

Creelin' in the Years: Fishing Policy Report

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ABSTRACT

The fishing industry in Scotland is in a state of decline. High input costs, quota and licensing constraints, low profitability, labour shortages, and a divide between policymakers and fishers has led to an industry on the brink of extinction. This paper aims to create a comprehensive outline of the challenges affecting the Scottish fishing industry, Fife in particular, and details a number of policy actions which could be taken to combat them. Utilising thorough research, examinations of past and present fishing policy, interviews with policymakers and fishers, and quantitative data analysis, this paper attempts to provide an approach to fishing policy that is grounded in historical, sociocultural, and economic context, and acknowledges the many compounding factors which impact the industry. This paper advocates for regulatory reform, labour market intervention, economic support, and policy which target often obscured cultural and social factors. Ideally, by taking an informed and holistic approach to policy making, it is possible to address the diverse and extensive challenges the fishing industry in Scotland faces.

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1.0 Introduction, Methodology

2024 marked the lowest number of Scotland-registered fishing vessels that the Scottish government had recorded for over two decades (See Appendix 1). Fishers report feeling under siege by factors out of their control. The complex nature of many diverse factors operating in conjunction with one another has led to an increasingly fragile and unstable environment for the fishing industry in Scotland. Changing policy, cost of living, wages, and culture, among other challenges, have forced small-scale fishing crews to adapt or be forced out of the industry. The increasing number and scope of challenges facing the industry have created a volatile atmosphere in which fishing crew struggle to subsist. Regulatory rigidity, labour shortages, and cultural marginalisation have driven the Fife fishing industry to decline; without targeted reform, the sector could face extinction within a generation. This paper will focus primarily on problems in Fife County, identifying and contextualising factors which negatively impact the local Fife fishing industry, hereafter referred to as 'the industry'.

This paper attempts to provide an approach to fishing policy that is grounded in historical, cultural, and economic context, and acknowledges the many factors which impact the industry. To appropriately represent the multifaceted nature of the industry, a number of diverse research methods were employed. This paper engages with policy relating to the UK fishing industry from 1973 - present. Interviews were conducted with a Member of Scottish Parliament, as well as a number of fishers from a variety of ages and backgrounds. Quantitative data was collected from the available statistics in the Scottish government's Scotland's Marine Economic Statistics reports between the years 2002 -2024.

First, this paper will explain the necessary context surrounding the fishing industry in Fife, chronicling changes in legislation from 1973 until present day, describing the functional structure of the industry, and examining the day-to-day reality of local fishers. Second, this paper will closely examine both the structural economic challenges and the social and cultural constraints which negatively impact the industry, examining the current trajectory of the industry without further intervention. Finally, this paper will attempt to provide feasible policy recommendations which target each factor and acknowledge the compounding nature of the challenges faced by the fishing industry. It will advocate for an approach which integrates regulatory reform, labour market interventions, economic support, and socio-cultural policy.

2.0 Context

2.1 Historical and Legislative Background

Understanding the impact of Brexit on the fishing industry in the East Neuk of Fife requires situating it within a longer trajectory of UK fisheries governance prior to 2016. The period from the UK's entrance to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 through successive reforms of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) fundamentally reshaped the structure, practices, and economic viability of fishing in East Neuk ports such as Pittenweem, Anstruther and St Monans (Force et al., 2021). Over time, these policy developments shifted control from national to supranational authority, introduced quota-based regulation, and incentivised structural changes within the local fishing fleet.

Before 1973, the UK exercised full sovereignty over its fisheries, with relatively limited regulatory constraints and no comprehensive quota system (ibid.). Fishing communities in Fife operated within a system characterised by open access to nearby North Sea grounds and a strong emphasis on whitefish species such as cod and haddock (Tingley and Pascoe, 2005). However, accession to the EEC marked a turning point. Fisheries became a shared European resource, and the principle of equal access to member states' waters introduced new competitive pressures.

The establishment of the CFP in 1983 institutionalised this transition. Central to the CFP was the introduction of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and a quota allocation system based on the principle of 'relative stability,' whereby member states received fixed shares of fish stocks according to historical catch data (Force et al., 2021). While this system provided predictability at the national level, it entrenched structural inequalities within the UK fleet. Quota distribution was mediated through national mechanisms, including Producer Organisations and later Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) units, which tended to favour larger offshore fleets with higher historical landings (Tingley and Pascoe, 2005). Consequently, smaller vessels operating out of Fife ports received relatively limited quota access (Force et al., 2021). This constrained their ability to compete in quota-regulated fisheries and contributed to a gradual shift away from traditional whitefish fishing.

The late 1980s and early 1990s intensified these pressures. The phenomenon of 'quota hopping,' whereby foreign-owned vessels registered under the UK flag to access British quotas, generated political controversy and further strained perceptions of fairness within coastal communities (Smit, 1997). More significantly, the 1992 reform of the CFP introduced explicit measures to address overcapacity in European fleets (Howarth, 2008). These included decommissioning schemes that offered financial incentives for scrapping vessels. In Fife, this led to a marked contraction of the fleet, particularly among ageing whitefish boats. The cumulative effect was not only economic but also social, as fishing employment declined and ancillary industries such as processing and boat maintenance were affected.

Alongside structural adjustment, the 1990s saw the expansion of technical conservation measures, including mesh size regulations, effort controls, and seasonal closures (Smit, 1997). While intended to protect fish stocks, these measures created operational challenges for Fife's mixed fisheries (ibid.). Vessels targeting one species frequently encountered others for which they had limited quota, leading to inefficiencies and reduced profitability. This issue became more pronounced following the 2003 CFP reform, which introduced stronger sustainability

objectives and long-term recovery plans for depleted stocks, particularly North Sea cod (Scottish Government, 2010). For Fife fleets, historically reliant on whitefish, cod restrictions were especially consequential. Many vessels were forced to adapt by targeting non-quota species, most notably langoustines, which became the economic mainstay of the region.

This transition towards shellfish was both a response to regulatory constraints and a reflection of broader market dynamics. Shellfish fisheries were less tightly regulated under quota systems and better suited to the smaller, inshore vessels typical of East Neuk ports. However, this shift also signalled a narrowing of the industry's economic base and increased dependence on a limited range of species, with implications for resilience and vulnerability to market fluctuations.

The 2013 reform of the CFP, implemented from 2014, further reshaped the regulatory environment. The introduction of the landing obligation, or 'discard ban,' required fishermen to land all catches of quota species, rather than discarding unwanted fish at sea (Force et al., 2021). While designed to reduce waste and improve stock management, this policy posed significant challenges for mixed fisheries such as those in the North Sea. The problem of 'choke species,' whereby exhausting quota for one species could halt fishing activity altogether, disproportionately affected smaller operators with limited quota flexibility (ibid., p.15). For Fife vessels, this added a layer of complexity and risk to day-to-day operations.

In parallel, the expansion of marine environmental policy, including the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), introduced spatial restrictions on fishing activities (Williams and Carpenter, 2016). These measures, often linked to broader European environmental directives, limited access to certain grounds and encouraged the adoption of lower-impact fishing methods (ibid.). While contributing to conservation goals, they also reinforced the trend towards smaller-scale, creel-based fisheries in Fife.

By the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the fishing industry in Fife had undergone profound transformation. The cumulative impact of CFP policies had reduced fleet size, shifted the focus from whitefish to shellfish, and embedded the region within a complex, quota-driven regulatory system (Scottish Government, 2010). At the same time, longstanding grievances regarding access, allocation, and control had fostered a perception among many fishermen that the existing policy framework was inequitable (Force et al., 2021). This historical context is essential for understanding both the expectations surrounding Brexit and its subsequent impacts on the fishing industry in Fife.

2.2 Structure of Fife Fishing Industry

The current structure of the fishing industry in Fife is defined by a significant contraction from its historical peak, a transition toward high-value shellfish, and a stark geographic consolidation into a single primary hub. While many of the East Neuk's historic ports, such as Anstruther, Crail, and St Monans, have transitioned into tourist destinations where boats serve a decorative or recreational role, Pittenweem remains the only working fishing harbour in Fife with regular commercial fish auctions (Davis, 2025).

The Fife fleet is predominantly small-scale and inshore. The industry consists mostly of small businesses, many of which are single-vessel operations (Fife Council, 2013). The fleet is dominated by the 10-metres-and-under sector (*Ibid.*). This small scale is reflected in the Fife Fish Producer Organisation (FPO) Ltd, which in 2018 represented only 29 vessels with a total catch value of £17.1 million (Forse et al., 2021). These vessels operate with a limited geographic range, making them highly dependent on local grounds within the Firth of Forth (Fife Council, 2013). This dependency leaves the industry vulnerable to displacement from other marine activities, such as offshore renewable energy developments or the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) (*Ibid.*).

In addition to this contraction, the industry now faces a severe demographic crisis. Nationwide data indicates that nearly 50% of skippers are over the age of 50, while the average age of vessel owners is also 50 (Forse et al., 2021). This ageing profile is exacerbated by the collapse in formal skills pathways; research indicates that there were no recorded entrants into sea fishing modern apprenticeships or vocational diplomas in Scotland for five consecutive years leading up to 2025 (McBride, 2025). The fleet size has also seen a relentless decline. In the 1990s, Pittenweem alone supported over 129 fishing boats; today, that number has dwindled to 79 (Scottish Office 1992, 60) (Appendix 4). This contraction is driven by a combination of overfishing, EU quotas, and massive barriers to entry (Davis, 2025). For young prospective fishers, the cost of acquiring a vessel alongside high-value Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) units, which can be valued in the millions, is often prohibitive unless they inherit a family business (Forse et al., 2021).

Despite its reduced scale, the industry remains an essential economic driver for Pittenweem. The economy here is heavily skewed toward shellfish, specifically Nephrops (prawns), which account for the vast majority of landing value (Fife Council, 2013)(Scottish Government, 2010). In 2014, Pittenweem's landings were valued at approximately £3.45 million, with a 74.6% dependency on Nephrops (Williams and Carpenter, 2016). The industry's local economic role is maintained through a combination of mobile gear (trawling) and static gear (creeling) (Ibid.). While trawling remains productive, the creel fishery often provides higher individual value per tonne by targeting the live export market (Scottish Government, 2010). However, this overlap in grounds has led to chronic "gear conflict" between the two sectors, which creates additional economic strain on small-scale fishers through equipment damage (Williams and Carpenter, 2016). Ultimately, the Fife fishing industry is now a specialised, fragile enclave within a broader coastal economy that has increasingly pivoted toward heritage tourism.

Pittenweem is also home to four vessels engaged in razor clam diving. Razor clams are a species of shellfish found in the shallow inshore waters around Scotland. The species of clams live burrowed under sand and fine sediment at around 40m depth and are fished primarily for the export shellfood market. Prior to 2004, razor clams in Scotland were harvested either by hand using divers close to shore or with suction dredges further at sea (Breen et al. 2011). After 2004, some vessels began employing a new harvesting method called electrofishing.

Electrofishing involves an anchored vessel pulling a line of electrodes over the seabed to create an electrical field. The electrical pulses stimulate the razor clam, causing them to emerge from their burrows (Scottish Government June 2026, 2). Divers swimming behind the electrodes can then collect the clams of a marketable size while smaller ones are left to re-bury themselves. Under EU law, and thus the terms of the EU-UK TCA, all forms of electrofishing are illegal (European Parliament 2019, 1). Since 2018 a scientific survey has been conducted on behalf of Marine Scotland to study the sustainability of electrofishing for razor clams with strict scientific oversight (Scottish Government June 2026, 1). Licenced boats participating in the trial are permitted to catch, land and sell razor clams but the size of the fleet and fishing areas are fixed (Scottish Government February 1).

Electrofishing brings a number of advantages compared to hand collecting and dredging. The method is significantly more efficient compared to hand diving which has a catch rate of less than 100 shells per hour (Fox et al. 2019). Electrofishing and hydraulic dredging by comparison net in excess of 4000 shells per hour (ibid.). Electrofishing is also superior to dredging as the fragile razor shells are often damaged by the hydraulic jets resulting in a lower quality product (Hauton et al. 2007, 871). Dredging also results in significantly more damage to the seabed and non-target species compared to the electrical probes which leave only a 1cm impression in the sand(Ibid., 875). The yearly reports produced by Marine Scotland and scientific trials conducted in other countries have found no to negligible harmful effect in non-target species as a result of electrofishing (Scottish Government June 2026, 2).

2.3 Reality of the Fishing Industry

Rising costs, intense labour, and an increasing sense of alienation in the field have created a reality in which fishers do not feel as though their work is worth the hardship. The upfront cost of entering the Fife fishing industry as an owner-operator represents one of the most significant barriers facing aspiring fishers. The fleet operating out of Fife's harbours consists largely of inshore vessels under 20 metres in length with many under 10 metres (Appendix 4). Vessels of this length range in cost between £15,000 and £25,000 on the open market (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Nicol). This is a substantial increase from 2014 when the Scottish Government found that second-hand vessels could be bought for as little as £5,000 to £10,000 (Stewart 2014, 8). In an effort to encourage young fishers to purchase their own vessel the Scottish government has introduced subsidies for first time buyers as part of the Marine Fund Scotland 2025-26. Young fishers aged 16 to 40 can apply for a grant to cover 40% of the overall cost of licensing a vessel (Scottish Government June 2025, 5).

Once a vessel has been purchased there are a range of associated ongoing costs. Commercial fishing vessel insurance is generally substantial due to the inherent risks involved with operating one. Rates are typically calculated based on the vessel’s value with smaller vessels using less mechanised gear, such as creelpots and hand nets, costing less (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Nicol). Across all vessel types, the cost of insurance has risen, with fishers reporting an

approximate 10% increase in 2023 alone (Harper 2023). Repair costs are generally increasing as well. An analysis of 240,000 marine insurance claims by Allianz in 2023 found that typical propeller and machinery damage claims are now twice as expensive compared to pre-COVID rates (Allianz 2025, 43). Higher steel prices, labour shortages, supply chain disruption, and delays in obtaining spare parts have compounded these costs (Ibid., 7). Within the specifications of the Marine Fund, maintenance costs to and repairs are not included within the grant (Scottish Government June 2025, 35).

The modern reality of fishing in Fife is defined by extreme labour intensity, a profound loss of cultural prestige, and a deepening alienation from government authority. While the industry was once the 'warp and weave' of national life, it is now experienced by its practitioners as a physically punishing and politically marginalised calling (Scottish Government, 2010). Commercial fishing remains one of the most dangerous and physically demanding occupations in the UK. For the Fife fleet, the transition to high-value species like prawns and razor clams has not lessened the physical burden. Trawler crews frequently undertake multi-day trips, sometimes lasting up to 10 days, during which the 'rapid pace' of hauling, cleaning, and repairing gear continues around the clock without rest pauses (Abranches, 2023). Data indicates that Nephrops trawlers average nearly 50 hours of work per week, with peak intensity reaching over 63 hours (Williams and Carpenter, 2016). Interviewed fishers in Pittenweem emphasise that declining stocks and rising fuel costs, often exceeding £2,000 per trip, force crews to work longer hours and in more dangerous weather conditions just to remain viable (Pittenween Fisher Interviews - Czech Joe and Paul).

In addition to physical hardship, there has been a definitive shift in how fishing is perceived, both within coastal communities and by the wider public. Historically, fishing was a calling passed from father to son, but this 'generational chain' is breaking as the industry loses its status as an occupation of choice (Jamieson et al., 2009). Local fishers now express a sense of cultural disengagement, noting that they often fish out of necessity rather than the traditional sense that it is "in their blood" (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Davie). The East Neuk's transformation into a tourism hub has created an 'authenticity paradox': while visitors come to see bobbing boats and stone cottages, the working fishers are increasingly sidelined by a 'virtual fishing' economy (Jamieson et al., 2009). Boats are often viewed by the public as decorative elements for a 'postcard-perfect' scene rather than tools of a gruelling livelihood (Davis, 2025). Furthermore, a barrage of environmental criticism has left many fishers feeling that their profession is no longer valued or respected, seriously undermining recruitment efforts (UK Parliament EFRA Committee, 2025).

The change in social perceptions of the industry have also impacted the way fishers are seen by policymakers. Relations between Fife fishers and the government are characterised by profound distrust and a "communication divide" (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Davie and Russell, see note 1). Interviews with Pittenweem fishers reveal a widespread feeling that policymakers are indifferent to the local industry's survival (*Ibid.*). This sentiment is frequently directed at local political figures; for instance, MSP Willie Rennie was specifically mentioned by interviewees in the context of broken promises and a perceived lack of integrity (*Ibid.*).

Fishers express particular frustration over the lack of consultation regarding the development of offshore wind farms and subsea cables, which they feel are being "forced" upon them at the expense of their traditional grounds (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Davie). There is a pervasive sense that "the big guys get it all, and the wee guys get nothing," with many local operators feeling that the government prioritises large-scale commercial concerns or environmental NGOs over the needs of small-scale inshore fleets (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Russell). Consequently, interactions with government rhetoric are often met with cynicism and eyerolling, as fishers feel they are being treated as "expendable" in the pursuit of broader political goals (UK Parliament EFRA Committee, 2025).

3.0 Problems Facing the Industry

3.1 Structural Economic Constraints

For the statistics cited in this section, see Note 1.

Small-scale fishing faces a web of compounding costs. Before they even leave harbour, fishers must put up enough to meet the capital costs of entry: a boat alone can run ~£60,000, a licence £30,000 – half the cost of the boat itself, as Russell (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Russell) notes. Fuel, bait, food accommodation, wages, maintenance, insurance, mooring fees, and regulatory compliance each draw from the same shallow pool of revenue. A ten-day trip can consume 2,000 litres of fuel - £2000 in costs before a single catch is sold (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). Paul (Pittenween Fisher) notes that as fuel prices rise, fishers are compelled to go out in increasingly poor weather conditions to justify the costs. Fuel price volatility compounds all of this: with already wafer-thin margins, a sudden spike in diesel can render a trip economically sunk overnight. Planning for the future becomes near impossible when one of the largest costs is wholly beyond their control. Again, this is another barrier for newcomers. Without a secure continuous stream of income, newcomers cannot justify taking out a loan to help combat the initial costs – it must be entirely self-funded.

Access to the fishery itself presents an equally serious constraint. Licences and quotas act as a ceiling on what fishers can earn, while simultaneously acting as a barrier that prevents new entrants from joining the industry. Russell describes the licensing process for razor clams: the application window was short, poorly advertised, and licenses cannot now be purchased at all, leaving only 22 boats licensed to fish razor clams across the entirety of Scotland, four of which operate in the Firth of Forth (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). Czech Joe, who dives on one such boat, notes that concentrating all licensed boats into one or two areas has accelerated the depletion of stock in those zones, while adjacent waters go unfished (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Czech Joe). The trial period governing razor clam fishing – initially intended to last two years – has now stretched to four. With no resolution in sight, fishers are left in a state of limbo. More broadly, the quota system limits how much any individual boat can land, capping income at the same time that fishing costs continue to rise.

The economics of what the fishers take home reveal the thin margins that most survive on. Davie receives around £4/kg for prawns, which is then sold for £25/kg in supermarkets, with even higher prices on the European Continent (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). This comes from the cumulative cost of processing, transport, and border warehousing that the catch must pass through before reaching France, Spain and Italy (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). These frictions have only worsened since Brexit, with export paperwork and customs adding extra costs. For Russell, crabs yield just £3/kg, and even lobster is only £31/kg (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). Czech Joe describes a similar price issue with razor clams; buyers dictate the prices with fishers holding little negotiating power (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Czech Joe). To stay afloat and in business, Davie calculates he must land roughly a thousand prawns a day (£80 ~ day). As he puts it: "The prawns are there, but the pay is not… there will come a point where it's just not viable to catch them," (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Davie).

In addition to low payouts, labour shortages also plague the industry. When recruiting crew, fishers must choose between local and overseas workers – both are problematic. According to Davie, there is a lack of local youth available, with those that do go through local fishing college programmes often don't want to work, suffer from a poor attitude, with many youth abusing drugs or alcohol (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Davie). Russell echoes these sentiments (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews – Russell). Beyond attitude, there is a persistent gulf between the theory taught at fishing colleges and the practical reality of fishing. Crucially, many graduates have no genuine interest in the industry to begin with. Overseas workers present a different problem: a steep price. Davie estimates hiring one worker from abroad costs £40,000-£42,000 annually – an absurd sum for fishers who struggle to earn barely £24,000 annually themselves (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026).

3.2 Social and Cultural Constraints

In addition to the structural economic challenges, there are a number of social and cultural factors which also negatively impact fishers and the industry as a whole. When asked what the main challenges facing the local industry were, Pittenweem-based fishers identified a lack of communication between policymakers and fishers (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026).

Willie Rennie, former leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats (2011-2021) and current Member of Scottish Parliament for Northeast Fife (2016-present) is frequently the main point of contact between the Fife fishing industry and the Scottish parliament and UK Government. When questioned in an interview about the main concerns heard from local fishers, Rennie identified encroachment in fishing grounds by wind farms, increasing fuel costs, and lack of viable crew as the most prevalent factors impacting the industry. (William Rennie, 2026) He detailed proposed plans to prevent monopolies within the local communities, and to compensate fishers for lost profits and inconvenience caused by wind farms. Acknowledging the compounding nature and complexity of the challenges facing fishers in Fife, Rennie maintained a sense of hope for the industry in the future, citing bills passed which would provide aid and underlining his own commitment to advocacy (William Rennie, 2026).

In October 2025, Rennie and Chamberlain, a Liberal Democrat MP for North East Fife, advocated for the UK Government to deliver proportional funding when allocating the new Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund, a bill proposed to alleviate challenges facing the fishing industry throughout the UK. When first proposed, the Fund allocated only 7.78% of the original £500 million to Scotland, despite Scotland contributing over 60% of the UK's total fishing fleet and seafood exports (Scottish Government, 2025). Rennie and Chamberlain called for further transparency, a clear plan for the duration of the funding to ensure it did not run out, and a more proportional allocation of funds (Malallah, 2025). After negotiations, the fund was reduced to £360 million, with a combined £56 million allocated to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, 15.55% of the total fund (GOV.UK, 2026). While a step in the right direction, the fund lacks a clear implementation plan. The goals listed are vague and do not include specific plans to ensure equitable distribution of resources.

Despite the efforts of the local government to engage with the fishing communities in their constituency, a divide between the policymakers and fishers persists. Many fishers in Pittenweem expressed frustration at ineffective and inadequate attempts to bridge the gap. One semi-retired lobster and crab fisherman with 50 years of experience in the industry commented that "nobody really tried," to tell fishers about compensation opportunities for wind farm encroachment into fishing waters (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). Additionally, he mentioned that licenses for razor clam diving, a growing sector of the fishing industry, were heavily restricted by the government (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026). According to him, the application period was short and was not properly broadcast to fishers, excluding many from an opportunity to expand to a more sustainable sector (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026).

Other fishers echoed these sentiments; many said they were not approached until after the UK Government had negotiated allocation contracts with renewable energy developers (Energy UK, 2026). When asked what would improve the situation for them, many advocated for equitable distribution of compensation for wind farm encroachment, proper consultation before the implementation of new policies, and infrastructure compatible with life in the industry (Pittenweem Fishers, 2026).

The lack of dialogue with fishers surrounding placement of wind farms and wind farm cables, when compounded with increasingly constrictive regulations on where vessels can fish has led to major disruptions to the fishing industry. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity for Scottish Parliament, Jim Fairlie, maintains that compensation for disruption of fishing activity by the wind farms is a private matter which must be settled between wind developers and the fishers themselves (The Scottish Parliament, 2025). Currently, there is no comprehensive governmental oversight to ensure that compensation is being given fairly and equitably. The communication divide on the issue of wind farms is by far the largest in scope, but it is by no means the only issue in which the rift between legislators and fishers is apparent. In a demographic that is overwhelmingly older, and generally non-responsive to electronic communications, the approach taken by policy makers must be adapted to meet the needs of the constituents, especially when the livelihoods of an industry are at stake.

4.0 Future Trajectory without Intervention

The long-term outlook for the Fife fishing industry, absent significant policy intervention, is a trajectory toward total cultural and economic displacement, where the working harbour becomes a historical artefact rather than a living industry (Abranches, 2023). The collapse of formal skills pathways, evidenced by five consecutive years without a single sea fishing apprenticeship entrant in Scotland, means that the extinction of the local professional class is effectively programmed (McBride, 2025). As the current cohort of ageing skippers retire, the generational chain of maritime intellectual capital – the art of understanding local seabed patterns and species behaviour – may permanently vanish (Ibid.).

The regulatory framework of the Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) system ensures that the industry's future will be defined by industrial consolidation and the extraction of wealth from coastal communities (Forse et al., 2021). Without intervention, fishing rights will continue to migrate into the hands of "quota barons" and "slipper skippers" who hold rights as high-value assets without an active interest in the Fife coast (Ibid.). This means that Pittenweem's remaining independent vessels will likely be replaced by a fleet owned by external corporate entities or processing firms, where local fishers are relegated to the status of agency workers rather than owner-operators (Ibid.).

Biologically, the industry faces a perpetual risk of commercial extinction due to its over-reliance on a single species, Nephrops (Scottish Government, 2010). Historical precedent in the Firth of Forth demonstrates that uncontrolled exploitation of local spawning grounds, such as herring and oysters, can lead to irreversible stock collapse (Smout, 2011). Without moving toward a "low-mortality" fishery, the Fife fleet remains trapped in a "race to fish" that mirrors the "tragedy of the commons," where the short-term need to survive economically drives the long-term destruction of the resource (*Ibid.*).

Economically, the industry is transitioning into a phase of "virtual fishing" and heritage tourism (Jamieson et al., 2009). The "authenticity paradox" suggests that while Fife villages will continue to market their maritime history to attract visitors, the actual working fishers will be displaced by a "feast-or-famine" seasonal economy (Davis, 2025). This shift accelerates the local housing crisis, as property prices rise beyond the reach of local families, effectively hollowing out the community that once supported the fleet (*Ibid.*).

Finally, the expanding footprint of offshore renewables and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) means that the Fife fleet faces a permanent "squeeze" on traditional grounds (Fife Council, 2013)(UK Parliament EFRA Committee, 2025). Without a robust spatial management strategy that prioritises local, low-impact gear like creels, small-scale fishers will be forced into smaller, unproductive areas where gear conflict and rising fuel costs will make their operation technically and financially impossible (Williams and Carpenter, 2016). Ultimately, the trajectory is one where the Fife coast becomes a theatrical backdrop for tourism, with its maritime identity preserved in museums rather than on the decks of working boats.

5.0 Policy Recommendations

5.1 Regulatory Reform

The daunting number of challenges facing the industry means that there is not a singular cure - no unilateral policy will be wholly effective, and all will take intention and effort to implement. A holistic understanding of the fishing industry, the structural, economic, and sociocultural challenges facing it, and the context in which they exist are required to ensure that policy solutions are tailored to the challenges the industry faces.

Regulatory reforms could counteract rigid regulations that do not take into account the reality of life in the industry. Reforming quota allocation to prioritise local fishers over other UK and EU vessels would protect the industry and markets that the Scottish vessels survive on. Additionally, easing the requirements for new-entrant licensing, especially for fishers under the age of 30, could dismantle one more barrier for younger fishers. When coupled with cultural and social policy targeting youth, easing licence requirements for local groups could encourage increased entry into the industry. This would, in part, combat the gradual decline of employment in the industry as shown in Appendix 2.

One specific change at the international level that could help the local fishing industry would be changing the legal status of electrofishing for razor clams. As mentioned above, the legal status of electrofishing in the UK is a product of the EU-UK TCA, which is up for renegotiation in June 2026 (Fella 2025, 9). Marine Scotland has conducted a scientific survey for eight years now which, alongside other scientific studies, have found electrofishing for razor clams to be a safe and non-destructive fishing practice (Scottish Government February 2026, 1). Where there are concerns raised in the studies is the sustainability of the practice as the high efficiency of electrofishing (82% catch rate) may not allow stocks to replenish (Fox 2016, 39). However, hydraulic dredging, which has a 90% catch rate and is more damaging to the seabed, is currently legal (Hauton et. al. 2007, 1). Due to the relatively short spawning period for razor clams (April to May) and slow growth rate, fishers may catch more clams than are needed to maintain a stable population (Blackman et.al 2025, 5). Although concerns of overfishing are legitimate, the Scottish Government has proven for the last eight years it can run a small-scale commercial industry in the guise of a scientific survey. With strict regulatory oversight, just as vessels engaged in hydraulic dredging are subject to, could allow for more data to be collected on the sustainability of the practice if it were to be turned into a commercial industry. Indeed, on the 20th of March 2026 the Scottish Government opened a consultation to receive input on expanding the size of the trial with the intention of setting up a “limited commercial industry” (Scottish Government March 2026, 3). Fife would benefit significantly from the opening of a razor clam industry as it currently has the highest share of total landings in Scotland (*Ibid*., 11).

No progress will be made without changes to the legal status of electrofishing however. The terms of the EU-UK TCA explicitly outlaw the use of electrofishing gear outside of scientific trials (European Parliament 2019). Without change, there is a risk that the potential razor clam industry in Scotland collapses. In interviews with crew and divers participating in the trial there was collective frustration at the lack of change. In the Firth of Forth there are just four areas, 'boxes', where electrofishing can be conducted. According to interviews, the four boats in the area are finding it harder to catch an economic amount of clams within these boxes (PittenweenFisher Interviews - Czech Joe). There have been no changes to the boxes since the trial started and they have been fished seasonally every year (Blackadder et.al. 2024, 5). As a result of these restrictions, crews need to spend longer in the water and go out in worse weather to catch an economically viable number of clams. The price of clams are also set by buyers and this price has not increased to cover rising costs (Pittenween Fisher Interviews - Czech Joe). Consequently, wages have not increased either and some divers are leaving to make better money onshore. As one diver said, the restrictions mean "longer days, more risk, smaller rewards" (Pittenween Fisher Interviews - Czech Joe) Electrofishing crews we talked to agreed that the practice was not sustainable without changes in the next year. The effects can already be seen in the declining number of participating boats. From a height of 26 boats in 2022, the number of active boats slipped to 23 in 2023, 22 in 2024, down to 19 in 2025 (Scottish Government March 2026, 10). The number of people employed in electrofishing is also at an all time low of 161 down from 198 in 2022 (Ibid.).

In addition to regulatory reforms, increased communication between fishers and policymakers would benefit all. Currently, the dialogue between the two groups is stunted and inadequate. Fishers feel their needs are not being properly represented, and the information provided by the government is not easily accessible to them. This trend is also reflected at the national level, with the Scottish government insufficiently consulted on matters of fishing policy. Despite over half of the UK's fleet being based in Scotland, the Scottish Parliament did not have a voice in the renegotiations of the UK-EU Fisheries agreement. Although no major changes to access or quotas occurred, the lack of communication, criticised as "an affront to devolution," highlights the separation of policymaking from local knowledge (Scottish Government, 2025b). On both levels, local and in the UK as a whole, there is a clear break in the chain of communication regarding fishing policy. This is becoming increasingly clear as the policy designed to help fishers and coastal communities, the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund (FCGF), does not proportionally allocate funding, nor does it have clear guidelines to ensure equitable distribution within communities (Scottish Government, 2025a). With millions at stake, the FCGF could change lives for the better; but misallocation and improper handling could place further strain on coastal communities and fishers, undermining the very goal of the policy.

To ensure communication between local policy makers and their constituents, as well as communication between local and national governments, policy must be informed by those that it will affect. Local policy would benefit from increased connection with fishers, on their own

terms, and national policy should take into account the needs of diverse localities. With regards to funding and compensation for fishers and coastal communities, increasing informed governmental oversight could address one facet of the economic challenges that a lack of communication exacerbates.

5.2 Labour Market Intervention

The labour crisis facing the Fife fishing industry is a symptom of an occupation that has become financially and culturally unattractive to the next generation. Reversing this requires intervention at both ends; making the industry viable enough to retain overseas workers where necessary and rebuilding the domestic pathway that has all but collapsed.

The most immediate lever available to policymakers is targeted wage support for crew employment. As established in Section 3.1, the cost of hiring overseas workers - £40,000-£42,000 annually - is simply beyond the reach of fishers who themselves earn barely £24,000 a year. A wage subsidy scheme, modelled on existing agricultural seasonal worker frameworks (SAWS), could offset a portion of crew costs for licensed small-scale vessels, making overseas recruitment economically viable for skippers who currently cannot afford it. This should not be a blanket subsidy but rather conditional on vessel size, catch value, and demonstrated local recruitment attempts, ensuring support reaches genuine small-scale operators rather than larger commercial interests. Complementary National Insurance relief for fishing crew employment would reduce overhead further, directly lowering the cost of taking on additional hands.

Wage support however addresses the symptom rather than the cause. The deeper problem is the collapse of domestic recruitment. As noted in Section 2.2, there have been no recorded entrants into sea fishing apprenticeships or vocational diplomas in Scotland for five consecutive years. Restoring domestic recruitment requires a formal, funded apprenticeship scheme tailored specifically to the inshore fishing sector. Unlike the current college programmes, which fishers across Pittenweem describe as producing graduates with theoretical knowledge but no practical ability or genuine motivation, a reformed model should be built around on-the-job learning from the outset. Pairing young entrants with experienced fishers under a structured mentorship framework - with the fisher receiving a financial incentive to take on an apprentice - would address both the skills gap and the motivational deficit at once. Working alongside an experienced fisher, rather than studying fishing in a classroom, is more likely to produce crew who understand the realities of the job before committing to it.

The financial barrier to entry must also be confronted directly. Young people considering the industry face not only low wages but the prospect of eventually needing to self-fund a vessel and licence running to nearly £90,000 combined. A graduated financial support package – beginning with subsidised apprentice wages and progressing toward low-interest loans or grants for first vessel acquisition - would create a viable economic pathway where none currently exists. The Marine Fund Scotland is a step in this direction, but its scope remains insufficient. Expanding it to include crew-level support, not just vessel purchase, would extend its impact to cover all areas of expense.

Together, these interventions would work to stabilise the workforce from both directions. In the short term, reducing the cost of overseas crew would alleviate the immediate labour shortage. In the medium to long term, rebuilding domestic recruitment would gradually reduce dependence on overseas workers altogether - creating a self-sustaining workforce rooted in the communities that depend on the industry.

5.3 Economic Support

Alongside regulatory and labour market intervention, direct economic support is needed to reduce input costs, protect margins against external shocks, and ensure that the value generated by the Fife fleet stays within the local economy rather than being extracted by distant processors and wholesalers.

The most pressing short-term relief is fuel tax relief. Fuel is simultaneously the largest variable cost facing small-scale fishers and the one most completely beyond their control. As Paul's experience makes clear, when diesel prices spike, fishers do not stay in port - they go out in worse weather to cover the additional cost, increasing the danger of an already hazardous occupation. A targeted fuel duty rebate for licensed inshore vessels, conditional on local crew employment and landing catches through registered Scottish ports, would provide financial relief while ensuring the benefit flows to genuine small-scale operators. To prevent dependency, the scheme could be structured as a temporary stabilisation measure, reviewed against fuel price benchmarks and tapered as prices normalise. Tying relief to local employment also creates a direct incentive for fishers to hire domestically, linking fuel support to the labour interventions in Section 5.2.

Beyond fuel, the thin margins documented in Section 3.1 are not only a consequence of low catch prices - they are a function of where value is added along the supply chain. Davie's prawns leave Pittenweem at £4/kg and arrive on the continent at £25, with the difference absorbed almost entirely by external processors, hauliers, and border facilities. Investment in local processing infrastructure would allow a greater share of that value to be captured before the catch ever leaves Fife. A cold storage and light processing facility at Pittenweem - capable of grading, packing, and preparing shellfish for direct export - would reduce dependence on third-party processors and strengthen fishers' negotiating position with buyers. Where fishers currently accept the price they are given because they have no alternative, local processing capacity creates one, shifting the balance of power back toward the producer. This need not be an entirely public investment - a co-operative model, administered by the Fife Fish Producer Organisation on behalf of member vessels, would distribute both the cost and the benefit across the fleet.

Taken together, fuel relief and processing investment target the two points at which small-scale fishers are most exposed: the cost of going to sea, and the price received for what they bring back. Neither alone is sufficient - a fisher with lower fuel costs but no improved market access remains caught in the same structural squeeze. But in combination, sustained over time, they would improve the margin on which the Fife fleet operates, build resilience against the price shocks that currently make planning impossible, and ensure that more of the value generated by local waters flows back into the communities that fish them.

5.4 Cultural and Social Policy

To address the terminal contraction of the Fife fleet and the resulting erosion of coastal identity, cultural and social policies must pivot from treating fishing as a relic of the past to positioning it as a vital, professionalised calling. This requires a strategy that bridges the "communication divide" between policymakers and practitioners while reclaiming the industry's status within the community (Pittenweem Fisher Interviews - Davie and Russell). One way to do this is industry is through policy which targets the promotion of fishing heritage tourism. Fife's 'postcard-perfect' villages currently suffer from an 'authenticity paradox': visitors are drawn to bobbing boats, yet the resulting tourism often displaces the working industry (Davis, 2025). Social policy should shift focus from 'virtual fishing', where boats serve as decorative scenery, to a model that utilises heritage to support 'real fishing' livelihoods (Jamieson et al., 2009). Outlined below are three specific ways which policymakers can combat the cultural atrophy of the industry;

- Direct Economic Linkages: Policy should mandate that a percentage of tourism-generated revenue be reinvested directly into harbour infrastructure and active fishers rather than purely aesthetic museum projects.
- Provenance and 'Boat-to-Plate': Leveraging Fife's identity, the government should implement local brand ecolabelling. This ensures seafood in local establishments is caught by the local fleet, capturing high mark-ups (sometimes 20-25 times the landing price) for the community rather than external wholesalers (Davis, 2025).
- Living History Preservation: In Pittenweem, the numbered paving stones used to determine the order of fish sales are a unique historical asset. Policy should protect these working artefacts and integrate them into a living heritage trail that celebrates active commerce rather than just the past.

Another facet for policy to target is the integration of fishing into school and apprenticeship pathways. The collapse of formal skills pathways, evidenced by five years without a single sea fishing apprenticeship entrant in Scotland, must be met with radical educational reform. The current generational chain is broken as youth opt for more stable trades. In order to meet the crew needs of seasoned fishers, and ensure that the new generations have access to quality training, the following two proposals should be instated;

Mentorship and Buddy Systems: To lower financial barriers, larger enterprises or retiring "slipper skippers" should be incentivised to partner with young skippers (Force et al., 2021).

This allows new entrants to learn the art of the seabed under a supported buddy system before taking full ownership.

- Professionalisation of Training: Colleges should restore funding for specialist sea fishing diplomas. Curriculum must expand beyond manual labour to include fisheries science, business management, and modern technology like the SIFIDS GPS tracking systems, elevating the job's status to a modern profession.

Successful policy must rebuild the ‘identity and status’ of fishing as an occupation of choice (Scottish Government, 2010). Community revitalisation and the protection of the coastal and fishing identities would help preserve the industry as a historical tradition.

- Restoring Status: To counter the feeling of being a ‘race apart,’ technical infringements should be decriminalised, and fishers should be repositioned as “custodians of the marine environment” (ibid.).
- Housing Policy: The East Neuk's housing crisis hollows out communities. Community land trusts should be empowered to purchase properties specifically for active fishing families, ensuring they are not priced out by holiday rentals.

These interventions aim to transform the Fife coast into a region where people can not only visit but live and work with dignity and purpose.

6.0 Conclusion

The exponential decline of the Fife fishing industry is due to a combination of structural economic constraints; high input costs, quota and licensing constraints, low profitability, labour shortages and social and cultural challenges; weak communication with policymakers, lack of informed consultation, misallocation of funding. In order to avoid the extinction of the industry, action must be taken immediately, to make the industry sustainable, viable, and to devolve the policymaking process to better reflect the needs of the fishers. Through policy targeting these issues and their intersections, it is possible to reverse the trajectory of decline in the industry. In the modern pursuit of efficiency and profit, society has devalued the cultural traditions that have sustained communities for generations. The fishing industry is vital to the history of Fife, and Scotland as a whole. As the world grows increasingly more connected, it is important for communities to protect their unique traditions, or risk losing them forever.

7.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Number of Fishing Vessels in Scotland, by Length (2002-2024) [See Note 2]

Appendix 2: Employment Headcount [See Notes 2, 3]

Appendix 3: Total Tonnage of Fish Landed, Scotland [See Note 2]

Appendix 4: Pittenweem; Vessel size, by type of fishing. [See Notes 2, 4]

10 meter and under	
Vessel type	Number of vessels
Nephrop trawls	2
Creel fishing	51
Lines/ hand lines	3
Other [note 1]	4
10 metre and under Total	**60**

Over 10 meters	
Vessel type	Number of vessels
Nephrop trawls	7
Creel fishing	1
Other [note 1]	1
Over 10 metre total	**19**
All vessels total	**79**

Appendix 5: Transcript from Willie Rennie, MSP Interview, 19 March 2026.

So, uh, our 1st question, how does fishing and fisheries policy factor into your work as an MSP?

It's quite a big issue. It's, uh, it's something that, um, is important to local people, whether they're in the fishing sector or not, long traditions. So they feel it. They feel that it's important to have a good fishing industry. And, and there are some big issues to try and resolve. So I'm quite active. Because of the nature of fishing, it's not that you can just pop down at any moment and go and see them [the fishers]. And it's not necessarily on email, so they're harder to get to, and they don't... communicate in a way that others might. And so, uh, again, so, I do quite a lot with them, and I try and help them, and, and it's mainly Pittenweem, but there are boats in most of the harbours. So, you've got them, there's a bit in St. Andrews, um, and Crail, Anstruther, St. Monans. And if someone have moved to Methil, which is not in my constituency, and that's because there was a falling out of Pittenweem. So, it's kind of... quite a feature of the whole... Maybe they're happier out there.

Um, well, we found exactly that, um, that, um, people have maybe been hard to access by email, so we're thinking of actually heading down today. Because I spoke to the Anstruther Harbour Master last week, and he said, get on down on Thursday, because it would be really good weather. Um, I was, I, I was wondering...

You should go to Pittenweem rather than Anstruther.

You think go the whole way down?

Go to Pittenweem, because, I guess, most of the boats are... Anstruther, there's more kind of, like, leisure boats and stuff. There's a few fishing boats in there, but most boats are in Pittenweem.

Okay. Amazing.

And they may already be gone. Cause they might be out to sea already.

So, what we heard was there was one set of crews that gets in between 10 and 12, and then another between 8 and 10. So, we'll give it a go

Okay. Sounds like you know more than I do, so that's fine.

Yeah, so what, what concerns, but when you have managed to speak to the fisherman? What concerns do you hear most?

So, a variety of different ones, the most recent ones are around about wind farms. So there's a big argument about space, spatial planning, and the seas. Because if you think about, you've already got freighter movement, freight movement up and down to Grangemouth and to Rosyth and Leith. So, big boats, uh, grabbed them. Then you've got areas is that excluded from fishing or limited fashion. And then you've got the wind farm that come in. It is not just the wind farms, it's mainly the cables. So, the cables stretch for a very long time, very long, very long, and they take along, just because there's problems with the construction fees, that you've got to stay out of the way during the construction fees, but they're nervous about trawling over the top of them in case they get caught. Like, the wind farms don't want the cables to get caught, because they're much more valuable than the fishing boats. But for the fishing boats, it's their lives. So they worry about what will happen. It seemed to be okay, but you can't tell fishermen whether something's safe or not. They've got to actually experience it before they believe it. So they are trawling over the cables now, and it seems to be OK. But if you think about it, I went out with the... It's mostly prawns, and then the, um... the creels, the pots. And, and the way that the, the prawn trawlers work is that they will, um, they will travel out from, maybe, an hour. And then they'll shoot their lines, and they will trawl for about three hours. And then, and in that time, the crew go to bed, right? So it's just the captain who's sailing the ship, the boat, and then after about three hours, they pull it up and they'd shove it down this funnel. Yeah. And then they sort them all out, and they discard all the bits they don't want, and they keep the prawns and occasionally they'll catch a fish, although it's amazing how accurate it is. It's like it hardly catches anything they don't want to catch.

Okay, that's really good.

And, um, so then, so most of the prawns, and they sort of get out, some of the bigger ones go into bigger boxes, et cetera, so anyway, so all that stuff. So if you can think about the fact that

they're trawling for three hours, they don't want to stop during that three hours, to pull it up, to go over the cable and back down again. Right? Because that's not how they you know that interrupts the sleep and interrupts how much they can trawl. So they have to either go a different angle or they have to get over the cable first before they start trawling. So, quite a large, quite a big disruption takes place, as there is all these cables, in terms of the construction, and then the nervousness about, um, what's happening when they're there permanently. And you think you've got NNG wind farm, Inch cape, and then there's lots more coming too. There's gonna be a myriad of cable spread right across the seabed. And if they're already nervous about them, they're gonna be nervous about trolling over them, in addition to the construction.

So, then it comes into the compensation. So, if you are in a static boat, um... static crew, which is basically the pots, the creels that they put in. And they get compensation for moving their creels. But the prawns don't, they're the mobile gear. They don't get it, because they say they can go anywhere.

[…]

So, and then there's claims, but there's reel wars going on, that he goes, 'cause they have our floor at the top, with a bunch of creel that go down, and they're cutting ropes on them apartments. I don't know who's cutting these ropes, but, so, it's a bit like the wild west sometimes. Right, so where am I? So they've [large crews] got compensation, and they're using that compensation to buy new boats, which is affecting everybody else's in the sector. The mobile crew get nothing. They - except NNG, who set a standard of giving compensation to the mobile gear and the mobile boats. But Inchcape have refused because the new guidelines - and it's only guideline - prepared by the industry, I think in partnership with the government doesn't give compensation to the mobile gear. We are trying to persuade them that that should change, because they do deserve computation. Now, proving where traditionally both have travelled is quite difficult. Although, when you go on the, and when you go on the boats, all their technology, they have shows where they've been. Because they know the seabed in intricate detail. They are really impressive. And they're a wee bit careful about sharing with other people. But, yeah, there was Bob Dunsire. He was one of the, um, prawn, [unintelligible]. One of the, um, can you see that? [showing picture of a map of trawling routes on mobile phone]
atch.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You've got the proper, you've got the whole network mapped out.

So that's all the routes he's been on. And what he was able to show me on that was where the cables are, and the cables run right through the middle of it.

Okay. So a big problem.

So he has got data to show where traditionally he would have been for many years. And so, it is possible to detect where they all are. And so, that's one of the disputes, right? Having said, I've only got half an hour.

No, thank you. It's really, it's really helpful.

So the next bit of the story, is that the government I'm now considering putting creel limits on the boat. Okay. This has been talked about for years, but it's been failed to be implemented. And the government are in the middle of doing it, and what they're thinking of having is a limit, a kind of a tiered limit, depending on the size of your boat. You have a limit on the number of creels that you're allowed to operate from that boat. And then they'll put tracking gear, cameras on the boats to make sure that they're sticking with that. And the cameras, the boat's will have to pay for that. So they, a lot of them don't like it, but they do want it to deal with the likes of the [redacted], who've got lots of it. And now, if you're already in the business, it's pretty hard to take a cut in the number of creels that you've got, 'cause you've based your business plan on a certain number of creels. So this could cause massive disruption. But I'm strongly in favour of it. And I think you could have a tier level, so all you have to do is just knock them down a bit, to make sure that they're not flooding the zone with excessive number of creels.

So, in a way, it's just to understand that properly, it's kind of like suggesting a more progressive tax bracketing system to stop domination?

Yeah. That's what happening.

Okay. Yeah, that's really good.

So, um, there's other bits about health checks for more fishermen, so they, the, um... the, uh, what do you call it, Coast Guard? It's the Coast Guard Service. I can't remember the full title of it, but it's a government body. They are insisting on health checks for fishermen. And Bob Dunsire, who mentioned a minute ago, is quite a big guy. Right? And he's very worried he's gonna be put out of business altogether. Okay. So there's things about health checks. That seems to have canned out a bit, but that was an issue.

Make sure the harbours kept up to standard. It's owned by Fife council at Pittenweem. And dredging it periodically, which is quite expensive to do is important.

Fuel costs, especially with the Iran crisis, **fuel is going through the roof.** They're on red diesel, so the tax rates are already lower on it, but nevertheless, it's a big increase for them.

Getting the crew is hard, getting reliable people to work on the boats, because they don't go 12 miles out they're not able to get international crew. If they do get international crew, they have to pay them higher rates and they can't afford that.

And then, there is the, the kind of unrelenting pressure from the environmental movement to cut down on inshore fisheries, and having, um, protecting breeding areas, and, um, the, you know, put limits on activity, um, which HPMAs were tried before, that they, they've been abandoned, but they, The Greens are trying to come in with a different route to control it. I'm all for balance. I just think some of it, the approaches to these things are far too aggressive. And we need a thriving fishing community, 'cause it's a good source of food, good source of employment. But we also need to look after the environment, and they agree with that as well.

Could I just quickly jump in on that point?

Yeah.

I was just wondering, um how the attitude towards fishing policy did vary between political parties. Um, is it mainly the Green Party that you noticed have really taken a stance or does everybody have a different position?

Labour are probably not as sympathetic to the industry. Okay. Oh, they're not extreme, but they are... politically, traditionally, it's been in the SMP versus the conservatives. That's traditionally. Particularly around about the Northeast. But the Lib Dems have got a lot of fishing communities in the highlands and islands, and also in Fife, so we've been very supportive of it as well, but we tended not to get involved in the pitch patterns over white fishing, which is what the Northeast is about. And the, um, Europe was a big thing. I made the mistake of one time going to the Pittenweem and talking about Brexit. That was, um, not to be repeated. Um, but they have suffered from Brexit, because, um, they never really had that many limits before on their activity, and their markets to Europe, for their high quality produce, were really damaged. From Brexit, but also from COVID. So there's a, I think, evolving position around about Brexit, and quite a lot of them are thinking of voting Reform this time. Um, is that those kind of people who was, what was there to lose? I hate the establishment. I don't trust them. They might vote for me, but they might be sympathetic to reform. Um... So, that tends, but the greens tend to be the most hostile to the fishing industry. And there is an East coast and West coast difference. It's from the west coast, have got a lot of more small fishermen diving for scallops. And you know, they don't have the trawling in the same way, and it's much more environmentally sustainable, you could argue. But, um, so there's divisions within the fishing community, not just within politicians.

Interesting.

And see that…? [holding up award plaque to camera] It's my award for saving the sand eel. So, there's a lot of sand eels out in the Forth estuary, and the sand eels are the main feed stock for the bird community. And there are Dutch, Danish boats that were coming, and you could see them, they were hoovering up, all the sand eel, for feed, for the salmon, you know, the fish farms, salmon, fish farms. Now, I think they're found alternative source of protein now. But that was having a massive impact on the bird community. So, thanks to a fisherman who alerted me to the fact that all these boats were coming in and hoovering up the sand eels, I took up the challenge and got that banned, which led to this, so...

That's amazing. On that... because it's an EU UK issue, is that an example of where the Scottish Parliament is able to be involved in international negotiations with the EU?

Uh, so, it was all done through the UK government. And so, England was pursuing the same banned as us. And so they also then took up the challenge with the... because they are the nation state. So, they took a… I mean, I think our government had a role in the discussions and feeding in information. And we were very supportive of the UK challenge, but it had to be done through the UK.

Do you find that there's there are times when the Scottish Parliament is pulling in one direction in fishing policy and that Westminster is pulling in another or is there some concordance, kind of meeting in the middle?

Uhm, it's not as important to the UK government. Okay. So it tends to be higher up our priorities. They, the fishing industry, as of old, gets treated as... an... an... They claim they get sold out in various negotiations all the way back to Ted Heath. And in any European discussions, and that was claimed again this time, because we wanted to have, our fishing industry wanted to have, control its own seas, but it had to give away some access to other boats from other countries. Um, so, um, the Scottish government claimed that if we were independent, we would, we wouldn't give away those rights, but in reality, they would want to rejoin the European Union immediately, and give up any independance they would have as an independent country. But the fishing industry talk about an independant, uh, what do they call it… it's an independent nation state, they call it, um, an independant coastal state or something like that, they call it, isn't it? I can't remember exactly what the phrase is. So, yeah, and to be fair, it is more important for us than it is for them, and it's probably more in our soul than it is across the UK. So it probably does have more political salience in Scotland, and that has manifested itself in, you know, international negotiations over access to waters. So I think that's true.

Um, I was thinking about, because I've looked at the history of fishing in Fife. And I saw that around the 1950s there was kind of a big decline in, um, the value of the fishing industry for the economy. But you mentioned there that it's still quite deeply in the soul of Scotland. Is that is that why it remains such an important..?

I think so. I mean, it would have dominated. I mean, it would have dominated, um, the economy of the East Neuk before. Now, it's tourism. But it's... I think people like to see the boats. They like to smell the rotten fish. There's something about that that's kind of good and earthy, that I'm sure does count.

You think tourists like to see the boats and...?

Yeah. So they like to go out and get the produce, you know, they like to get the local fish. These fish vans, have you seen the fish vans that go around?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

All over Scotland. And they have got the best vans. They have, and that's an indication of how much money they're making. But they go all the way to Dumfries, all the way over to Argyle, right in the country, all from the East Neuk. And when you're out knocking on doors, there's lots of them, these vans, in people's driveways. Everybody seems to have a stake in these vans, and they don't just sell fish. They sell the bakers' bread, and the local eggs, and all that. They're kind of many shops that are going around. That's got a real value as well. People feel they're getting a good, honest product. Even though none of the whitefish comes from the East Neuk.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, 'cause it's all coming from up in Shetland.

Yeah. Up in the northeast, isn't it? Absolutely.

So... As you've been an MP for the region for quite long, is that quite a new development? Is there a point, a year, in time that you could say that changed to there being a lot more fishing vans?

So COVID really benefitted. So the vans were really struggling for a bit. It was like your grandmother would get fish out of the van. And now it's all generations, from everywhere. So I think they were struggling for a bit, but COVID just sent it wild. And and there's a desire to get good quality product from the van that comes round. So, COVID definitely benefited them.

Interesting. And why do you think that was? Was it just people looking for more local produce or?

They were at home, and the van was coming round, and... It was a good access, you know, they wanted, they had a bit more money in their pocket, probably, because they weren't going out, so they bought good fish from the van, and the bread. So, and, it was a way of, you know, just a little treat for yourself.

Yeah, but in terms of looking to the future, what do you think the main concerns are, uh, and what do you think the fishing industry is gonna look like in sort of 10 years' time?

Good question. That's a huge number of concerns. But the demand for the product is still high. So, I think there will be... there will still be a good fishing industry. I think some of the ones that are marginal in terms of profitability might fall away. But I think there will still be a space for the industry, because I think the demand is there, and the stock is there - as long as we look after it - the stock is there. And I think, yeah, so it will survive, but it's still got massive pressure to overcome. The fuel costs and the shortage of labour, and, you know, pressure from Green controls, spatial squeeze. It's like, people are out to get them. It's like, you know, all these different things, all coming at once, and they feel under siege. They think nobody wants them. Yeah. And actually, I disagree. I think people do want them. But we feel as if every possible hurdle has been thrown in that way.

So, they feel under siege, they do genuinely feel as if nobody wants them. And that creates a, and, you know, a feeling amongst them that they lash out, they speak out very strongly and are very hostile to people who want to bring in new challenges to them. So, it's, it's a massive , a massive problem. And that's where, I always feel as a politician, I feel it's my job to speak up for people who need help. And that's what I try to do.

But it's, it's a fascinating sale of issues. to try and put you away from. And 'cause government tends to make decisions in isolation, doesn't it? So immigration policy is made in isolation from energy policy, and both have a massive impact in the sector. And then those who make up the rules about protecting the environment do throw in isolation from energy and immigration. And they do that in isolation from the development of wind funds, you know? And so everybody looks on their own look side, and they don't actually think about the big picture and the impact on a sector like that.

And so it's not as simple as, we've got to make this one change, this one policy change, and everything will get better, which is often how it's framed, especially to win votes.

Yeah, it's not that. You've got to deal with it one by one because that's how it works. But you could, that's where there's a value in having a local parliamentarian or politicians who do look at everything.

Hmm.

And it's our job to put pressure on all of those things. If we didn't exist, I don't really know how they would get their message across and how to get government to listen. And it's not, that's not a part of political thing, you know, any party, who takes an interest, you know, is able to see everything. and working what the value is of speaking out for them.

One final question, 'cause I know you've got to run. Um, so we are gonna head down um, to try and speak to people. I know I know earlier you mentioned that you tried to bring out Brexit in Pittenweem and you wouldn't try that again. Um, how do you think we should go about speaking to people about how they're feeling?

Um, Just, just come down and just say, like, tell me how things are.

Yeah, and don't prod…?

How are things, you know? You've been out much? What's the catch like? Are you getting enough crew? Are you, um... You know, what price you get for the product? And how are you gettin on with those wind farms? And, you know... Yeah, I would just ask them, just, how are things? How are things going?

Amazing.

You know, um, I don't know what reaction, but you'll get. But saying you were speaking to me, and, um, you might get thrown off the pier, ha.

Okay. Well, we'll take our chances. Thank you very much. Yeah, thank you so much for this. Really helpful.

Appendix 6: Transcribed Field Notes from Pittenweem Fishers Interview, 19 March 2026.

Davie (65)

Prawn/Langoustine fisherman (trawler) works out of Pittenweem harbour (~40 years)

Fishing as a way of life, but not necessarily an optimistic view → sense of 'we do it because we need to' not 'we do it because it is in our blood'

- During bad weather, anglers go to West Coast

Problems/concerns identified:

- Policy
  - Communication divide between fishers and policymakers
    - Poor opinion of William Rennie, MSP
    - Not consulted re: wind farms // cables
- 'EEC Regulations'
- Weak infrastructure
  - No support for fishers
- Fuel Prices
- Low price for catches
  - £4 / kilo of prawns → sold for ~ £100/kilo in shops ***
    - Have to get about 1,000 prawns a day to get by (10 boxes, about 100 prawns each box)
    - ^Works out to ~£80 / day
    - £170 / box (??)
    - In the past (winter) they got about £90 / box
- Brexit→ drove export prices up ***
  - Export France, Spain, Italy
  - At £4 or £5 / kilo → processing, transport costs, warehouses on borders → £25 / kilo
- Crew problems
  - Overseas workers
    - Not __ km out from coast → have to pay overseas workers £40,000 - £42,000 (used to be £36,000) / yr
    - They [local anglers] barely make £24,000 annually themselves
- Lack of local youth / crew
  - Many go into joinery / brick work
  - Those that do go through local fishing college programmes don't want to work (poor attitude, not willing) (attitude/drugs/drink/cellphones
- Decline of fishing as local industry
  - Used to be ~75 large ships (1990s?) mostly trawlers, not creel
  - Now ~5 local (large) ships left

"The prawns are there, but the pay is not… there will come a point where its just not viable to catch them."

Russell

Lobster and Crab fisherman (older than Davie, semi-retired) fishing for 50 years
Fishing as a way of life → necessity, in their blood

Revenue:

- Crab ⇒ £3 / kilo
- Lobster ⇒ £31 / kilo (SPAIN = BIG EXPORT)
- Global warming (sea temp +1 degree celsius) = lobsters mate/breed/spawn four times a year, instead of just one → more stock

Problems/Concerns:

- Costs
  - License is about half the cost of boat
    - Boat is ~£60,000
    - License ~£30,000
- No ££ from tourism goes to fishers
- Insurance costs
- Division between politicians and fishers
- Distrust of politicians
- Strong dislike of William Rennie
- Windfarms
  - No government consultation with fishers before wind farms
  - Compensation wasn't broadcast // was hard to get
- "Nobody really tried." [to tell us about it]
-
- Licenses
  - Government only gives certain people licenses for razor clam diving
  - Application was short and not properly broadcast to fishers
    - Can't buy licences for razor clams at all (?)
- Can't buy licences for razor clams at all (?)

Possible Improvements:

- Politicians listening
- Equitable distribution of compensation (e.g. windfarms?) amongst crews
- 1-2 'greedy guys' getting all

"Its the same old story; the big guys get it all, and the wee guys get nothing."

Czech Joe

Diver on razor clam boat participating in the Scottish Government's electrofishing scientific survey

Problems/concerns identified:

- Does not believe the trial in its current form is sustainable due to limits on catch areas reducing available stocks
  - *"would be good to open it up … doesn't make sense having all the boats fishing in one or two areas"*
  - *Declining stock means even longer hours and even more risk – "it means longer days, more risk, smaller reward"*
    - Number of clams noticeably smaller compared to when Joe started
- Crewing razor clam boats particularly difficult — need 3 qualified divers, they also need to register with the government to dive in the boxes
  - Conditions are dangerous with divers working in the cold and near dark for hours
  - Most divers can make the same or more money doing commercial diving or in another area (Joe has a friend that makes the same money as a mechanic)
  - Joe earns the same he did when he started — what was once good money is now mediocre
- Energy export cable for the Inch Cape windfarm crosses all but one of the boxes, disturbs the seabed, puts further pressure on stocks

- Buyers dictate the price clams are sold at + boats have a maximum quota of 450kg per day which cannot be exceed
    - The share that crews receive hasn't increased to cover costs
    - Main market for razor clams is in China and South East Asia

As a result of above, Joe doesn't see a future for razor diving if more boxes aren't opened (1 to 2 years left) — if no change in a year he's going to do something else

Paul Forrest (33) and Anonymous (21)

Paul is a fisher from Shetland working on a prawn trawler out of Pittenweem

Problems/concerns identified

- 10 day trip consumes 2000l of fuel which costs around £2000, need to make at least £2000 for trip to break even
- The £2000 a trip number is higher than it was before — as it gets higher, need to go out in worse weather conditions with associated dangers
- Crewing difficult – most young people who would crew boats have drug or drink problems and are unfit to work onboard as a result
    - Lack of enthusiasm due to difficult working conditions and long hours
- High entry cost for new fishers — upfront cost boat and insurance
    - Government is trying to reduce entry costs for new fishers trying to buy a boat through subsidies
- Inch Cape windfarm posing a problem, 500m exclusion zone either side of energy export cable while the company is working on it
    - Export cable runs directly through the main fishing areas – no consultation with fishers before
- Paul says there is no monitoring for EU boats (not boarding them + they are fishing without quota)
    - However, marine directorate will board every local [Scottish] boat
    - *"They sold us up on that [Brexit]"*

8.0 Notes

Note 1: A number of the statistics cited in Section 3.1 - including catch prices, crew wages, and licensing fees - were gathered through informal, on-the-ground interviews with working fishers in Pittenweem conducted during March, 2026. These conversations were not formally recorded or transcribed; fishers were more forthcoming in casual, conversational settings, and the decision was made to prioritise candour over formality. As a result, the figures cited reflect the direct testimony of interviewees rather than official industry data and should be interpreted accordingly. Discrepancies between interview data and official figures may reflect the gap between national statistics and the lived economic reality of individual small-scale operators - a gap which is itself a central argument of this paper.

Note 2: The information represented in Appendices 1, 2, and 3, was procured from statistics published by the Scottish Government's Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistics, spanning the years 2002-2024. When compiling the data, there were minor discrepancies over certain values; for all disputed values, the most recent figures were used.

Note 3: This figure is inclusive of ‘Regular’ employees, ‘Irregular’ employees, and ‘Crofters’.

Note 4: The 10m and under ‘Other’ fishing method category includes: mechanical dredging, suction dredging, gill nets and entangling nets, shell fishing by hand and all demersal trawls, and nets.

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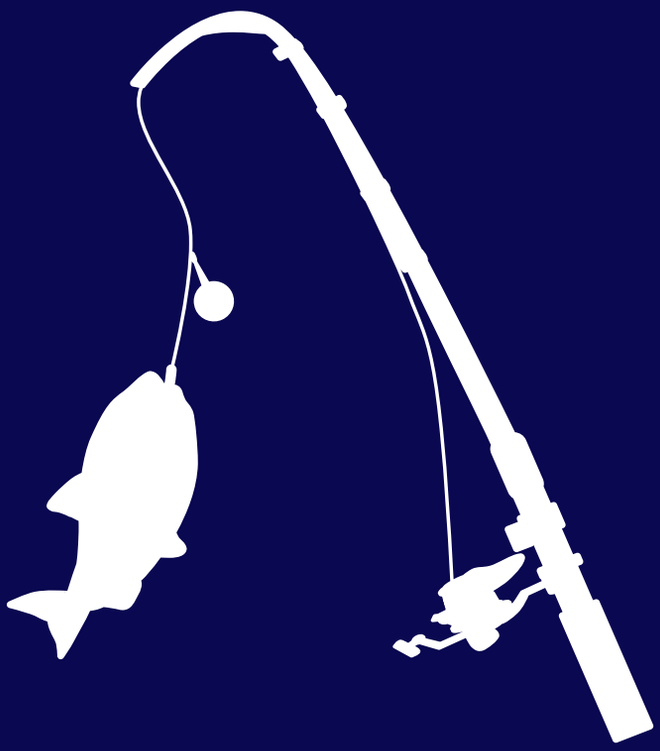
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