COMMENT

European Parliament votes in favour of greater protection for Europe’s seas

Strasbourg, 14 November 2006


The European Parliament today called for a determined Europe-wide effort to combat marine pollution and the impacts of destructive and unsustainable fishing, shipping, oil drilling, and coastal and offshore construction activities, which present an escalating threat to Europe’s seas. Environmental groups welcomed the assembly’s stance on the Marine Strategy Directive, which demands tougher action than that contained in the rather vague original proposal of the European Commission.

The vote comes just a week after an eminent study warned of the impending collapse of global fish stocks and marine ecosystems by 2050 (1). Supporting environmental groups’ repeated demands, the study’s authors emphasised the need for marine environments to be managed according to a holistic, ecosystem approach. This would need to include integrated fisheries management, the creation of marine reserves, the maintenance of essential habitats, and pollution control to avoid serious threats to global food security, coastal water quality and ecosystem stability.

The Parliament backed a number of significant changes to the Directive: it brought forward to 2017 the deadline for member states to clean up their marine environments; it set specific and legally binding criteria for a European definition of “good environmental status” applicable to oceans and seas; and created the possibility of fast-track pilot projects for regions such as the Baltic where member states are keen to press ahead with protection measures. The amended Directive also aims at a better integration of environmental concerns into other Community policies, enabling Member States to require EU-wide action if, for example, fishing activities are proving an obstacle to their efforts to achieve ‘good environmental status’ in their waters.

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(1) Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services. Worm et al., Science, Vol 314 3/11/2006. The study, conducted by an international team of marine biologists projects that if current trends continue all currently fished stocks may have collapsed in less than 50 years. It is the first study to examine a wide range of the existing data on ocean species and ecosystems, and provides a synthesis of historical, experimental, fisheries, and observational datasets to understand the importance of biodiversity at the global scale.