



Making Ocean and Climate the EU's First Priority

Priority actions for the European Commission work
programme 2019-2024

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Seas At Risk

June 2019



Our Blue Vision

Seas and oceans make up 75% of our planet. The ocean produces more than 50% of the oxygen we breathe, is the main food source for more than 3.5 billion people and is an incredible source of biodiversity, with every living person depending on the ocean to regulate our climate. It has absorbed over 90% of the heat trapped by our carbon dioxide emissions and, as the world's largest active carbon sink, has sequestered over 30% of the carbon from those emissions, slowing down the warming of our planet.

Healthy, biodiverse and resilient seas and oceans are critical in the fight against the devastating changes that will otherwise result from climate breakdown and the current sixth mass extinction. However, the ocean is threatened by overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution, unsustainable resource extraction and climate change. Ultimately, we can only avoid a full-blown climate meltdown, save the ocean and halt biodiversity decline if we change the ways in which we produce and consume, our lifestyles and our economic thinking. Good public policy must show the way forward. It is clear by now that the ways in which we protect and manage seas and the ocean will determine our future.

As the world's biggest maritime territory and with almost half of its population living by the sea, the EU has a key role to play in bringing about this change. Our [evaluation of EU policy achievements in respect of the marine environment in the past five years](#) showed clear progress, especially in the governance framework established. However, this sits alongside a considerable implementation gap, pointing to the lack of a holistic approach to ocean protection. EU institutions and countries have addressed the threats to the marine environment one by one rather than taking a global view of the impact of our lifestyles on the ocean, particularly its resilience, in the face of impending climate breakdown. The new European Commission will have to work intensively with the European Parliament, the Member States, civil society and other stakeholders to ensure the necessary progress during the next five years.

Priorities for healthy seas for 2019-2024

In response to biodiversity loss and the climate crisis, we urge the European Commission to make the protection of seas and ocean a priority in its upcoming mandate. The new work programme should focus on the following actions:

1. Promote ambitious Member State implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (Marine Directive) to ensure that important steps are taken towards the goal of Good Environmental Status (GES) by 2020, consider the legal implications of Member States failing to achieve GES by 2020, and protect and enhance the Directive's level of ambition in case of REFIT in 2023.
2. Complete an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas (MPAs) with effective management measures in place, based on the full implementation of the Marine Directive and the Birds and Habitats Directives, ensuring a ban on all industrial activities in EU MPAs, including bottom-trawling.
3. End overfishing of all harvested stocks by 2020 and allow for the recovery of fish stocks while minimising the impact of fishing on the wider marine environment through full and timely implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and protect and enhance the level of ambition in the CFP review.
4. Strengthen the policy and regulatory frameworks to fight marine litter pollution, with a focus on minimisation of microplastics and enhanced recyclability of fishing gear.
5. Stop promoting deep-sea mining to avoid irreversible biodiversity loss and commit instead to a strategy to significantly reduce the demand for metals, in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12.
6. Provide leadership at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to reduce maritime greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and protect the Arctic from polluting black carbon.
7. Be an effective leader in international ocean governance by setting a good example and respecting legal commitments at home.

Seas At Risk looks forward to working constructively with the European Commission to deliver the protection that our oceans urgently require and deserve.

1. Restoring and protecting marine biodiversity and making seas climate-change resilient

The health and resilience of the ocean is heavily dependent on the richness and abundance of its biodiversity. Marine biodiversity is in dramatic decline, however, because of the impacts of human activities. [Overfishing, habitat degradation, pollution and climate breakdown](#) are the main causes of the rapid decline in marine populations observed in recent decades. The world community faces a huge challenge in returning its seas and oceans to good health, as required under SDG 14.

The EU has a potentially powerful set of management tools to ensure that its seas are restored to resilient ecosystems with thriving wildlife: the Marine Directive, which aims to restore seas to GES by 2020; the Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) Directive, which should ensure that maritime activities are planned within environmental limits; and the network of MPAs, underpinned by the strongly protective regime of the Birds and Habitat Directives. In practice, however, we see a fragmentation of approaches, with MSP being primarily used to push for ‘blue growth’, and worryingly weak implementation of marine environmental legislation. Achieving GES of EU seas can happen only if these three processes reinforce one another and work closely together to reach common environmental goals.

At the international level, a growing number of countries have recognised ocean conservation as a political priority. This is reflected in the planning of several important global-level events for 2019 and 2020, which will focus on the role of the ocean in the fight against climate and nature collapse. Among these events are the 25th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (the ‘Blue COP’) in December 2019, the UN Ocean Conference on SDG 14 in June 2020 and the 15th COP of the Convention on Biological Diversity in October 2020. Its strong marine governance framework puts the EU in an ideal position to play an international leadership role on ocean conservation, provided it respects its own commitments for the EU seas and delivers results in the crucial years ahead.

Priorities for 2019-2024

- **Call for ambitious action by the Member States** to achieve the Marine Directive’s objective of GES of EU seas **by 2020**, focusing on the main threats to EU seas, namely overfishing and pollution (plastic, chemical and agricultural, underwater noise).
- Consider the **legal implications of Member States failing this objective** and protect and **enhance the Directive’s level of ambition** during its next implementation cycle (in particular in case of its revision in 2023), supporting full participation by stakeholders and civil society.
- Complete an ecologically coherent network of **MPAs with effective management measures in place**, based on the full implementation of the Marine Directive and the Nature Directives, ensuring a **ban on all industrial activities in all EU MPAs**, including bottom-trawling.
- Support Member States’ efforts to **protect their offshore MPAs** by taking an active role in the negotiation process with neighbouring Member States to **restrict or even ban fishing activities** and ensuring that the joint measures put forward **comply with the EU’s environmental legislation** (Nature and Marine Directives).
- Strengthen the **coherence between national MSP and EU and international legal commitments** to protect and restore marine biodiversity, especially those of the Birds and Habitats Directives and the Marine Directive.
- Ensure that the **development of renewable energy at sea respects ecosystem sensitivities and boundaries** and is in line with the requirements of the Nature Directives and the Marine Directive.
- Become an **effective leader in international ocean governance** by setting an example and **respecting legal commitments at home**.

2. Supporting seafood production in balance with nature

The CFP requires an end to overfishing by 2015 or, at the latest, by 2020. Although we have seen improvements in some seas, it is clear that this target will be missed unless strong and decisive action is taken now. Destructive fishing practices continue to impact species and habitats, as the tools provided by the CFP have not been properly implemented.

Overfishing is a problem not only because it makes fish an unsustainable source of food for human consumption, but, more importantly, because fish are an essential part of the marine world. When massive amounts of fish biomass are extracted from the sea, marine ecosystems become unbalanced, making them more vulnerable and less able to resist other threats, including those caused by climate breakdown.

Priorities for 2019-2024

- **End overfishing of all harvested stocks by 2020** in compliance with the CFP, by proposing fishing limits in line with scientific advice for all stocks and promoting Member States' adoption of those fishing limits.
- Consider the **legal implications of Member States failing this objective** and protect and enhance the CFP's level of ambition during its review in 2021.
- Secure an **effective implementation of the landing obligation** by ensuring that measures to avoid and reduce unwanted catches are implemented, including through increased monitoring and control of fisheries activities.
- Promote and support Member States' efforts to **minimise the impact of fishing on the wider marine environment**, including through allocation of fishing opportunities to low-impact fisheries and full implementation of the Data Collection Regulation and the Technical Measures Regulation.
- Establish an **effective fisheries management regime in the Mediterranean Sea**.
- Enhance the **protection of deep-sea stocks and ecosystems in EU and international waters**, including through the promotion of ambitious implementation of the Deep Sea Regulation and precautionary fishing limits for all deep-sea stocks.
- Strengthen the **environmental dimension of European aquaculture policies** by increasing the role of the European Commission in **regulating the sector** (e.g. on the spread of non-indigenous species in European waters), providing guidance (e.g. on strategic environmental assessments of maritime spatial plans and environmental impact assessments of aquaculture projects) and promoting the use of **more environmentally friendly practices** (e.g. reduction of effluent, leaks, marine litter, use of chemicals, antibiotics and other medicines).

3. Supporting sustainable consumption and production

Most of the environmental problems at sea have their origin on land, thus solutions must be sought on land as well. Under SDG 12, the EU and the global community have committed to ‘achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources’ by 2030.

The throwaway economy puts unsustainable pressure on our seas and oceans. Marine litter, particularly plastic pollution, has become the iconic representation of human impacts on the sea, bringing a sharp increase in public awareness of the issue. With citizen interest growing, the pressure for EU-level policies to reduce plastic pollution has gained exponential momentum.

A hidden addiction within the European economy is the increasing demand for metals to fuel the ever-growing consumption of consumer products such as cars, laptops and mobile devices. The transition to renewable energy and accelerating urbanisation are expected to boost this demand still further. Now, the mining industry is looking at the deep sea as the new ‘Eldorado’ for metals. This is despite the wholesale waste of metals on land, where they are squandered in products with short lifespans. Sustainable consumption and production should ensure more efficient use of metals in order to prevent mining from taking root in the deep sea, a move that will cause irreversible biodiversity loss and large-scale habitat destruction.

Priorities for 2019-2024

- Ensure that Member States deliver on their commitments under SDG 12 by **strengthening the circular economy package**.
- Ensure **full, ambitious and speedy transposition and implementation of the Single-Use Plastics Directive** by EU Member States, by promoting existing best practices, developing clear and documented implementation acts and encouraging broad stakeholder participation in the implementation process.
- Ensure widespread and adequate implementation of the Single-Use Plastics and Port Reception Facilities Directives with respect to the **design, separate collection, reuse and recycling of fishing gear**, which remains the most important source of marine litter.
- Maintain the current level of ambition in the implementation of the **European Plastics Strategy** in relation to sustainable consumption and production and, more specifically, the reduction of microplastic pollution, and consider further **policy development to deal with the release of both intentionally and non-intentionally added microplastics** into the environment.
- Take the lead on the **international response to marine litter**, building on the EU legislation on plastics and on recent developments within UN Environment and the IMO to develop a **coherent global strategic framework to fight marine litter pollution** with complementary regional action plans.
- **Stop promoting deep-sea mining** in order to avoid irreversible biodiversity loss and instead commit to a strategy and action plan to **significantly reduce the demand for metals**, in line with SDG 12.
- Act on the 2018 Resolution of the European Parliament on International Ocean Governance (2017/2055(INI)) by supporting an **international moratorium on commercial deep-sea mining exploitation licences** until such time as the effects of deep-sea mining on the marine environment, biodiversity and human activities at sea have been studied and researched sufficiently and all possible risks are understood.

4. Decarbonising the shipping industry

While the 2015 Paris Agreement did not specifically mention emissions from international shipping, it nevertheless created a political dynamic that resulted [in the IMO's initial GHG Strategy](#) in 2018, which commits to the decarbonisation of the sector and to a GHG reduction of at least 50% by 2050. This will require deep cuts in emissions in the short-term, as well as the development of zero-emission vessels and fuels in the medium to longer term. This ground-breaking agreement was made possible with significant pressure from civil society and EU leadership. The level of ambition in the initial Strategy will have to be strengthened when it is revised in 2023 but, in the meantime, the commitment to prioritising measures with the potential to reduce emissions in the short-term (before 2023) is a significant step towards keeping global warming below 1.5°C.

In a separate process, since 2012 the IMO has been considering the impact of black carbon emissions from international shipping on the Arctic. This work has recently been supplemented by civil society's call for a ban on heavy fuel oil (HFO) use in the Arctic. In addition to protecting the Arctic from the special problems associated with a HFO spill, a shift to cleaner distillate fuels would reduce black carbon emissions by around 30% and make it possible to use diesel particulate filters that can then reduce black carbon emissions by over 90%. This is part of a wider push for the use of cleaner marine fuels, which should incentivise more efficient shipping and close the price gap between fossil fuels and emerging clean fuels.

Priorities for 2019-2024

- Provide leadership at the IMO to ensure an urgent agreement on measures that **reduce GHG emissions from ships significantly in the short-term**, with reductions starting before 2023.
- Support the **roll-out of zero-emission vessels and fuels** at EU level.
- Support an **ambitious revised IMO GHG Strategy** in 2023 that provides for shipping to make a fair contribution to keeping global warming below 1.5°C.
- Support a progressive outcome to IMO work on protecting the Arctic from the effects of black carbon, including a **ban on the use of HFO in the Arctic** and urgent action **to reduce the effects of black carbon emissions** on the Arctic.

SEAS AT RISK



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