

# The EU Ocean Act

Position paper - 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026

## Europe's Ocean Regulation Bringing policy coherence and effective implementation to EU Ocean governance

### The urgent need for EU ocean policy coherence

Europe's seas are at a crossroads. Decades after the EU first recognised the need for integrated maritime governance, the marine environment remains in critical conditions. Europe's seas are vastly over-exploited as a result of intensive fishing (including bottom trawling), shipping, oil and gas exploration and drilling, tourism and other coastal activities. Emerging activities like the large-scale rollout of offshore wind energy add to these multiple pressures. Pollution from plastics, noise, nutrients and chemicals is persisting and undermining ocean resilience and human health. Climate change is driving ocean warming, acidification and biodiversity declines at unprecedented rates.

The European Environment Agency and European Commission have repeatedly confirmed that **Good Environmental Status (GES)** – the central goal of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) – has not been achieved in any of Europe's regional seas. Lack of policy coherence, fragmented governance, insufficient financing and poor implementation and enforcement of the EU's ocean-related policies have hampered progress. Marine management remains divided between sectoral policies – fisheries, energy, transport, raw material extraction, environment – each operating under separate governance frameworks and leaderships, objectives, timelines, and reporting cycles. The result is inefficiency, overlapping and conflicting measures, and the cumulative degradation of marine ecosystems. Binding and consistent targets at EU level are lacking, while national targets are largely undefined or inadequate more than ten years after their introduction. Business-as-usual – and politics as usual – are failing us.

In 2024, our **Blue Manifesto** – signed by 140+ organisations – set out a clear and urgent roadmap for EU action to address these systemic problems and ensure a healthy and resilient ocean by 2030. It highlighted the need for an overarching mechanism for policy coherence and the central role the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) should play in that.



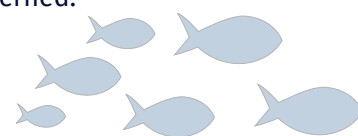
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The **European Ocean Pact**, adopted in 2025, was an important step towards this vision. It articulated a shared political vision of “*a regenerative blue economy that restores the ocean while fostering development, social inclusion and equity.*” The Pact recognised the ocean’s vital role in Europe’s climate stability, food security, and economic resilience – but also that its health cannot be taken for granted. It also announced the creation of an **Ocean Act**, to ensure a holistic policy framework across all policy areas. The Ocean Act’s role is to bring relevant targets under one roof and ensure their coherent and effective implementation, including through a sea basin approach and a consistent application of the ecosystem-based approach.

The forthcoming **Ocean Act** must now transform the Pact’s worthy and achievable vision into law and ensure effective implementation and enforcement. It represents Europe’s chance to build a single, simplified, and enforceable framework for all ocean-related policies. The Ocean Act must set the foundation for a **binding, measurable and accountable pathway** toward ocean recovery and regeneration – ensuring that by 2030, Europe’s seas are healthy, climate-resilient, and well-governed.



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# 1 - The Ocean Act: Europe's opportunity to create an Ocean Regulation

The **Ocean Act** must be the legislative keystone of Europe's marine governance – a unifying framework that brings coherence, accountability and ambition to EU ocean policy. To achieve this, it must be adopted as a **Regulation**, ensuring direct applicability and consistent implementation across all Member States. The European Climate Law and Nature Restoration Regulation can provide inspiration for this and set a precedent for overarching governance, while respecting Member States prerogative implemented through the National Nature Restoration plans .

The use of a Regulation would guarantee the enforceability that existing directives, interpreted unevenly at national level, have lacked as marine issues are essentially cross-boundary.

The Ocean Act should consolidate all existing marine commitments into a **single, binding framework**, integrating objectives from all marine related policies, including the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the Biodiversity Strategy, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Water Framework Directive, the Marine Action Plan, the Zero Pollution Action Plan and the forthcoming EU Port Strategy and Maritime Industry Strategy. It should, as well, ensure integration of targets and measures set in EU and international climate policies (e.g. Paris Agreement, EU Climate Law, Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy, FuelEU Maritime Regulation...). By integrating these frameworks, the Ocean Act would establish a coherent pathway toward a shared goal: a healthy, resilient ocean that sustains life, communities and economies alike.

Its central aim must be to ensure the achievement of Good Environmental Status of the EU's seas. To that end, it is necessary to transition towards a **regenerative blue economy** – one that restores marine ecosystems, respects ecological boundaries, prevents all sources of marine pollution and supports livelihoods and wellbeing. This requires shifting from an exploitative to a restorative model of ocean use, underpinned by a strong social foundation and a just transition for coastal and maritime sectors. The Ocean Act is Europe's chance to deliver on long-term economic resilience for the blue economy sectors and sustainable livelihoods for coastal communities. The Ocean Act must ensure that the blue economy, from fisheries to shipping, aquaculture, tourism, biotechnology and renewable energy, respects the ocean's carrying capacity and supports the resilience of those sectors.

Europe can, and must, do better for its coastal communities. Healthy ecosystems are the backbone on which the EU can future-proof the livelihoods of the people that depend on blue economy sectors.

## A. Key objectives of the Ocean Act Regulation

To deliver this transformation, the Ocean Act must:

- **Establish legally binding objectives and timebound and measurable targets (with thresholds)** for 2030, 2040 and 2050, including the achievement of Good Environmental Status (i.e. the 11 descriptors of the MSFD), the effective protection of at least 30% of EU seas with 10% under strict protection, and time-bound reduction targets for pollution and ecosystem pressures such as destructive fishing practices.
- **Encompass all existing EU and international ocean targets and objectives that are not yet enshrined in EU law, notably:**
  - Establishing Marine Protected Areas covering at least 30% of EU seas as well as in the High Seas by 2030, as outlined in the [EU Biodiversity Strategy](#) and the [Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework](#) and the [Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Treaty](#) and **implementing effective management measures**.
  - **Strictly protecting 10%** of EU seas, as outlined in the EU Biodiversity Strategy.
  - **Reduce marine plastic and microplastic pollution** respectively by 50% and 30% by 2030 as outlined in the [EU Action Plan: "Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil"](#).
  - **Phasing out harmful subsidies**, as outlined in the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework and the [WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement](#).
  - **Minimising ocean acidification** as outlined in the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework.
- Ensure the **strong and consistent application of the ecosystem-based approach, as set out in the MSFD, across MSPs and sectoral policies and plans, including the Common Fisheries Policy and offshore renewable energy plans**. MSP and sectoral policies and plans should be aligned with MSFD targets and thresholds, introduce nature-based climate adaptation and resilience measures, incorporate EU protection and restoration targets, ensure coherence with energy, climate, fisheries, shipping, sustainable finance and other relevant policies, and promote responsible multi-use and coastal management for effective adaptation to climate change.
- **Ensure a phasing out of the most destructive marine activities**, such as bottom-trawling in Marine Protected Areas (as set out in the 2023 EU Marine Action Plan), plastic and chemical pollution at sea and offshore oil and gas exploration and drilling.
- **Strengthen enforcement and transparency**, empowering the Commission to monitor progress and enforce compliance through regular assessments and the Ocean Pact Dashboard as a public accountability tool.
- The Ocean Act can only be effective if it is backed by **substantial funding under the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework**, which should ensure funding of any activity is conditional to environmental and social performance and should phase out harmful subsidies that have a detrimental impact on the marine environment and jeopardise all efforts to improve its health. By phasing out harmful subsidies, the EU can redirect public money towards the regenerative blue economy.
- Last but not least, the Ocean Act should be supported by **putting the ocean at the heart of EU decision-making** through the creation of an ambitious governance structure to secure policy coherence and political ownership, including a task force of EU Commissioners, strengthened inter-DG cooperation and meetings of joint "Ocean" Council meetings.

## B. Key principles for the Ocean Act Regulation

To ensure a coherent framework, the upcoming Ocean Act must be based on **solid principles**:

- **Ensure coherence across EU law by** mainstreaming ocean health in all EU policies that have an impact on marine ecosystems, such as agriculture and soil, transport, energy, raw materials and chemical policies. This **ocean mainstreaming** should be operationalised through a systematic process to evaluate ocean impacts of sectoral policies, mirroring what is prescribed in the article 6(4) of the European Climate Law regarding consistency of any draft measures of legislative proposals with the climate-neutrality objective.
- **Recognise the Ocean Protection Principle:** a shift in ocean governance that requires any human activity to first demonstrate compatibility with ocean health before proceeding, placing the responsibility on extractive and polluting industries to show they will not cause harm, rather than on conservationists to prove damage.
- **Mandate a non-deterioration principle**, to ensure that once the EU reaches GES and seas are restored, no new activity, funding or policy leads to environmental decline in any sea basin.
- Ensure the full application of the **precautionary principle**, to prevent high-risk novel activities from moving ahead in cases of scientific uncertainty, especially for emerging pressures like **microplastics, deep-sea mining, marine geo-engineering and carbon capture and storage**.
- Include targets on the **social dimension of the transition** to a regenerative blue economy, ensuring 'blue justice', equity and wellbeing principles, and protect and empower those most directly dependent on the ocean – particularly small-scale fishers, coastal communities and maritime workers.

In short, **the Ocean Act must become Europe's Ocean Regulation** that binds together ecological regeneration, social justice, and economic transformation into one coherent, enforceable framework.

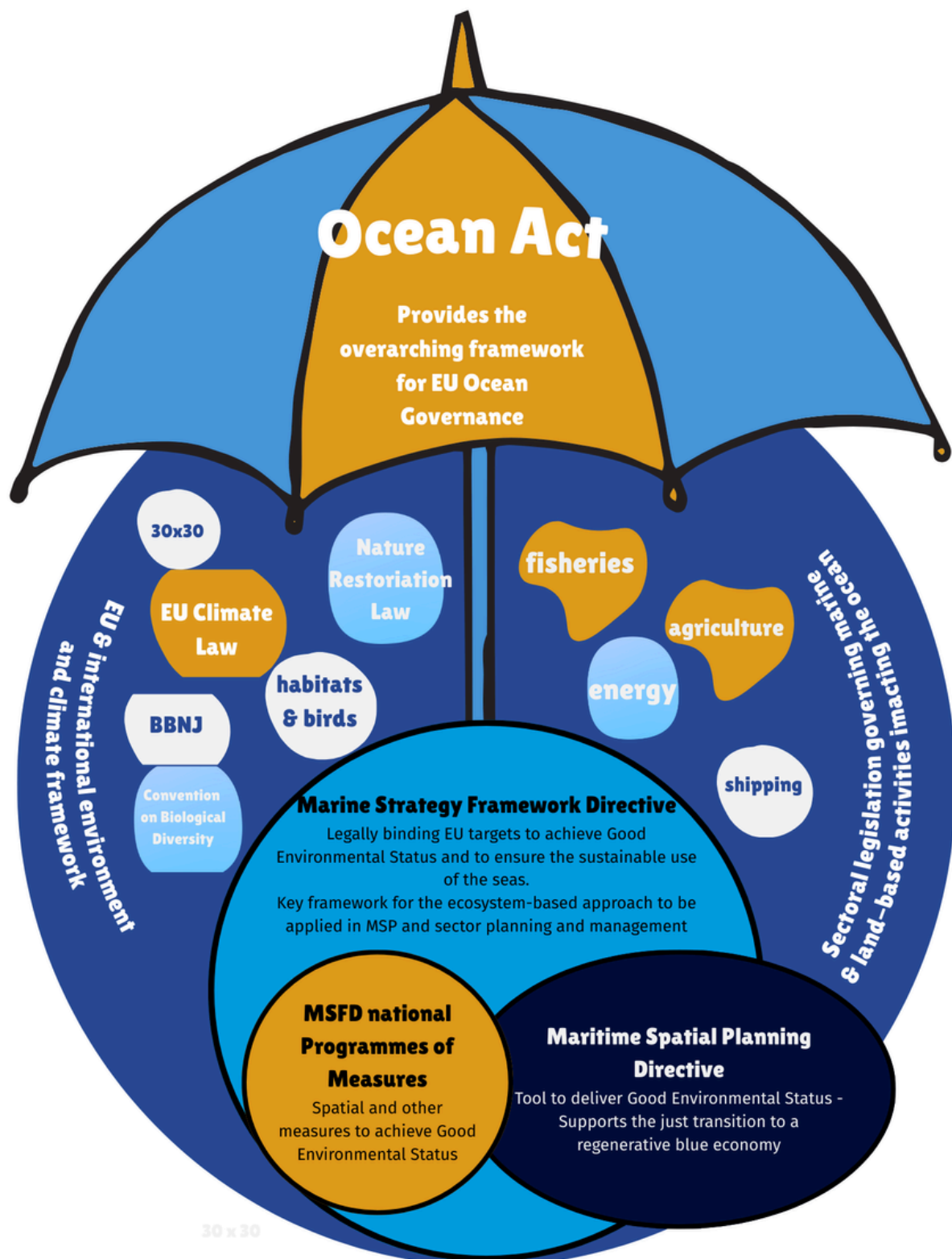


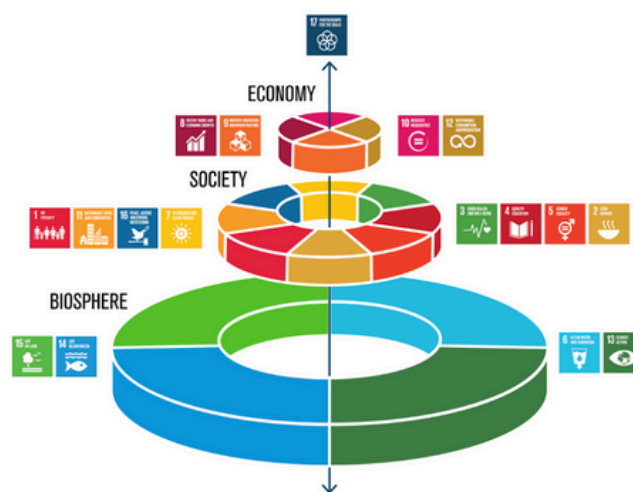
Figure 1: The Ocean Act as an umbrella regulation for EU Ocean Governance



## 2 - Empowering ocean regeneration: Getting the MSFD and MSPD to work together

To deliver the objectives of the Ocean Act, the EU must undertake a **parallel revision of the MSFD** and the **MSPD** to ensure these work optimally together to achieve shared goals. The Ocean Act Regulation should also establish the interlinkages between the directives, in line with a strong sustainability model, i.e. societies and economies should be recognised as embedded within a healthy biosphere. Accordingly, the Ocean Act should first and foremost build on the MSFD, with MSPD as a supporting tool to reach good environmental status.

Figure 2: Strong sustainability model: the SDG ‘wedding cake’



Source: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University CC BY-ND 3.0.

In this context, it is essential to clarify that Maritime Spatial Planning is an enabling tool for designing spatial measures that deliver policy objectives and targets established under other legal frameworks, such as the MSFD, sectoral policies and just transition policies.

The MSFD is the cornerstone of ocean governance, which requires countries to develop Programmes of Measures, including spatial and other measures (e.g. financial incentives, research, technological improvements etc). MSP should therefore be closely coordinated with the wider set of MSFD measures, but that link is often lacking.

### The current directives have partly overlapping objectives, but also some contradictory ones:

- The MSFD aims to achieve Good Environmental Status of EU waters (by 2020) and to ensure sustainable use of the seas. It makes the ecosystem-based approach a legally-binding and operational principle for managing the EU's entire marine environment. The MSFD aims to bring coherence between, and ensure the integration of environmental concerns into, the different policies, agreements and legislative measures which have an impact on the marine environment.
- The MSPD aims to support sustainable development and growth in the maritime sector, applying an ecosystem-based approach, to promote the coexistence of relevant activities and uses, and to contribute to the preservation, protection and improvement of the environment, including resilience to climate change impacts.

These two pieces of legislation form the key elements of EU ocean governance, yet, in practice, they have evolved separately – with different objectives, implementation of timelines and approaches – limiting their respective impact and increasing administrative burden on national public authorities. Both Directives are set to be revised, and this should take place in a consistent and coordinated approach.

The MSPD currently presents environmental, social and economic objectives on an equal footing, with sustainable development and growth as sometimes contradictory objectives. Its revision should remove the ‘growth’ paradigm and explicitly reflect a hierarchy of objectives, with ecological limits as the primary priority, followed by social wellbeing, and economic activities operating within and in support of these boundaries. This is in line with scientific advice (eg from the [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services - Nexus report](#)) that makes clear that the environment underpins everything else, and the affirmation by the [International Court of Justice](#) that “the protection of the environment is a precondition for the enjoyment of human rights”.

The MSFD already sets the overarching objective of achieving Good Environmental Status, and this applies to other sectoral policies under EU law – though it has not happened in practice. The revision of the MSFD should reaffirm and strengthen its role in defining ecological boundaries, setting binding targets and measures, and in providing the overarching framework for the application of the ecosystem-based approach across EU marine and maritime policies, including MSP and sectoral policies such as the Common Fisheries Policies, shipping and renewable energy policies.

A well-coordinated revision of both directives therefore offers a strategic opportunity to align their implementation, strengthen the ambition to protect and restore marine ecosystems, and fully operationalise the **ecosystem-based approach** across all maritime governance. The revised MSFD should continue to serve as the **environmental backbone**, with the MSPD explicitly positioned as one of the enablers to achieve GES, ensuring that spatial planning delivers the conditions required to achieve and maintain GES, in line with specific and quantitative EU targets. The two Directives must work hand-in-hand, together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directives, to ensure that the spatial planning and licensing of maritime activities and the cumulative impacts of blue economy activities do not hamper the achievement of GES.

This alignment requires:

- **Recognising ocean health as the main shared goal for both legislations**, as central precondition to support thriving coastal communities.
- **Ensuring synchronised implementation cycles** between the MSFD and MSPD, and, where possible, other connected environmental legislation (e.g., Water Framework Directive, Habitats Directive, Nature Restoration Law,...) ensuring coordinated assessment, planning, and reporting across Member States.
- **Establishing integrated governance structures** linking national marine strategies and maritime spatial plans, so that Programmes of Measures and MSPs are mutually reinforcing and stakeholder and public participation processes can be coordinated and made more effective and efficient.
- **A shift toward a sea-basin approach** to ensure coherence between national policies, and that considers ecosystem connectivity and assesses cumulative impacts, which extend beyond sectoral and geographic boundaries. The Regional Seas Conventions (HELCOM, OSPAR, Barcelona and Black Sea Conventions) have longstanding experience in supporting the implementation of the MSFD and could also take on the role to coordinate maritime spatial plans (as HELCOM already does).



- **Streamlining the integration of climate change adaptation and mitigation measures** and targets in both Directives to ensure that the ocean continues to support the resilience of coastal communities and remains our strongest ally in the fight against climate change. Climate considerations, as outlined in EU and international climate policies, should be integrated systematically, both in Programmes of Measures to reach GES and in marine spatial plans, to ensure that ocean warming, acidification and related ecological changes are factors in the assessments, targets and measures.
- **Strengthen Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs)** and -when needed - Appropriate Assessments of maritime spatial plans and MSFD Programmes of Measures to ensure they are capable of achieving GES.
- Ensure that projects subsequent to the MSFD Programmes of Measures and MSP processes are authorised only after **Appropriate Assessments (for Natura 2000 sites), or Strategic Environmental Assessments** have been carried out, and, when planned in or near MPAs and other area-based protection such as particularly sensitive sea areas (PSSAs), are permitted only where these assessments conclude that there will be no significant adverse effect on site integrity.
- Develop the European Ocean Observatory into a **shared knowledge, information, data and monitoring system**, in which MSFD, MSP and other ocean related monitoring results are brought together, harmonised and made easily accessible. Ensure cost-efficiency data collection through sea basin monitoring systems and enhanced digitalisation.

By revising and aligning the two Directives together under the umbrella of the Ocean Act, the EU can move from a fragmented, sectoral system to a **truly integrated ocean governance framework** – one that ensures all uses of the sea contributes to, rather than undermines, environmental and social objectives.

### 3 - Strengthening the foundation: Priorities for the Marine Strategy Framework Directive revision

The **MSFD** remains the cornerstone of Europe's environmental protection at sea. In March 2025 the Commission released an [evaluation of the MSFD implementation](#) that concluded the following:

- GES has not been achieved and progress on the ground has been limited, despite significant advances in scientific understanding on the triple planetary crisis and the underlying unsustainable use of resources.
- The MSFD has proven to be cost-effective, i.e. the costs of implementation are outweighed by the estimated benefits. A further reduction in administrative burden can be achieved by addressing inefficiencies in the system.
- The MSFD has paved the way for broad-scale marine data collection and knowledge-building. However, the data collected so far are not fully harmonised, often lack quality and major knowledge gaps persist, while the significant potential of digitalisation, data-sharing and Earth observations remain largely untapped.
- Regional coherence and cooperation/coordination are key pillars of the MSFD, but, among others, regional differences persist due to the unclear mandate of the Regional Seas Conventions which needs strengthening.
- The MSFD is broadly in line with EU environmental policy, but better coherence is needed with the Water Framework Directive and the Habitats Directive, closer coordination on implementation with the Nature Restoration Regulation, stronger links with the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and sectoral policies (such as fisheries, renewable energy, shipping and other blue economy sectors), and clearer definition and application of the ecosystem-based approach.
- Climate change impacts are not fully integrated, including in the design and implementation of the MSFD programmes of measures.

To improve on the above, the revised MSFD must:

- **Set GES and related descriptors and targets at the EU level.** Allowing Member States to define ambition nationally and to agree on sea basin targets and thresholds has largely failed. Baseline EU targets and thresholds should be set by the Commission in the revised MSFD to stop the race to the bottom.
- Clear guidance needs to be given to member states demonstrating how to implement these targets and thresholds and provisions should be made to address cases where national efforts fail to achieve Good Environmental Status, particularly for transboundary challenges such as underwater noise pollution. This reform would also simplify monitoring and allow the Commission to assess progress more effectively.
- **Strengthen Annex VI on MSFD Programmes of Measures:** this annex currently allows overly generic categories of measures, resulting in uneven ambition and limited environmental impact. Annex VI should be strengthened to require **specific, outcome-oriented measures** linked to achieving GES for each descriptor, including minimum EU-level requirements to ensure consistency and effectiveness across all sea basins, and to ensure highly harmful activities (like deep-sea mining, marine geo-engineering, bottom-trawling, oil and gas drilling) are banned or phased out. It should also **ensure consistency between programmes of measures and maritime spatial planning**.
- Strengthen **enforcement and accountability:** The Commission must be equipped with strong enforcement powers to verify compliance, initiate corrective action, and, where necessary, enforce the achievement of GES targets. The Ocean Pact Dashboard should serve as a transparent reporting mechanism, allowing both policymakers and citizens to track progress in real time. The Commission should carry out a periodic stocktake to assess progress on GES to inform the next round of programmes of measures, similar to the accounting and stocktake process used for carbon emissions under the UNFCCC Paris Agreement.
- **Strengthen requirements for cross-border (i.e. sea basin)** coordination of the MSFD implementation, strengthen the mandate of Regional Sea Conventions with consistent procedures and roles.
- Finally, the revised MSFD must better address **land-sea interactions**. Marine pollution and degradation also originates from land – through soil and riverine pollution, coastal construction, or contaminants and nutrient runoff. Stronger integration with the Water Framework Directive, the Water Resilience Strategy, the Nitrate Directive and coastal management policies is essential to achieve true ecosystem coherence from catchment to coast.

## 4 - Sharpening the tool: the revision of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive

The **MSPD** must be redefined as a forward-looking planning tool for ocean **restoration, resilience and responsible use of marine space**. Originally conceived as a coordination instrument to promote “blue growth”, the Directive now needs to reflect the European Union’s environmental and climate priorities and effectively operationalise the ecosystem-based approach. Maritime Spatial Planning must move away from a sector-by-sector management towards a balanced, transparent, and integrated framework.

The revised MSPD should explicitly state that the overarching objective of maritime spatial planning is to support the achievement of EU biodiversity targets and maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) and to contribute to the restoration and protection of marine ecosystems. Spatial planning must prioritise ecological integrity and resilience over sectoral expansion. A systematic and spatially explicit analysis of ecosystem functionality, connectivity, and sensitivity must lie at the heart of MSP and substantially inform all decisions pertaining to the planning and regulation of human activities at sea. The conservation and restoration of marine ecosystems should not be treated as any other sectoral interest, but as determining the boundaries within which those sectoral activities must take place, given their ultimate dependence on ecosystem health.

To that end, the MSPD should:

- **Establish a tighter link with the MSFD by strengthening and harmonising the implementation of the ecosystem-based approach as outlined by the MSFD.** While the MSPD should apply an ecosystem-based approach in line with the MSFD, implementation across Member States varies widely and planning decisions are not in line with the achievement of GES. The revision of the MSPD must be used as an opportunity to align MSPs with MSFD targets and ecological thresholds to reach GES as well as with other relevant policies and legislations, including the Nature Restoration Law and the EU Biodiversity Strategy.
- **Prioritise nature restoration** by allocating sufficient and appropriate space, allowing the Biodiversity Strategy and Nature Restoration Law targets to be met, and by integrating all MPAs and areas to be fully restored according to the spatial plans.
- **Implement the sea-basin approach in line with the EBA, coordinated by the Regional Seas Conventions (RSC),** to ensure coherence across national boundaries, the joint management of shared ecosystems, efficient use of space and resources, and the sharing of infrastructure, as well as the assessment of cumulative impacts, which extend beyond borders. Ensure RSCs’ capacities are increased accordingly and their mandates strengthened in the MSFD and MSPD.
- **Strengthen public participation and stakeholder engagement** in the design and implementation of spatial plans. Stakeholders and the public must be consulted and involved from the earliest stages of MSP.
- **Regulate multi-use to ensure that it is only considered when it relieves pressure from marine ecosystems, respects ecosystem carrying capacity and supports the livelihood of local communities.** To this end, multi-use must always be embedded in MSP as part of a holistic approach to the planning of marine space, where synergies between activities are explored to reduce the overall cumulative impacts of human activities and support the transition to a low-impact blue economy.

- **Strengthen the land-sea interaction requirement of the MSPD by embedding Integrated Coastal Zone Management** and other provisions to ensure land-based activities don't have a detrimental impact on marine ecosystems and align with the Water and Coastal Resilience frameworks.
- Implement the MSPD to support the achievement of the EU's environmental and biodiversity objectives and drive the transition to a resilient, regenerative and low-impact blue economy. For instance, in order to help preserve critical habitats to boost marine biodiversity, fish reproduction, and the long-term sustainability of fisheries, the MSPD should grant preferential **access within the 12 nautical mile zone for small-scale, low-impact activities and conservation projects.**

Through these reforms, the MSPD must act as a **spatial tool to achieve the EU's environmental and social objectives**, ensuring that maritime space is managed responsibly, equitably and within ecological limits.

## Conclusion: Delivering coherence, accountability and enforcement for a healthy ocean future

Europe's ocean governance has long suffered from inconsistency and weak enforcement. The **Ocean Act** offers an opportunity to finally close this governance gap by establishing an integrated, robust and enforceable system that links policies, funding and accountability across the EU.

Implementation should be guided by **coherence and transparency**. The Ocean Act must align existing marine legislation, set out shared standards and timelines for review and reporting, and empower the Commission to act where Member States fall short. Enforcement should no longer be reactive but preventive, based on early-warning mechanisms and publicly available progress data.

The next **Multiannual Financial Framework, and notably the National and Regional Partnership Plans** must reflect this new logic: EU funds should actively support ocean recovery, not degradation. Funding streams across sectors – from fisheries to infrastructure – should comply with environmental objectives. Harmful subsidies must be phased out and redirected towards targeted investment in low-impact, regenerative, and nature-based activities.

The Ocean Act can provide both the framework and the mechanism to achieve a healthy ocean that sustains a resilient blue economy. By providing an overarching framework for the parallel revisions of the MSFD and MSPD under the umbrella of a single Regulation, Europe can finally move beyond fragmented maritime management and build an integrated governance system that reflects the interconnected reality of the ocean.

A coherent, enforceable Ocean Act will ensure that Europe's seas – our greatest shared resource – are restored, protected, resilient, and **managed for the benefit of people and planet alike**.

