

A briefing by the Marine Conservation Society

📷 Catriona Spink / Ocean Gives

Marine litter: A Scottish Islands context

March 2025

Evidence gathered by the Marine Conservation Society and the Scottish Islands Federation has revealed the true extent of marine litter on Scottish islands:

- Several island groups have significantly higher rates of litter when compared to the Scottish mainland.
- Litter from fishing and aquaculture sources is twice as common on Scottish island beaches than on the mainland.
- The volume and type of marine litter on Scottish islands means this is a distinct problem, that requires distinct solutions.

Action is needed. We are calling for Members of the Scottish Parliament to:

- ✓ Work constructively with UK Government to introduce free, standardised waste reception facilities at all ports and harbours in Scotland alongside equivalent facilities for aquaculture sites.
- ✓ Build on the existing Marine Litter Strategy and develop an evidence-based roadmap to tackle fishing and aquaculture gear pollution, especially for the Scottish islands in conjunction with island communities.
- ✓ Push for further Scottish Government funding to support additional clean-up activity across the Scottish islands.

Background

Marine litter is a global challenge that poses numerous environmental and economic impacts. But for Scottish island communities, this issue is bigger – and more complicated – than it is for those on the mainland.

Working together with the Scottish Islands Federation, the Marine Conservation Society has gathered large amounts of data from across Scottish islands to reveal the true extent of this problem.

Key survey findings

Across 2024, data was collected from 181 surveys of beaches across Scottish islands. Key findings include the following:

- Several island groups have significantly higher amounts of litter than the Scottish average of 204 litter items per 100m. This includes the Argyll Islands with 849/100m, Shetland with 481 items per 100m, and the Highland Islands with 225 items per 100m.
- 32% of island litter comes from fishing and aquaculture sources (such as ropes, creels, feed pipes, and netting). This compares to just 12% on the Scottish mainland.
- Litter dropped by the public makes up just 31% of marine litter recorded on Scottish islands, compared to 40% of litter found on mainland beaches.
- The average size and weight of beach litter on Scottish islands is significantly higher than on the mainland – creating further problems for its removal. Removing marine litter can cost UK ports and harbours on average €2.4 million, or nearly £2 million per year.

Current Government action

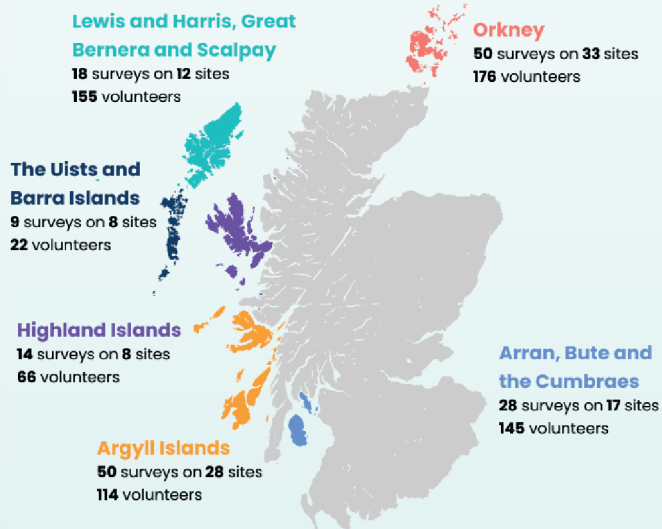
The Scottish Government's Marine Litter Strategy aims to reduce the amount of litter entering the marine environment, and to remove litter already there. This includes working with the fishing industry, and other UK nations, to improve systems for disposing of end-of-life fishing gear and working to better understand how marine litter affects island communities.

We have also supported the passing of the Circular Economy Act in 2024, which we hope will drive down the number of plastic and polystyrene cups found on Scottish beaches.

We support the government's current work in the area – but this data shows that more work, and a clear action plan, is needed to reduce Scottish island marine litter.

181 Surveys **16%** ▲
15,708m surveyed
219,516 items collected
749 Volunteers **~30%** ▼
4,840kg removed

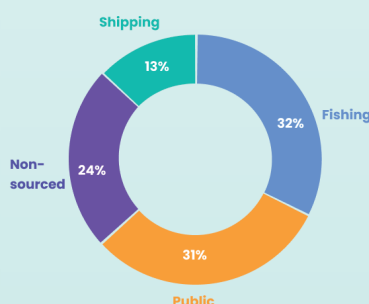
Shetland
12 surveys on **11** sites
71 volunteers



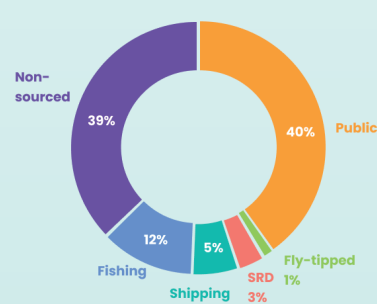
Scottish Islands



All Islands



Mainland Scotland



To arrange a meeting or find out more information please contact

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Together, we can make a difference



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