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Breakthrough in protection of the Dogger Bank Natura 2000 site, ecological heart of the North Sea

After years of negotiations, the Dogger Bank, a unique and massive complex of Natura 2000 sites belonging to the UK, Germany and the Netherlands will finally get its needed fisheries management plan.

Centuries of invasive bottom-trawling have degraded the sandbank community of the Dogger Bank, altering it in favour of short-lived species at the expense of vulnerable, long-lived ones like the ocean quahog (a type of clam), the longest-lived animal known to man on the planet (known to survive up to 500 years).

In 2013, after 3 years of discussion, the Member States, along with Denmark who prize the Dogger Bank as their most important sandeel fishing ground, agreed to exclude beam trawls and other bottom gears, from about a third of the Dogger Bank. BirdLife Europe as well as other NGOs had sought a higher level of protection but accepted that this was still a major step forward in balancing nature conservation and fishing interests.

However, with increased pressure from the Dutch industry to go against the consensus, the Netherlands demanded closing less of the Dutch part of the bank on the grounds that the proposed closures were too costly for the fishing industry. The UK and Germany, however, refused to renegotiate the overall management plan.

After months of political wrangling in the Dutch Parliament, Sharon Dijksma, the Dutch minister responsible for fisheries, has finally decided to support the joint Member States proposal. In her letter to the Dutch Parliament this week, she rejected the Dutch fishing industry's plans to protect less of the Dutch Natura 2000 Dogger Bank site from the damaging impact of beam trawls and other bottom gears.

Birdlife Europe congratulates the Dutch Minister on facing down her industry's attempts to block what was a multi-national consensus on how best to protect the Dogger Bank's sandbank habitat and ensure a future for both nature and the fishing industry.

Euan Dunn, RSPB's (BirdLife UK) Principal Marine Advisor, said: *"The NGOs have consistently resisted any weakening of the original management plan and are delighted that it has been upheld. We now seek a rapid adoption of the plan by the Commission so that one of the most important areas in the North Sea for fisheries, seabirds and other marine wildlife can at last get the protection it so badly needs. It's long overdue to resuscitate this beating heart of the North Sea ecosystem".*

BirdLife Europe hails this not only as a victory for marine protection but also for demonstrating that regionalised decision-making under the new Common Fisheries Policy can work with the right political will.

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BirdLife Europe is a Partnership of nature conservation organisations in 47 countries, including all EU Member States, and a leader in bird conservation. Through its unique local to global approach BirdLife Europe delivers high impact and long term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.

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