Briefing: the EU Ocean Pact and Marine Protected Areas

Supporting coastal jobs and climate resilience thanks to a healthier ocean

April 2025

When effectively managed and protected, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) act as catalysts for thriving, climate-resilient and prosperous coastal communities across Europe. Numerous success stories, some presented in the briefing, to illustrate how EU MPAs are particularly strategic for the competitiveness and resilience of EU blue economies, including the fishing sector, through the rebuilding of fish populations, the protection of seafood supply, and the support to territorial development and local jobs.

Strengthening the implementation and enforcement of existing EU MPA legislation is the most effective way to reap these social and economic benefits and guarantee the wellbeing of coastal communities, including traditional fishers.

With the EU Ocean Pact, Europe has a unique opportunity to become a global leader by taking bold action to safeguard marine ecosystems and meet international targets by 2030. For that, MPAs are an essential tool for promoting an integrated approach to sustainable ocean management, yet their full potential remains largely untapped.

It will be crucial to ensure that the EU Ocean Pact aligns with the Ocean Deal vision and policy roadmap proposed by more than 140 NGOs in the Blue Manifesto.

The EU Ocean Pact should include actions until 2030 to:

1. **Adopt legally binding ocean protection targets to protect 30% of EU seas, including 10% under strict protection**. Despite international commitments, these targets remain cur-rently voluntary, and countries are mostly failing to meet them.[1] Recognising their importance by establishing them in law would ensure their achievement and demonstrate EU leadership internationally on ocean commitments.

2. **Make the EU Ocean Pact ecosystem-based** by strengthening the Marine Strategy Framework Directive by tightening links with related EU policies on marine spatial planning and nature restoration, through stringent targets and thresholds.

3. **Commit the EU to prohibit destructive fishing practices, including all mobile bottom-contacting gears, inside EU MPAs.** According to the recognised global standards of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, bottom trawling is considered incompatible with any type of MPA.[2]

4. **Enforce science-based management of EU MPAs.** This should include adequate monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Engage local stakeholders, including fishers and coastal communities to promote dialogue and long-term support for MPA objectives.

5 **Protect carbon reserves in European seas.** Based on the results of an ongoing EU study on seabed carbon sequestration, the Commission should develop a proposal to identify and effectively protect these reserves, which offer the most important carbon storage potential in EU waters, particularly from the impacts of fishing activities.

6 **Reserve the EU coastal area for low-impact fishers and other sustainable activities.** A global assessment of the status of preferential access areas (PAAs) has shown that small-scale fisheries there benefit from higher catch volumes, higher landed value, increased fishing for human consumption, and more nutritious species than marine areas outside PAAs.[3] The EU already reserves the first 3 nm along the Mediterranean coast for low impact fishers. Extending this preferential access to the entire EU coastline would protect valuable coastal ecosystems and benefit the coastal communities who depend upon them.

7 **Adopt new legislation to support ocean resilience and coastal adaptation.** The European Commission should propose new legislation to help ocean resilience and coastal adaptation, emphasising nature-based solutions for better preparedness to counter climate-related challenges.


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1. Overview of today's EU MPAs

Today, only 12% of EU seas have been designated as MPAs – well below the 30% by 2030 global target endorsed by the EU. While EU MPA coverage more than doubled in surface between 2012 and 2022, a lack of management, weak enforcement, and insufficient funding have rendered many of these areas merely "paper parks"- that only exist on maps without effective protection against destructive human activities, in particular destructive fishing practices.[4,5] Thus more than 80% of EU MPAs show marginal protection against the most harmful human activities, and only 1.5% of them are designated as strictly protected.[6] Without proper protection, EU MPAs will fall short of providing not only their ecological benefits for ocean biodiversity but importantly also their socio-economic benefits for human activities dependent on a healthy ocean, including traditional fishers and coastal communities.


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The EU Ocean Pact presents a crucial opportunity to integrate objectives contributing to a healthy ocean into the heart of EU sectoral policies affecting the ocean, and to leverage the potential of MPAs to support climate resilience, ecosystem regeneration and sustainable activities within these special ocean areas dedicated to nature conservation. The Ocean Pact must tighten up restrictions on impactful activities inside MPAs, address their poor management and enforcement and foster a more integrated and holistic approach to marine conservation.


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2. MPAs are the most effective tool to ensure a healthy and resilient ocean

MPAs are vital for conserving the ocean and ensuring coastal and marine ecosystems are healthy, productive, and resilient and remain so. They are a necessary "nature-based solution" and lay strong foundations for EU marine and coastal economic sectors using the ocean. Research has shown the positive links between the level of protection of MPAs and their effectiveness: the greater the level of protection, the higher the conservation benefits. In fully protected MPAs, such as no-take zones, fish biomass is on average much higher (+670 %) than in adjacent unprotected areas and the complexity of ecosystems makes them more resilient to climate impacts.[7] Other studies show evidence of benthic habitats recovering, including in MPAs, after the adoption of restrictions on destructive fishing like bottom trawling, such as for rhodolith beds in the Natura 2000 site of the Menorca Channel in Spain,[8] and for sea pens in the Pomo/Jabuka Pit Fisheries Restricted Area in the Adriatic Sea.[9]

The economic benefits of a healthy and resilient ocean are vast. Globally, conserving fish stocks could increase annual profits of the seafood industry by more than €49 billion, while protecting coastal wetlands could save the insurance industry around €50 billion annually by reducing losses caused by flood damage.[10]

Well protected MPAs are a prerequisite for delivering a sustainable blue economy that supports prosperous coastal communities across Europe, including through fisheries and sustainable tourism.[11]


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To ensure the EU Ocean Pact achieves its objectives, the role of well protected MPAs and their proper management must play a central role, so they serve as a tool to bridge multiple aspects of ocean governance, such as conservation and restoration, sustainable management of the sea (including fisheries), and climate change adaptation.

3. MPAs as central tools to enhance policy coherence and address sectoral conflicts

One of the goals of the European Ocean Pact should be to enable coherence across ocean policies and to address sectoral conflicts, including when managing MPAs. The management of EU MPAs is often undermined by conflicting interests, preventing effective ocean conservation. Fisheries, tourism, energy, transport and coastal development operate under separate legal frameworks that often fail to integrate an ecosystem-based management of MPAs. To add to this, management often favours economic interests over nature conservation requirements, resulting in MPAs unable to ensure timely protection from harmful human activities, including destructive fishing practices.[12]


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Given the potential economic benefits of well managed MPAs, sectoral policy priorities must be managed in an integrated manner and be prioritized to achieve a common higher objective of a "healthy ocean". The Ocean Pact must create such a holistic framework where a "healthy ocean" becomes a binding objective central to all EU ocean-related policies and is supported by other targets, such as 30% of ocean protection and 10% under strict protection. In this regard, getting countries to enforce management of their MPAs is fundamental to define and balance the various use of these areas, mitigate the harmful impacts of human activities, and ultimately ensure economic opportunities for coastal communities. The Ocean Pact should also expressly recognise that some environmentally damaging activities are incompatible with EU MPAs, such as mining, oil and gas exploration, and industrial fishing.[13] Similarly, the Ocean Pact must ensure that areas designated for offshore renewable energy are not placed within EU MPAs.

MPAs are at the centre of EU ocean policies

Properly managed MPAs would contribute to achieving existing EU legal objectives and would have a positive impact on biodiversity, fisheries, the blue economy, and climate adaptation, due to the ocean's ability to act as a carbon sink. Properly managed MPAs would contribute towards the following goals, thereby enabling better policy coherence in the ocean:

- Maintaining and restoring a favourable conservation status for threatened habitats and species under the **EU Birds Directive 2009/147/EC and Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC**.
- Supporting the EU's international commitment to the Global Biodiversity Framework, and its **EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy's** targets to protect 30% of marine areas, with 10% under strict protection by 2030.
- Supporting the objectives of the **2023 EU Marine Action Plan**, including the fair and just transition to low-impact fisheries.
- Helping to achieve the **EU Nature Restoration Regulation's (EU 2024/1991)** objectives of restoring 20% of EU seas by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.
- Rebuilding fish stocks, protecting habitats as nursery grounds, and sustaining fish populations at healthy levels in accordance with the **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)**.
- Achieving Good Environmental Status under the **Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) 2008/56/CE**.
- Contributing to the ecological balance of the **EU Maritime Spatial Planning Directive** (2014/89/EU).
- Supporting the EU's strategy of **Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future**.
- Supporting the EU's **Climate Adaptation Strategy** through nature-based solutions to enhance coastal defence and buffer against climate change impacts.
- Contributing to the **EU's climate neutrality goal** under the **European Climate Law** (EU 2021/1119) by protecting natural carbon sinks.

4. MPAs as tools to support low-impact fisheries, coastal livelihoods and innovation

By their very nature, MPAs promote an integrated approach to ocean governance, balancing sustainability with the interests of coastal communities, fisheries or tourism. By boosting marine biodiversity, they create opportunities for coastal tourism which accounted for 29% of the EU blue economy's Gross Value Added and 54% of its total employment in 2021.[14] MPAs also serve as science labs for research, developing (cutting-edge) technology and generating complex data management to manage and monitor MPAs in the form of satellite imagery, machine learning, artificial intelligence, drones, gliders and Autonomous Underwater Vehicles etc.[15] The emerging EU blue biotechnology and blue bioeconomy sectors can also leverage the benefits of well managed MPAs to turn ocean biomass into food, feed, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, energy, packaging, clothes and much more.[16]

The following case studies explore how well managed MPAs can revitalize fisheries, boost tourism, restore vital ocean ecosystems and help mitigate climate change.

A Torre Guaceto, Italy: A model for low-impact fisheries

This example highlights the benefits of restricting industrial fishing and a collaborative approach that strengthened the recovery of habitats and fish stocks and fishers' commitment to sustainability. Following concerns over declining fish stocks and damage from mobile fishing gear, the Italian government imposed a five-year fishing closure (2001-2005), allowing scientists to collect baseline data and design proper fisheries management.[17] By late 2005, fish catches within the MPA were five times greater than outside, with larger and more valuable fish. By 2016, fish biomass had increased by over 400%, and fishers' income doubled.[18]

B Bonifacio Strait Nature Reserve, France/Italy: A cross-border success for conservation and fishers

Spanning 800 km^2 between Corsica (France) and Sardinia (Italy), this is one of Europe's few fully coordinated cross-border MPAs. Before its creation in 1999, threats like overfishing, illegal fishing, and maritime traffic endangered marine biodiversity.[19] By 2015, coordinated conservation efforts between France and Italy led to a 250% increase in fish stocks, including key species like lobster, seabass, and seabream.[20] Joint enforcement reduced illegal fishing and protected Posidonia seagrass meadows, which capture carbon 35 times faster than tropical rainforests.[21]

C Medes Islands Marine Reserve, Spain: A blueprint for sustainable coastal tourism

The Medes Islands Marine Reserve, designated in 1983 as a small no-take zone, saw a 500% recovery in fish biomass by 1993. The reserve now generates €10 million annually, with 85% of revenue from diving and glass-bottom tours. It also supported the local economy by creating jobs and boosting local businesses,[22] while small-scale fishers report higher catches in nearby areas, demonstrating that well-managed MPAs balance conservation and economic benefits.[23]

D Kosterhavet Marine National Park, Sweden: An example of sustainable tourism and low-impact fisheries

Established in 2009 as Sweden's first national marine park, it spans 400 km^2 in the Skagerrak Sea and protects rich ecosystems from deep fjords to seagrass meadows. The park significantly benefited fisheries, through areas closed to trawling where the number of fishers using passive gears increased by 38% and catches grew by 74% between 2012 and 2015.[24] Eco-tourism, including kayaking tours and wildlife excursions, attracts over 100,000 visitors annually, boosting the local economy.[25]

E Flamanville Marine Protected Area, France: Boosting lobster stocks and local fisheries

Established in 2000 off the coast of Normandy, the MPA covers 500 ha and was created to support local crustacean fisheries, especially European lobster. It includes a no-take zone where extractive activities are prohibited. Long-term monitoring, from 1985 to 2019, showed significant ecological benefits, with lobster densities inside the reserve increasing by 250% and the average lobster size growing by 20%. These positive changes led to a spillover effect, with adjacent fishing zones seeing a 15% increase in lobster catches.[26]

F Condor Seamount, Portugal: Recovering fish resources through deep-sea protection

In October 2024, the Azores established a comprehensive MPA network covering about 287,000 km^2, with half of the area designated as no-take zones. The initiative aims to preserve unique marine ecosystems, including seamounts and hydrothermal vents. The whale-watching industry in the archipelago thrives, valued at €80 million annually. Notably, the Condor Seamount, closed to demersal fishing since June 2010, has seen a 400% increase in blackspot seabream abundance, along with larger fish sizes.[27]

G Portofino, Italy: Conservation, scuba industry, and local taxes

This MPA follows a three-zoning plan to regulate access and use, and human activities like scuba diving are regulated and monitored. Protection measures have kept the reserve's ecosystems in excellent condition, with high biomass of keystone species such as dusky groupers and seabreams, healthy Posidonia meadows, and growing red coral colonies.[28] As a result, diving has flourished, with about 20 commercial charter businesses and 60,000 dives recorded in 2001. Dive operators contribute nearly €100,000 in taxes annually.[29]

H Skagerrak Coast, Norway: Rebuilding lobster through fisheries closures in MPAs

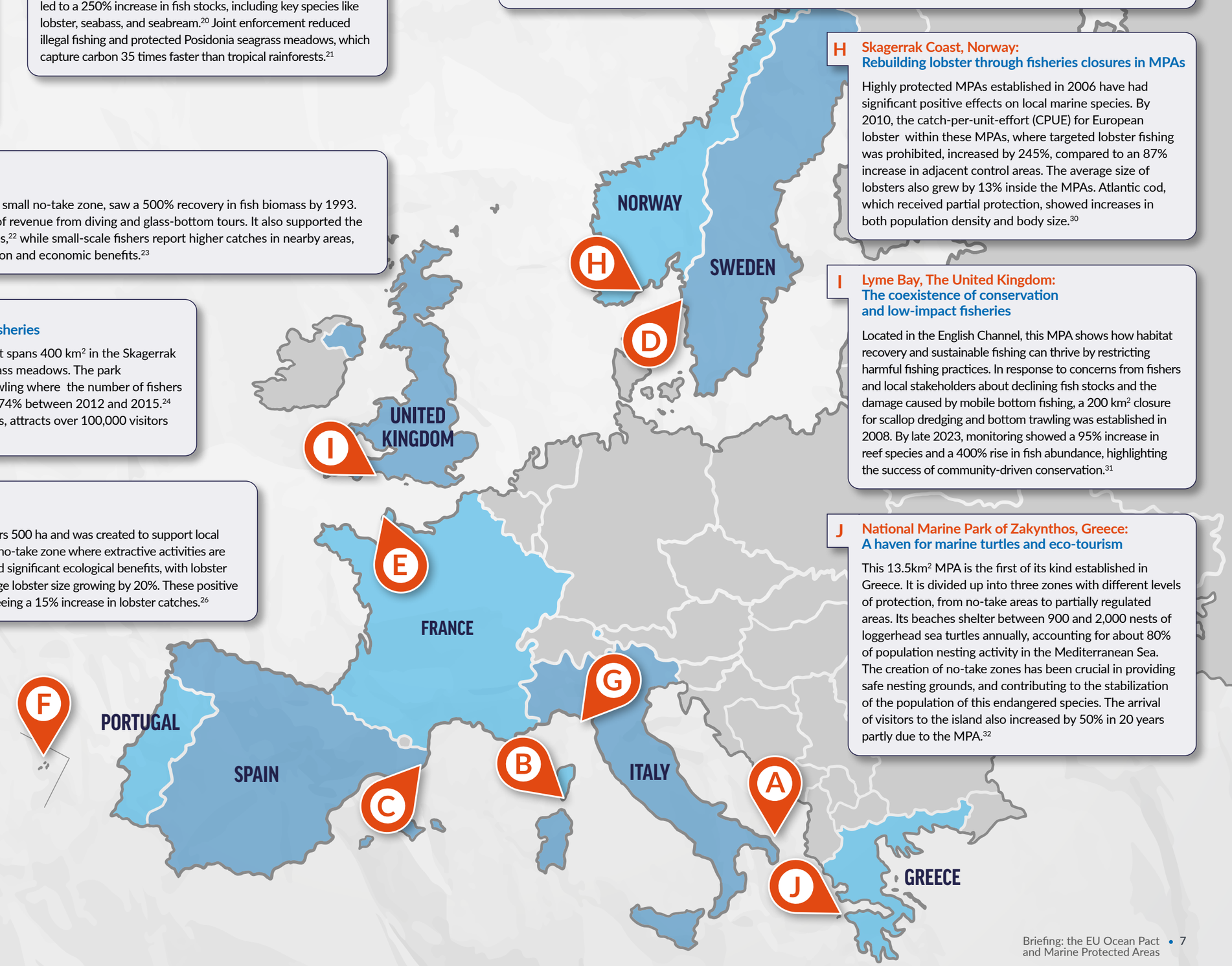
Highly protected MPAs established in 2006 have had significant positive effects on local marine species. By 2010, the catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) for European lobster within these MPAs, where targeted lobster fishing was prohibited, increased by 245%, compared to an 87% increase in adjacent control areas. The average size of lobsters also grew by 13% inside the MPAs. Atlantic cod, which received partial protection, showed increases in both population density and body size.[30]

I Lyme Bay, The United Kingdom: The coexistence of conservation and low-impact fisheries

Located in the English Channel, this MPA shows how habitat recovery and sustainable fishing can thrive by restricting harmful fishing practices. In response to concerns from fishers and local stakeholders about declining fish stocks and the damage caused by mobile bottom fishing, a 200 km^2 closure for scallop dredging and bottom trawling was established in 2008. By late 2023, monitoring showed a 95% increase in reef species and a 400% rise in fish abundance, highlighting the success of community-driven conservation.[31]

J National Marine Park of Zakynthos, Greece: A haven for marine turtles and eco-tourism

This 13.5km^2 MPA is the first of its kind established in Greece. It is divided up into three zones with different levels of protection, from no-take areas to partially regulated areas. Its beaches shelter between 900 and 2,000 nests of loggerhead sea turtles annually, accounting for about 80% of population nesting activity in the Mediterranean Sea. The creation of no-take zones has been crucial in providing safe nesting grounds, and contributing to the stabilization of the population of this endangered species. The arrival of visitors to the island also increased by 50% in 20 years partly due to the MPA.[32]



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Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union, the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project, the Becht Family Charitable Trust and other funders. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders. Neither the European Union, nor the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project, nor the Becht Family Charitable Trust, nor other funders can be held responsible for them.