

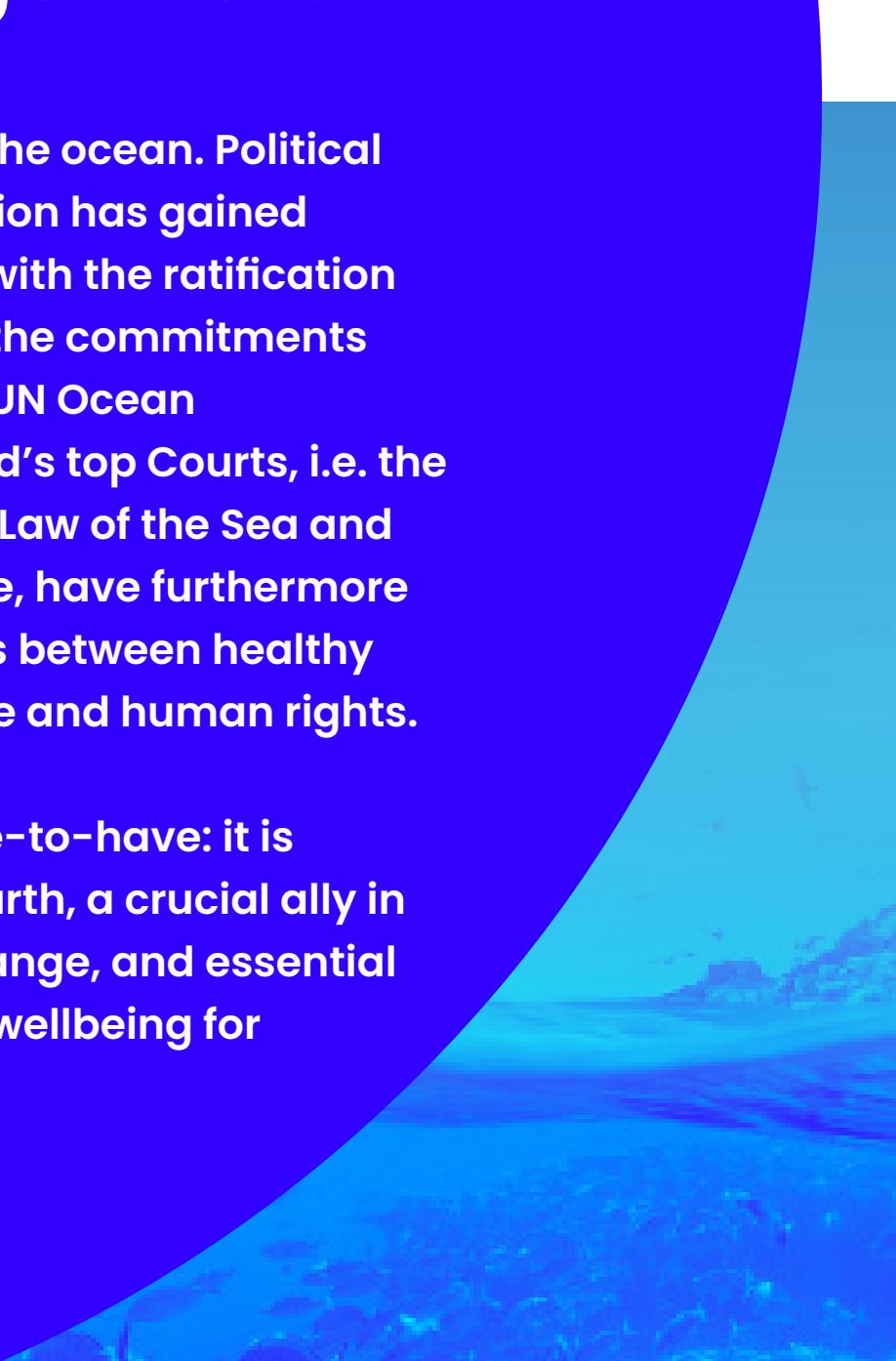
The Ocean Act

Europe's

Ocean Regulation

This is a historic decade for the ocean. Political support for ocean regeneration has gained momentum internationally with the ratification of the High Seas Treaty and the commitments countries made at the 2025 UN Ocean Conference in Nice. The world's top Courts, i.e. the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea and International Court of Justice, have furthermore highlighted the intrinsic links between healthy marine environment, climate and human rights.

A healthy ocean is not a nice-to-have: it is fundamental for all life on earth, a crucial ally in the fight against climate change, and essential to ensure public health and wellbeing for generations to come.



We have an international duty to protect and preserve the marine environment. This does not require new targets to be put in place – it is a simple question of implementing what has already been agreed by countries at the EU and international levels. The EU already has plenty of policy instruments in place to achieve this. More than a decade ago, the EU had the ambition to restore its seas to ‘good environmental status’ by 2020 and put in place various tools to achieve this. These failed to deliver because they were poorly aligned and weakly implemented.

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.

The Ocean Act has the immense potential to deliver on this and to build a unifying framework that brings much needed coherence, accountability and ambition to EU ocean governance, with ocean health at its heart. It must turn ocean policy into enforceable law, instead of voluntary planning, and ensure full alignment with the legally binding objective of Good Environmental Status and international environmental and climate commitments as a sine-qua-non baseline for all marine activities.

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The building blocks of an Ocean Act that works for both planet and people:

- The Ocean Act must encompass all existing international and EU ocean targets and objectives that are not yet legally binding in EU law: notably establishing Marine Protected Areas covering at least 30% of EU seas with effective management measures by 2030 and strictly protecting at least 10% of EU seas and the phasing out of harmful activities and subsidies.
- To be credible, the Ocean Act must take the shape of a Regulation (following the example of the EU Climate Law and Nature Restoration Regulation), which is the simplest way to set a framework for 27 EU countries and make it directly applicable.
- Ensure policy coherence: EU ocean governance and policies are still split across silos (fisheries, energy, shipping, raw materials, environment). The Act must function as a unifying legal framework by ensuring ocean regeneration targets are mainstreamed in sectoral policies through a mechanism that requires the systematic evaluation of the impacts of sectoral policies on ocean health
- The Act must ensure science-based policy making, i.e. ensure that its policies respect scientific ecological limits and social wellbeing, with economic activity operating within those boundaries, not alongside them.
- Good Environmental Status must be the Act's overarching goal, as it is the precondition for the wellbeing and health of people and communities and for thriving economies. 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.
- The EU needs to deliver a well-coordinated revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD): The MSFD programmes of measures, combined with maritime spatial plans, are key to delivering good environmental status and ensuring targets are met.



The MSFD sets the key framework for the ecosystem-based approach to the management of our seas. The Ocean Act should ensure strong and consistent application of this Ecosystem Based Approach framework across maritime spatial plans and across the implementation of sectoral policies.

The ecosystem-based approach requires a sea basin approach and cross-border coordination of the implementation of the MSFD and MSPD. This should preferably be overseen by the Regional Seas Conventions (HELCOM is already coordinating MSFD and MSPD in the Baltic Sea). For the Regional Seas Conventions to be up to this task, their mandate and capacity need to be strengthened.

Phase out destructive marine activities: this includes bottom-trawling in Marine Protected Areas (as prescribed in the 2023 EU Marine Action Plan), and offshore oil and gas drilling.

In line with the precautionary principle: ban high-risk and harmful new activities – such as deep-sea mining and marine geo-engineering – in European seas.

Guide the just transition towards a regenerative blue economy that respects ecological limits, promotes sufficiency principles over pure economic growth, supports sustainable livelihoods, fosters social justice, health and well-being, and supports workers and communities affected by the transition.

The Ocean Act can only be effective if it is backed by substantial funding under the next EU's Multiannual Financial Framework, which should ensure funding of any activity is conditional to environmental and social performance and phase out harmful subsidies.



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