

TITLE: The footprint of bottom trawling in European waters: distribution, intensity, and seabed integrity

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ABSTRACT:

Mapping trawling pressure on the benthic habitats is needed as background to support an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. The extent and intensity of bottom trawling on the European continental shelf (0–1000 m) was analysed from logbook statistics and vessel monitoring system data for 2010–2012 at a grid cell resolution of 1 × 1 min longitude and latitude. Trawling intensity profiles with seabed impact at the surface and subsurface level are presented for 14 management areas in the North-east Atlantic, Baltic Sea and Mediterranean Sea. The footprint of the management areas ranged between 53–99% and 6–94% for the depth zone from 0 to 200 m (Shallow) and from 201 to 1000 m (Deep), respectively. The footprint was estimated as the total area of all grid cells that were trawled fully or partially. Excluding the untrawled proportions reduced the footprint estimates to 28–85% and 2–77%. Largest footprints per unit landings were observed off Portugal and in the Mediterranean Sea. Mean trawling intensity ranged between 0.5 and 8.5 times per year, but was less in the Deep zone with a maximum intensity of 6.4. Highest intensities were recorded in the Skagerrak-Kattegat, Iberian Portuguese area, Tyrrhenian Sea and Adriatic Sea. Bottom trawling was highly aggregated. For the Shallow zone the seabed area where 90% of the effort occurred comprised between 17% and 63% (median 36%) of the management area. Footprints were high over a broad range of soft sediment habitats. Using the longevity distribution of the untrawled infaunal community, the seabed integrity was estimated as the proportion of the biomass of benthic taxa where the trawling interval at the subsurface level exceeds their life span. Seabed integrity was low (<0.1) in large parts of the European continental shelves, although smaller pockets of seabed with higher integrity values occur. The methods developed here integrate official fishing effort statistics and industry-based gear information to provide high-resolution pressure maps and indicators, which greatly improve the basis for assessing and managing benthic pressure from bottom trawling. Further they provide quantitative estimates of trawling impact on a continuous scale by which managers can steer.

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