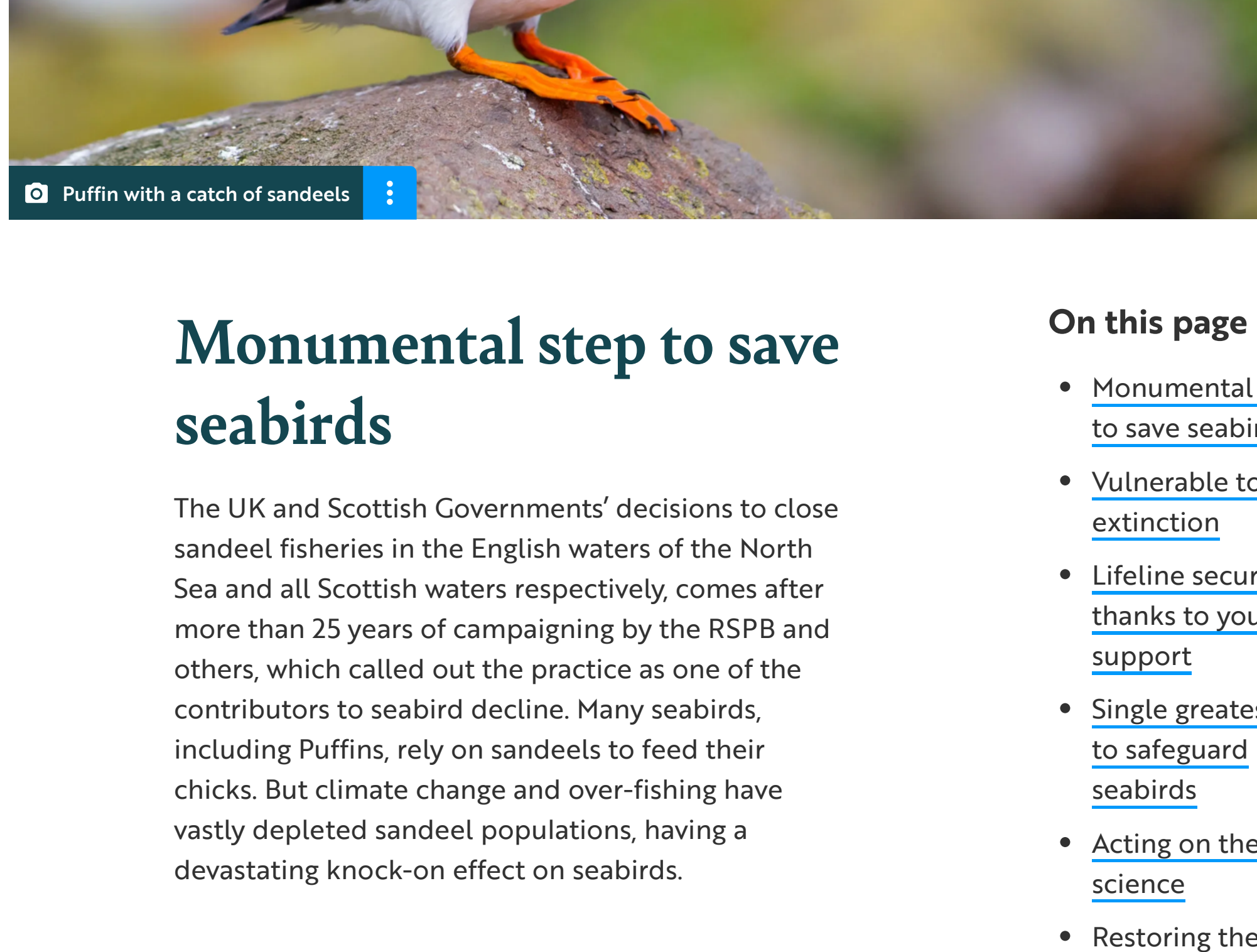


News

Big news for seabirds as campaign to close the English North Sea and Scottish waters to sandeel fishing succeeds

Puffins, Kittiwakes, Razorbills and other threatened seabirds have been thrown a lifeline, after decades of campaigning have finally succeeded in stopping industrial sandeel fishing in the English North Sea and in all Scottish waters.

5 min read



Puffin with a catch of sandeels

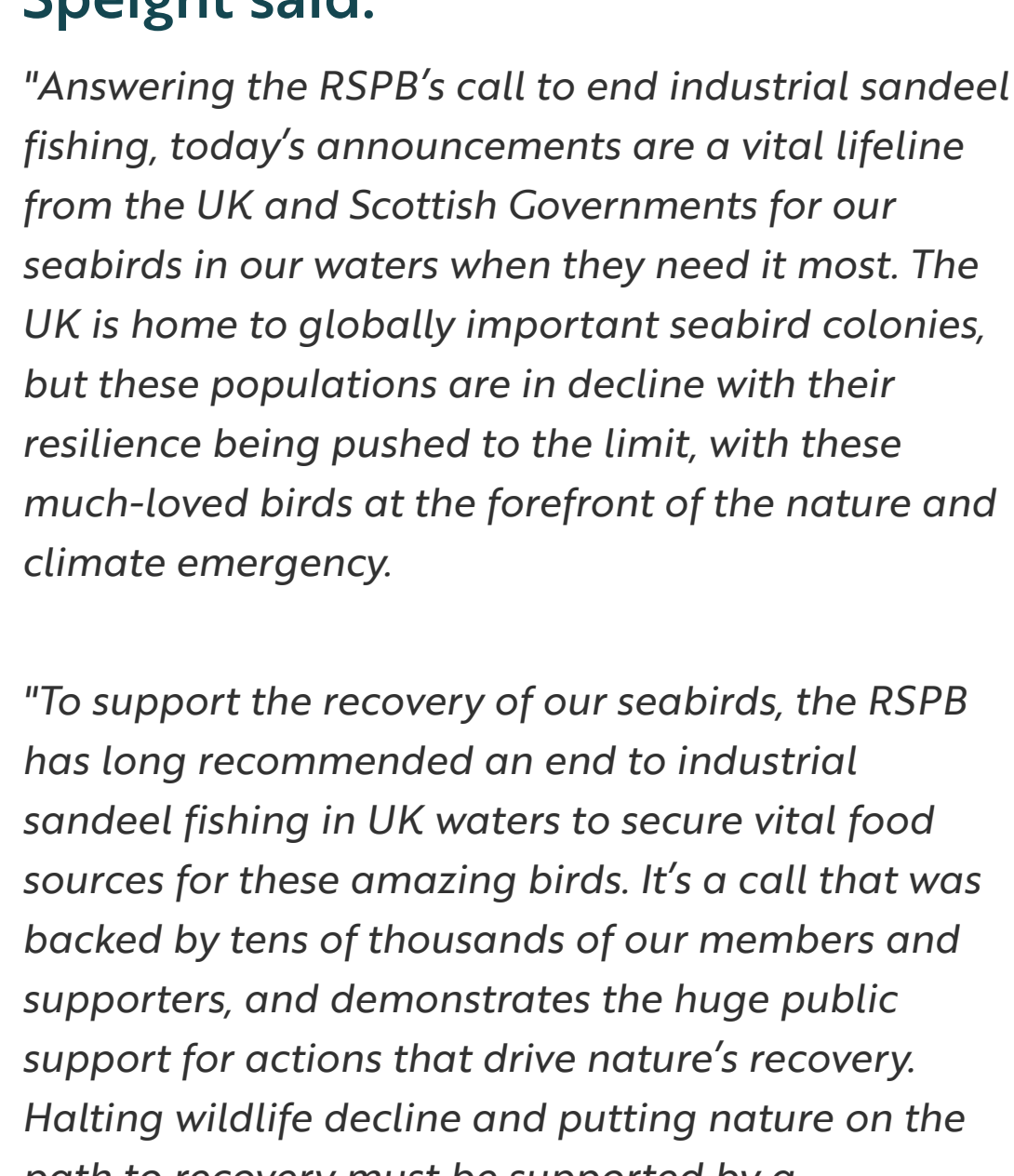
Monumental step to save seabirds

The UK and Scottish Governments' decisions to close sandeel fisheries in the English waters of the North Sea and all Scottish waters respectively, comes after more than 25 years of campaigning by the RSPB and others, which called out the practice as one of the contributors to seabird decline. Many seabirds, including Puffins, rely on sandeels to feed their chicks. But climate change and over-fishing have vastly depleted sandeel populations, having a devastating knock-on effect on seabirds.

Vulnerable to extinction

Last year's seabird census found that more than half the seabird species breeding on British and Irish coasts have declined over the last 20 years. In Scotland, which is home to over half of UK seabirds, this figure rises to 70% of species in decline. Shockingly, around one in four Puffins have been lost from across the UK since 2000. Both Puffins and Kittiwakes, which depend on sandeels for food, are threatened with global extinction and are Red-listed as birds of highest conservation concern.

Ending the industrial fishing of sandeels is just one necessary step in the effort to safeguard seabirds as they come under a barrage of existential pressures, including climate change, bird flu and poorly planned offshore marine development.



Kittiwake pair

Lifeline secured thanks to your support

Last year, the UK Government ran a public consultation to close sandeel fishing in the English waters of the North Sea. The RSPB and tens of thousands of our supporters leapt into action, with more than 33,000 people from across the UK adding their voice to our campaign and responding to the consultation. 8,000 RSPB supporters also took to social media to tell their MPs how they felt. The consultation found overwhelmingly in favour of a closure of sandeel fisheries with 95.5% in agreement.

The Scottish Government also ran a consultation proposing to end sandeel fishing across all Scottish waters. Together, with over 11,000 RSPB supporters, we responded in favour of ending industrial sandeel trawling in Scottish waters. The consultation reported almost unanimous support for the move, with 97% in favour across individuals and organisations.

There's no doubt that this groundswell of support has been instrumental in putting a stop to sandeel fisheries. A huge thank you to everyone who has joined with us to save our seabirds.

Single greatest act to safeguard seabirds

Welcoming the announcement, RSPB Chief Executive Beccy Speight said:

"Answering the RSPB's call to end industrial sandeel fishing, today's announcements are a vital lifeline from the UK and Scottish Governments for our seabirds in our waters when they need it most. The UK is home to globally important seabird colonies, but these populations are in decline with their resilience being pushed to the limit, with these much-loved birds at the forefront of the nature and climate emergency.

"To support the recovery of our seabirds, the RSPB has long recommended an end to industrial sandeel fishing in UK waters to secure vital food sources for these amazing birds. It's a call that was backed by tens of thousands of our members and supporters, and demonstrates the huge public support for actions that drive nature's recovery. Halting wildlife decline and putting nature on the path to recovery must be supported by a programme of government action and there is clear public support for doing so."



Beccy Speight and Steve Barclay

Responding to the ban in Scottish waters, Anne McCall, Director of RSPB Scotland, said:

"We are delighted that the Scottish Government have today announced a closure of all Scottish waters to industrial sandeel fishing. This coincides with a similar announcement for English waters of the North Sea from the UK Government. We commend the leadership shown by both Scottish and UK Governments to take action to protect our beleaguered and precious seabirds on this issue and thank the tens of thousands of RSPB supporters who added their voice to our calls to enact these closures.

"With over 70% of Scottish seabird populations in decline, ending industrial sandeel fishing is the single greatest action that can be taken to support our most vulnerable seabirds right now. It will build their resilience in the face of Avian Flu and the multitude of other human-made pressures they face, such as climate change and offshore developments. Sandeels are a key food source for seabirds and other marine wildlife but have been adversely affected by both climate change and unsustainable fishing, so this is a very positive and welcome measure for the overall health of our seas."



Kittiwake

UK Environment Secretary Steve Barclay said:

"I was delighted to visit Bempton Cliffs last week and see firsthand the RSPB's work to protect our precious seabird colonies. I can confirm that the UK government is permanently closing the sandeel fishery in the English waters of the North Sea, to improve the resilience of our seabird colonies and the wider marine environment on which they depend. I know RSPB members have long campaigned for this important measure to aid the recovery of Britain's seabirds, which are a source of great national pride. As Environment Secretary, I am committed to delivering the action required to meet our ambitious goal to halt and reverse the decline of wildlife."

Acting on the science

A 2021 report by the RSPB, Revive our Seas, outlined the case for stronger regulation of sandeel fisheries in UK waters. The report found that several seabirds had suffered severe declines in recent years, with those species dependant on sandeels faring the worst. These include Kittiwakes, whose UK population has halved since the 1960s, as well as Puffins, with both birds declared as at risk of global extinction.

Making clear the link between seabird decline and reduced sandeel availability, the report also uncovered major flaws in the way the North Sea sandeel fishery is managed. Although warming seas, as a result of climate change, are held primarily responsible for the decline of sandeel availability, the commercial fishing of this species is making the problem much worse. Every year, industrial fishing fleets catch hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sandeels in the North Sea, crippling the ability of seabirds to find enough to feed their chicks.

Puffin with sandeels

Restoring the natural world

The closure of industrial sandeel fisheries in the English North Sea and Scottish waters will help build seabird resilience at a critical time for the natural world. The latest comprehensive assessment of the UK's biodiversity, the State of Nature 2023 report, found one in six species threatened with extinction from Great Britain. For marine life, the biggest drivers of decline are unsustainable fishing, climate change and marine development. Much more needs to be done to safeguard seabirds and our marine wildlife, including better protections, and addressing the issue of thousands of seabirds being caught in fishing lines and nets.

The closure of industrial sandeel fisheries is a recognition of the need to act now to save our seabirds, and to tackle unsustainable fishing. While there are many more challenges to overcome, this is a crucial step in the long journey to restore our natural world and reverse the decline in wildlife.

Find out more

- [Sandeel fisheries in the UK](#)
- [State of Nature 2023 report](#)

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