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Waitrose and scallop dredging

Dear ████████,

We are grateful to your colleagues for the meeting between Open Seas and Waitrose on 24th November 2021. This letter is to re-state Open Seas' deep concern with the decision of Waitrose and its parent company John Lewis Partnership **to continue sourcing dredge-caught scallops** from a fishery that causes unsustainable damage to seabed habitats and marine biodiversity.

I founded Open Seas six years ago to cast light on the widespread degradation of Scottish seabeds and marine ecosystems caused by the lax regulation of bottom-towed fisheries. Scallop dredging is probably the most egregiously damaging legal method of fishing in the UK, raking scallops from the seabed using heavy metal toothed dredges - causing large-scale damage to seabed habitats, such as biogenic reefs, that are fundamental to healthy ecosystem function. Its poor management in Scotland has been the target of multiple recommendations for regulatory improvement, very few of which have been implemented.

Open Seas has had lengthy correspondence with Waitrose staff to ascertain whether the company was in the first instance aware of the damage caused by poorly-regulated scallop dredging; and once fully appraised, whether Waitrose was willing to change its sourcing policy. It became apparent to us during the meeting mentioned above that Waitrose is not intending to change.

Waitrose sells Scottish dredge-caught scallops from its in-store fish counters, winning "best fish counter in the UK" for the fourth year in succession from the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). While there are more sustainable alternatives, such as scallops sourced from hand-dive fisheries, Waitrose chooses to sell only scallops caught by the most damaging method, scallop dredging.

In doing so Waitrose makes three unjustified marketing claims on your company's website.¹

1. *"All our fish and seafood is traceable from catch to checkout, so we know who caught it – and where."*
2. *"We work only with well-managed fisheries and we never sell species that are threatened or endangered."*
3. *"all our seafood is responsibly farmed and caught"*

¹ <https://www.waitrose.com/ecom/content/about-us/our-farming/fish-and-seafood>

We consider each of these in turn and explain for the public record why we think you are greenwashing the sourcing of scallops.

“All our fish and seafood is traceable from catch to checkout, so we know who caught it – and where.”

This is not true. In our view, Waitrose has recently admitted to this statement being misleading. There was a clear recommendation for the fishery to implement full traceability when it was first certified in 2012.² By acknowledging, at the end of last year, that “70%” of the scallop dredge vessels in Shetland are fitted with vessel tracking systems, Waitrose has confirmed it is not able to trace where all scallops in its supply chain are caught. You cannot therefore be 100% confident that the scallops bought and sold by Waitrose have not been landed from illegal sources. Waitrose has promised that vessel tracking will be fitted on all Shetland’s scallop vessels by January 2022, but we have since received no confirmation that this is the case.

Besides these scallops dredged from Shetland, Waitrose has also until recently sourced them from the west coast of Scotland. Commitments by the Scottish Government to deploy ‘Remote Electronic Monitoring’ (REM) on the entire Scottish scallop fleet have been repeatedly failed. There is therefore still no effective traceability regime for west coast scallops. We understand Waitrose has been sourcing scallops from west coast dredgers without REM which have routinely switched off their own public AIS tracking systems. So you cannot have known where they have been caught.

Waitrose emailed me in October 2021 stating that the company does not “source any scallops from the west coast of Scotland”. Shortly afterwards scallops in at least two of your stores were being sold under a label stating “*Dredged in the west of Scotland*” (see below). This has since been explained as a “*ticketing error*”. This does not command confidence in the traceability of your supply chains, particularly given we have been corresponding on these issues for five years.



² “Ensure appropriate tools are in place for monitoring, surveillance and enforcement of any actions within the Management Framework for example use of portable vessel monitoring systems in vessels without VMS.”

“We work only with well-managed fisheries and we never sell species that are threatened or endangered.”

This statement is demonstrably not true. Until recently (see above) Waitrose has been sourcing at least some of its supply from the west of Scotland. The west of Scotland scallop dredge fishery cannot conceivably be considered well managed: incidents of illegal activity are frequent; much-needed spatial management has yet to be delivered, despite the long-standing recommendations of independent fisheries consultants commissioned by Scotland’s Inshore Fishing Group network (now Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups).

Waitrose recently confirmed that it currently sources UK scallops only from the MSC-certified Shetland dredge fishery. While we recognise this fishery may be slightly better managed than others, there remain significant issues: fisheries management advice on valuable habitats vulnerable to dredging activity, intended to protect and recover marine habitats, were issued in 2016 by Scotland’s statutory nature conservation advisors. This has yet to be implemented. This advice and more recent research shows areas of known habitat that deserve additional protection remain vulnerable to dredging activity. This is also what the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation’s own management plan says should happen. This is a clear case of conservation regulations failing to keep up with the urgency of the biodiversity crisis. For the past five years, Waitrose could have worked with suppliers to improve management of the fishery by exploring a Code of Conduct with a view to improving management. No such measures have been implemented.

In summary, Waitrose continues to source scallops from Marine Protected Areas without effective environmental protection measures in place. So it is simply not defensible for Waitrose to claim that it “*work[s] only with well-managed fisheries*”.

“all our seafood is responsibly ... caught”

Scallop dredging is one of the most destructive fishing methods in Europe. The fact that Waitrose buys only ‘certified’ scallops and participates in the Sustainable Seafood Coalition does not change basic facts about the scallops it sells:

- Waitrose sells scallops dredged from Marine Protected Areas.
- Waitrose sources from the only scallop fishery in Scotland not to license hand-diving for scallops. Hand-diving is a more sustainable method and alternative to dredging for scallops. Waitrose does not sell hand-dived scallops.
- Previous audits of the dredge fishery from which Waitrose sources have shown that a significant proportion of the dredged catch by weight was in fact damaged bycatch species such as horse mussels. This destructive bycatch means hundreds of tonnes of biogenic reef-forming, carbon-sequestering marine biodiversity is being removed from the seabed and killed by the fishery every year.

In light of this, how can Waitrose consider its choice to sell dredged scallops to be responsible? Surely Waitrose considers hand-diving for scallops to be a less environmentally damaging method of harvesting scallops than dredging?

We would also like to put on the record that we dispute Waitrose’s suggestion that we have not been constructive in our engagement (your Partner & Ethics and Sustainability Advisor has noted “*I hope you can understand why we find it difficult to have a fruitful dialogue*”.) This is immensely frustrating, given our patient engagement over the years, both with Waitrose directly and the consortium of other businesses it collaborates with via the Fisheries Improvement Project for the Scottish scallop fishery. We sent an [extensive briefing](#) detailing our concerns about the management of the Scottish scallop dredge fishery in January 2019, both directly to Waitrose and other retailers participating in the Project UK Fishery Improvement Project. Waitrose agreed at the time that action was needed.

We subsequently sent Waitrose our perspective on the existing industry Code of Conduct in February 2019 and associated recommendations, to which we never received a response. We acknowledge that Waitrose did take some steps to improve traceability, but to the best of our understanding these have not secured full traceability from the fisheries that Waitrose sources from (as noted above), nor

addressed the management concerns we have outlined. As well as providing on-going feedback on 'pre-assessment documents' for the past two years as part of the Project UK process, Open Seas have continued to re-state and outline our concerns to Project UK stakeholders, e.g. in [March 2021](#) (to which we received [this response](#)) and in [July 2021](#). **We therefore strongly reject any suggestion that we have not been both patient and constructive in our correspondence until this stage.**

In recent correspondence Waitrose staff have also suggested that sourcing dredged scallops supports fishing communities and sustainable fisheries in Shetland. We are in touch with former scallop dredge skippers from Shetland who regard scallop dredging as a highly destructive method of fishing, having witnessed first-hand its impacts on the local marine environment. They point out that the fishery denies access to new entrants and is not well managed.

For the above reasons, we regard Waitrose's marketing claims as likely in breach of the Green Claims Code³. We shall seek advice from the Competition and Markets Authority.

Yours sincerely,



Hugh Raven

³ . <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-claims-code-making-environmental-claims/environmental-claims-on-goods-and-services>