconic coastline. The next Scottish Government must take bold steps to move Scotland closer to a circular economy, and stop items such as drinks bottles, wet wipes and lost fishing or aquaculture gear from ending up in Scotland's seas. This should include the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme by October 2027, a new levy on single-use cups, and free fishing and aquaculture recycling services at all ports and harbours in Scotland.



Robust measures to protect seabed habitats from damaging forms of fishing

Scotland's seas are being fished unsustainably, and they have also failed to reach Good Environmental Status. Continued delays have left important marine habitats without meaningful protection from unsustainable forms of fishing. The next Scottish Government must introduce comprehensive, evidence-based protections across Scotland's inshore MPAs and Priority Marine Features, and reform inshore fisheries management to protect the long-term health of our marine ecosystem.



A holistic, ecosystem-based approach to marine planning

Scotland's seas are under pressure from every direction, including from overfishing and the rapid expansion of offshore wind. Renewable energy is vital to tackling the climate crisis, but it must not be at the expense of nature and the resilience of our marine ecosystems. The next Scottish Government must take a joined-up, ecosystem-based approach to planning, considering all these pressures together rather than in isolation.



Create Scottish Government-backed Blue Bonds to boost ocean regeneration and support the growth of the sustainable blue economy

Marine restoration and regeneration projects are economic opportunities that are crying out for further investment. There is a huge opportunity for government funding and private finance to flow towards activities that regenerate our seas, capture carbon and support the creation of new jobs and skills training across coastal communities. The creation of Scottish Government-backed Blue Bonds would derisk and galvanise private sector investment into the sustainable blue economy. This would unlock further opportunities for jobs, skills and the growth of Scotland's blue economy whilst supporting ocean regeneration.

A new Water Bill for Scotland

- A new Water Bill for Scotland would provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform Scotland's ailing water system.
- Clean water is essential for ocean regeneration, for protecting public health and is a key driver for supporting economic growth in coastal communities.
- Improvements urgently need to be made to Scotland's water quality monitoring and to prevent pollution from entering into our water network.

The Water Bill needs to include:

1. 100% monitoring of Scotland's sewage discharges
 - Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) allow untreated dilute sewage to be directed into rivers and bathing waters during exceptionally heavy rainfall, but they are currently being used far too often.
 - Sewer overflows in Scotland discharged sewage into Scotland's waters more than 24,000 times in 2024. Only 31% of overflows are monitored in Scotland, with data from just 7% of overflows being made publicly available. This is compared to 100% in England and Wales. Scottish Water have confirmed that there are no plans to reach this level of monitoring in Scotland.
 - **We want to see full monitoring of CSOs and emergency overflows (EOs) in Scotland, which would reveal the true scale of this problem and how to address it.**
2. A comprehensive plan to tackle sewage-related debris
 - Sewage Related Debris (SRD) is increasingly ending up in Scotland's wastewater network and our seas. Over 22,000 wet wipes were found on Scottish beaches in 2024. Sewage Related Debris was recorded on two-thirds of beach cleans.
 - Screens can be installed on CSOs to prevent SRD leaving the sewer network, yet 59% of CSOs in Scotland lack this protection.
 - **We are calling for the next Scottish Government to take stronger action to prevent SRD from escaping the wastewater network, including the installation of screens on all CSOs.**
 - **We also want to see further measures to tackle SRD at source by phasing out single-use plastic items and improving product labelling to prevent these items from entering the sewage system to begin with.**

Wet wipe on Cramond beach
📷 Holtography



3. Stronger monitoring of PFAS – ‘forever chemicals’ – and action to prevent PFAS from entering our water network

- Around the world, there is growing concern about the presence of PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), also known as ‘forever chemicals’. PFAS are a group of thousands of highly persistent man-made chemical substances. These do not break down in the environment, and build-up and increase in concentration. They are found in lots of everyday products, including clothing, non-stick pans, and paints and dyes.
- PFAS have been found in our seas, rivers, drinking water and even rainwater. Exposure to PFAS has been linked to a range of negative impacts in animal health and behaviour, including blood, liver and kidney function of bottlenose dolphins and poorer body condition of seabirds.
- Currently, Scottish Water monitor the levels of PFAS in drinking water through risk assessments, but current treatment processes cannot fully remove chemicals because these chemicals dissolve easily in water. Removing them requires specialised techniques which are not in place at all Scottish water treatment plants.
- **We want to see improved monitoring and treatment of water for PFAS, alongside further action to prevent these harmful chemicals from entering the water network in the first place.**

Speed up Scotland’s transition to a circular economy to tackle marine litter

- Our 2024 State of our Beaches report revealed that levels of litter on Scottish beaches has increased. This threatens marine wildlife and harms Scotland’s beautiful coastline.
- Passing ambitious circular economy measures would help make marine litter a thing of the past, whilst boosting the economy and lowering costs to public services.
- The next Government needs to prioritise measures that emphasise prevention, reduction, reuse and recycling.

These measures should include:

1. A Deposit Return Scheme by October 2027

- Deposit Return Schemes (DRS) add a deposit to items such as bottles and cans, which consumers can then reclaim when returning through the scheme.
- A well-designed DRS could mean a 90% reduction in the number of containers that are thrown away instead of being recycled or reused, which could significantly reduce marine litter. In 2024, drinks related litter was found on 95% of beaches surveyed in Scotland.
- A DRS is due to be introduced in Scotland, alongside schemes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in October 2027.
- **The Scottish Government must work constructively to ensure this is a world leading scheme which lays the pathway for a wider move to reuse and refill.**

Plastic bottle found on Kinnell Estate
© Holtography



2. A new levy on single-use cups

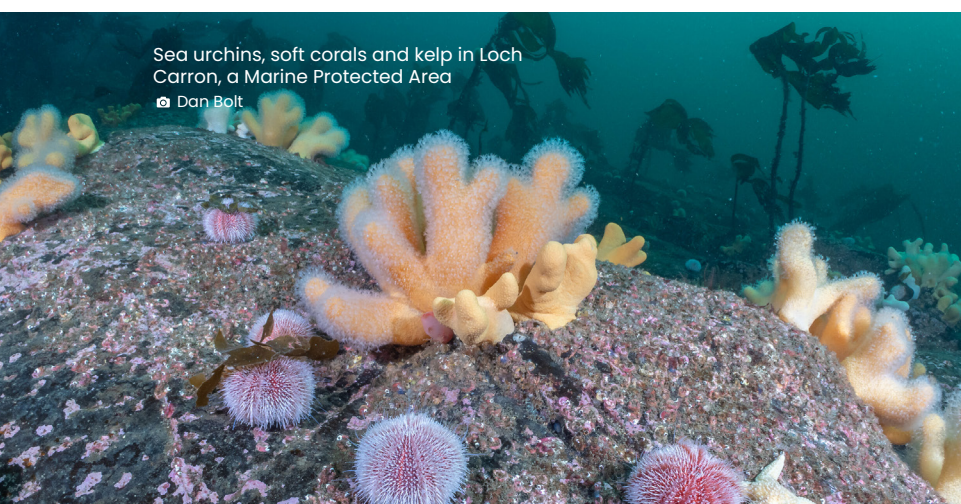
- It is difficult to recycle single-use cups, like those used for hot drinks. These can often end up as litter – cups were found on 54% of surveyed beaches in 2024.
- The Circular Economy Act 2024 gives Scottish Ministers powers to introduce a levy on certain single-use items, including single-use coffee cups.
- Following a consultation last year, this levy has now been delayed until the next parliamentary session.
- **We are calling for the Scottish Government to introduce a targeted, effective levy on single-use cups, and invest in pathways to further incentivise practices of reuse and refill.**

3. Free fishing gear recycling services at all Scottish ports and harbours to tackle harmful disposal of end-of-life fishing gear

- End-of-life fishing gear can often end up in the marine environment. This can threaten marine life and litter our beaches.
- This is a particular problem on Scottish islands, where a third of all marine litter comes from disused fishing gear.
- Only half of the main Scottish ports and harbours have facilities for recycling end-of-life fishing or aquaculture gear.
- **We are calling for the Scottish Government to work alongside the UK Government, learning from progress in Wales, to introduce free fishing gear recycling services at all ports and harbours in Scotland.**

Robust measures to protect seabed habitats from damaging forms of fishing

- Current fishing practices are directly contributing to a failure to achieve Good Environmental Status in Scotland's waters.
- Targeted, evidence-based fisheries management measures have been shown to restore marine habitats and support sustainable fishing
- The next Scottish Government must implement long-overdue protections for important marine habitats across Scotland and transform inshore fisheries management.



These protections should include:

1. Stronger protections for Scotland's offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

- Scotland's offshore waters, stretching from 12 to 200 nautical miles, contain 27 Marine Protected Areas.
- The Scottish Government recently announced management measures for offshore MPAs. While these measures are welcome, most are 'zonal' instead of 'whole-site' measures. This means that fishing with bottom towed gear can still take place in parts of all but five MPAs.

- ‘Whole-site’ measures would restrict damaging forms of fishing across the entire MPA, allowing the wider ecosystem to recover more fully when compared to a more limited ‘zonal’ approach.
- **We are calling for the next Scottish Government to carefully monitor the condition of these offshore MPAs, and to further strengthen these protections if necessary as part of an adaptive management approach.**

2. Protections for Scotland’s inshore MPAs and Priority Marine Features

- About 200 of Scotland’s MPAs sit within its inshore waters, alongside many other examples of ‘Priority Marine Features’ (PMFs) such as seagrass or flame shell beds that exist outwith the formal MPA network.
- By the 2026 elections, protections for Scotland’s inshore waters will be ten years overdue. Any further delay risks yet more damage to fragile marine habitats.
- **Alongside our partners in Scottish Environment LINK, we are calling for the next Scottish Government to:**
 - **Adopt a presumption against bottom-towed fishing gear in a significant proportion of inshore waters, including “whole-site” protections from this gear for inshore MPAs and PMFs.**
 - **Set clear targets to end over-fishing, bycatch, and the entanglement of protected species.**
 - **Support the fishing industry to transition to low impact sustainable practices.**

A holistic, ecosystem-based approach to marine planning

- Our seas have never been more crowded. Competing demands on space from different sectors, the impacts of climate change and overdevelopment risk harming our marine environment.
- Investment in offshore wind is rapidly increasing without full consideration of the potential impact on marine wildlife. Fishers also deserve long-term clarity over where, and how, they can fish.
- Well thought-out Marine Spatial Planning can provide a solution which protects our marine environment, allows further renewable energy development, and gives certainty for Scotland’s fishing industry.



Fishing boat in Cove, Scottish Borders
 © jimmonkphotography / Shutterstock

Reforms to marine planning must include:

1. An Ecosystem-based approach to marine planning

- Healthy seas are the foundation for Scotland's environmental, economic and cultural wellbeing.
- An ecosystem-based approach to marine planning would take a holistic view of our seas – considering all activities and their combined cumulative impacts whilst prioritising the recovery and resilience of marine ecosystems.
- Impacts on the marine environment, from its many different users, should not be managed separately, as part of a 'sectoral' approach. As a minimum, we believe that marine planning should be integrated with fisheries management.
- This increasingly crowded landscape means that the marine environment needs a framework that considers the cumulative impact, and competing needs, of all stakeholders.
- **We are calling for the next Scottish Government to ensure that National Marine Plan 2 delivers an ecosystem-based approach to marine planning, which puts the improvement of the overall health of the marine environment at its heart, and goes further to protect nature than National Marine Plan 1.**

2. Regional marine plans

- Scottish Ministers have the power to create regional 'Marine Planning Partnerships' (MPPs) to manage planning across Scotland's different inshore "marine regions."
- These partnerships could give different regions much-needed flexibility to focus on local priorities, such as salmon farming, fisheries, or marine tourism.
- Despite this, 15 years after the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, only one Regional Marine Plan has been adopted.
- **We are calling for the next Scottish Government to work with established MPPs to allow more regional plans to become a reality and to establish MPPs for other regions of Scotland.**

Wind turbines in North Sea
© MaxNoz / Shutterstock



Further investment in Scotland's blue economy

- Investing in Scotland's 'blue economy' has the potential to deliver huge benefits for communities, businesses and the marine environment.
- In the next parliamentary session, the Scottish Government's updated fiscal framework will provide fresh opportunities to ramp up investment in a sustainable blue economy.
- Through ambitious sustainable blue finance measures, and increased funding for marine initiatives, the next Scottish Government can unlock seas of opportunity in Scotland's marine environment.

Brown and green seaweeds in Scottish waters

© Martin Prochazkacz / Shutterstock



Investment in the blue economy should include:

1. Issuing Scottish Government-backed 'blue bonds'
 - The new fiscal settlement gives the Scottish Government the powers to issue government-backed bonds to private investors, which would raise funds for blue investments such as sustainable aquaculture or coastal protection.
 - Blue Bonds, which would raise ringfenced funds for blue investments, including ocean regeneration projects at scale, could be sold at more competitive interest rates than standard government bonds, and provide better value for Scottish taxpayers' money.
 - This approach would complement the existing Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) and leverage a step-change in private finance for ocean regeneration
 - **We are calling for the next Scottish Government to use its new borrowing powers to ramp-up investment in the blue economy by issuing blue bonds in the next parliamentary session.**
2. Increased government funding invested in the marine environment
 - In recent years, nature and marine investment have slipped down among the Scottish Government's spending priorities.
 - This has left Scotland's Marine Directorate struggling to deliver much-needed transformation in marine governance, delaying long overdue fisheries management reforms such as the Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement Programme (IFMI), and limiting their ambition.
 - Whilst we welcome the government's 'Blue Economy Vision for Scotland', further action and investment is required to make it a reality.
 - **We are therefore calling for the next Scottish Government to increase its investment in the MarineFund Scotland, the Marine and Science Innovation Strategy, the Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF), and in its own Marine Directorate, ensuring it has the resources to protect our ocean and drive long-term change.**

For more information, please contact Daniel Hale,
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Registered charity in England and Wales 1004005 and in Scotland SC037480.
Registered company limited by guarantee in England and Wales 02550966.
Registered office: Overross House, Ross Park, Ross-on-Wye, HR9 7US. VAT number: 321491232.

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