SEAS AT RISK

ANNEX III - Deep dive #2

The EU Ocean Act

Position paper - 9th February 2026

Shipping and Ports at the Heart of the EU Ocean Act

This paper builds on Seas At Risk's broader position on the EU Ocean Act, which calls for a binding, integrated Regulation to restore ocean health, address cumulative pressures across sectors, and ensure that all maritime activities operate within ecological limits. Shipping is a central test case for whether the Ocean Act can deliver policy coherence, effective implementation and measurable environmental outcomes.

Why Maritime Transport Must Be Central to Europe's Law for the Sea?

With the shipping industry contributing to 3% of global greenhouse gases, on a par with emissions from Germany or Japan, the path to decarbonisation is essential. Shipping noise from the commercial maritime trade constitutes the major source of continuous underwater noise in the ocean, which negatively impacts marine life and habitats, while ocean pollution from shipping is increasing as more ships install scrubbers, management of wastes remains inadequate, and grey water remains unregulated.

Back in 2023, the EU showed the world their wish to become global leaders by pledging an 80% carbon-reduction. This came with the announcement of the FuelEU Maritime regulation. But with the release of the Ocean Pact that ambition seems to have faltered. In some parts, the Ocean Pact seems to have missed the mark entirely, overlooking proven and apparent solutions that could help achieve the 2050 goal.

Take wind propulsion. According to Seas At Risk's most recent study, **Wind First!** installing sails on already existing vessels can cut fuel use by up to 30% with weather routing, and a whopping 90% on newly built ships. Today, there are already more vessels operating with wind propulsion than with e-fuels, and installations are doubling year on year. Yet there is no mention of wind propulsion in the Ocean Pact.

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If decarbonisation goals are to be met, the Ocean Act should provide the overarching framework to ensure that shipping-related strategies, including the Maritime Industrial Strategy, actively support low-impact solutions such as wind propulsion. This includes directing funding towards research and development, wind-assisted retrofitting and new-build vessels, and ensuring ports are prepared for wind technologies through appropriate infrastructure planning, with allocated funding towards research and development, wind-assist retrofitting, and new-build vessels. And ports need to prepare for the arrival of wind technology by upgrading their infrastructure.
But wind alone cannot decarbonise the shipping sector. Cleaner, alternative fuels must be a priority, leaving dirty fossil fuels behind. Although the Ocean Pact supports cleaner fuels, but there are glaring omissions:

- E-fuels, such as e-ammonia are highly flammable, toxic to the environment, must be handled with care, and can potentially disrupt the nitrogen cycle, which is already in a precautious state and emissions have exceeded the amount the planet can handle (planetary boundaries). There is no mention of safety and environmental risks in the Ocean Pact.

- It fails to address the sustainability and lifecycle of e-fuels: this is a critical gap. E-fuels, although promising, are only as green as the energy and carbon sources that produce them. Without clear criteria for assessing the environmental and climate impacts of these fuels, from production to use, there's a risk of promoting solutions that look green on the surface but do not offer true climate solutions.

- Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is often thought of as an alternative to fossil fuel, but it is a fossil fuel and emits methane - a significant greenhouse gas which is 30x more polluting than CO2 on a 100 year basis and 80x on a 20 year basis.

- Truly sustainable fuels cost two to five times more than fossil fuels, due to fossil fuels being exempt of taxes in countries. Without strong tax reforms, it leaves little incentive for the industry to switch to cleaner fuels.

Shipping gas emissions could also be reduced through simple operational measures. A recent study has shown that an average speed reduction of 10% across the global fleet could reduce underwater noise pollution from shipping by up to 40% and shipping greenhouse gas emissions by 13%.

Regarding ship collisions with whales, a 10% decrease in speed would result in a 50% reduction in risk, while a 20% decrease in speed could accomplish a 78% decrease in collision risk.

Collisions between ships and marine macrofauna species contribute significantly to the decline in their populations. In certain areas, such as the Mediterranean with sperm whales and fin whales, they can be the decisive factor in the definitive disappearance of these subpopulations.

In summary, among the various operational measures available, reducing ship speed is the most cost-effective way to reduce the environmental impact of shipping. It is an immediately applicable measure and does not require technological modifications.

Positive effects of applying speed reduction to the global fleet:

Decrease in:	CO2	NOx, SOx and black carbon	underwater noise	risk of collision with whales
Speed reduction of:				
10%	13%	13%	40%	50%
20%	24%	24%	67%	78%

In areas where vessel speed reduction measures have been implemented, it has been found that voluntary measures are rarely enforced or successful. A recent study of eleven ship speed reduction programmes in different parts of the world showed that the compliance rate of voluntary measures was between 9% and 41%, whereas the mandatory measures had a compliance rate exceeding 80%. In other words, to ensure effectiveness, speed reduction measures must be:

- mandatory, and
- must be applied to all ships without exception.

In addition, strict monitoring of mandatory speed limits is essential to ensure compliance.
One of the great advantages of mandatory vessel speed reduction is that it creates a level playing field for all shipping lines. This ensures that all shipping lines are subject to the same restrictions and that compliance does not place them at a competitive disadvantage, this level playing field cannot be achieved by mere recommendations or voluntary measures, as reflected in ACCOBAMS Resolution 8.17.

Another omission is the lack of action to reduce black carbon emissions from ships leaving EU ports and heading to the Arctic. Heavy or residual fuels are the most polluting forms of fuel used in shipping and black carbon, a potent short lived climate pollutant released when ships burn these residual fuels, is particularly damaging to the Arctic sea ice. When it settles on the surface, it darkens the surface, which in turn accelerates melting and climate change. Despite the EU's self-proclaimed leadership on Arctic protection, there is no concrete promise to immediately switch to cleaner polar fuels.
So, while the Ocean Pact supports alternative fuels, it is simply not enough. It must also acknowledge these barriers and how to overcome them if we are to ever achieve a clean and safe future in shipping, one where we live within the planet's limits.

1. Why shipping must be central to the Ocean Act

Maritime transport is one of the largest and fastest-growing pressures on Europe's seas, yet it remains governed through a fragmented patchwork of climate, pollution, safety, and spatial-planning instruments. Shipping contributes significantly to:

- greenhouse gas emissions,
- underwater noise,
- air pollution,
- marine plastic pollution from chronic loss of containers at sea, discharge of garbage, and microplastics through ropes, marine paint degradation and greywater discharges,
- ocean pollution from oils, chemicals and wastewater discharges (scrubbers, sewage, greywater),
- invasive species,
- seabed disturbance from anchoring,
- collision risks for marine wildlife including whales, turtles, sharks,
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Taken together, these pressures lead to cumulative impacts in ports, coastal waters and the open ocean, which are not adequately addressed through today's fragmented governance framework.
Despite this, shipping impacts are still largely treated sector by sector, rather than as a systemic driver of ocean degradation.

The Ocean Act is Europe's opportunity to correct this failure.

Just as the EU Climate Law created a binding framework across energy, industry, and transport, the Ocean Act must create a single, enforceable governance framework ensuring that shipping operates within ecological limits and contributes to ocean recovery rather than undermining it.This also requires integrating shipping with other maritime activities under the Ocean Act, through maritime spatial planning and ecosystem-based management that address cumulative impacts across sectors rather than treating shipping in isolation.

2. The problem: fragmented governance of shipping impacts

Today, shipping is regulated through disconnected instruments and policies, each addressing only part of the problem:

- Climate: EU ETS for shipping, FuelEU Maritime
- Air pollution: Sulphur Directive
- Water pollution: Ship Source Pollution Directive, Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD),
- Biodiversity and noise: Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Habitats and Species Directive
- Space and routes: Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD)
- Ports: emerging Port Strategy, Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation (AFIR),TEN-T, national port policies
- International layer: IMO rules and guidance, BBNJ, Biodiversity Convention

This fragmentation leads to:

- conflict and siloed approaches,
- unmanaged cumulative impacts,
- weak enforcement,
- inconsistent ambition across sea basins,
- delays resulting from reliance on slow or uncertain international decision-making processes,
- and a persistent failure to reach Good Environmental Status.

Shipping illustrates why business-as-usual ocean governance does not work.

3. What the Ocean Act must do for shipping

In line with the Ocean Protection Principle, shipping activities should be required to demonstrate compatibility with ocean health and Good Environmental Status before being authorised or expanded. The Ocean Act must establish shipping as a core regulated ocean activity, not a peripheral sector governed only through climate or safety lenses.

To achieve this, the Ocean Act should:

3.1 Create a binding framework for shipping impacts on the ocean

The Ocean Act should provide the framework for all EU shipping-related obligations into a single, coherent architecture, integrating:

- MSFD environmental objectives,
- MSPD spatial planning requirements,
- EU ETS and FuelEU Maritime,
- Sulphur and Ship Source Pollution Directives,
- forthcoming Port and Maritime Industry Strategies, and
- relevant IMO and other international instruments.

This integration must ensure that shipping regulation serves ocean protection goals.

3.2 Establish binding targets for shipping-related pressures

The Ocean Act should set EU-wide, measurable targets for shipping impacts, including:

- mandatory reduction measures and targets for underwater noise from vessels,
- elimination of operational (oil and chemicals) and wastewater discharges into EU seas (scrubbers, sewage and greywater),
- mandatory reduced vessel speeds to reduce underwater noise, emissions and collision risk,
- elimination of operational oil and chemical discharges and wastewater (including sewage and greywater), as well as scrubber washwater, into EU seas,
- elimination of fossil fuels, including the explicit rejection of LNG expansion as a marine fuel due to fossil lock-in and methane emissions,
- alignment of shipping emissions with the EU's climate neutrality pathway,

Targets must be time-bound (2030, 2040, 2050) and legally enforceable.

3.3 End destructive and polluting shipping practices

The Ocean Act must clearly state that certain practices are incompatible with ocean recovery, including:

- the continued use of open- and closed-loop scrubbers,
- routine discharge of wastewater and other oil, chemical and plastic pollution from ships,
- anchoring practices that damage sensitive seabed habitats,
- the expansion of fossil-based fuels, including LNG,
- shipping operations that undermine Marine Protected Areas or critical habitats for marine mammals through noise, traffic or pollution

A just transition approach must be applied, but delay cannot be justified indefinitely.

4. Shipping, space, and the role of maritime spatial planning

Maritime spatial planning is one of the EU's most powerful but underused tools to manage shipping impacts.

Under the Ocean Act, the MSPD must explicitly require that maritime spatial plans:

- integrate shipping routes, traffic separation schemes, anchoring grounds and port access channels in ways that minimise ecological harm including
- reroute traffic away from sensitive habitats and species hotspots,
- manage vessel speeds in ecologically critical areas,
- reduce cumulative impacts in congested sea basins,
- align spatial decisions with MSFD environmental thresholds.
- plan strategically for shipping activity alongside other maritime activities.

Shipping must no longer be treated as a "fixed constraint" in spatial planning. It is a manageable pressure.

5. Ports as gateways, not sacrifice zones

Ports are the primary interface between shipping, and coastal communities.However, ports are also convergence zones where multiple anthropogenic stressors concentrate, making these environments particularly vulnerable to acidification and creating conditions where even modest pH changes can trigger disproportionate ecological responses Yet port impacts remain weakly regulated from an ecosystem perspective.

The full environmental and marine impacts of port-enabled activities should not remain a blindspot for the EU. Europe has major globally-connected ports (Rotterdam, Hamburg, Antwerp) that enable trade in commodities which accelerate harm to ocean ecosystems. Europe should connect the dots and use the influence of its global ports to advance transparent and fair value chains aligned with planetary boundaries.

The Ocean Act should ensure that port development and operation:

- is fully integrated with marine environmental objectives,
- is subject to cumulative impact assessment and robust governance mechanisms that require all port stakeholders to transparently report on their environmental impacts in line with established Earth systems science,
- contributes to reductions in underwater noise, air pollution and marine contamination,
- supports the uptake of zero-emission vessels without creating new fossil lock-in,
- aligns infrastructure development with MSFD and MSPD objectives.

Port development must no longer be treated as automatically beneficial. It must be compatible with ocean recovery.

6. Enforcement, accountability, and EU leadership

Without enforcement, the Ocean Act will fail.

For shipping, this means:

- EU-level definitions and thresholds for key pressures (noise, pollution),
- mandatory measures where EU-wide action is required,
- Commission powers to assess compliance and require corrective action,
- transparent reporting through an Ocean Act Dashboard,
- conditionality of EU funding on environmental performance.

The EU must also use its market power to raise global standards, but international ambition cannot be an excuse for weak action in EU waters.

7. Our core recommendations:

For Seas At Risk, the Ocean Act must:

- place shipping firmly within ecological limits and planetary boundaries, ensuring that ocean health sets the non-negotiable conditions within which maritime transport must operate,
- end the fragmentation of maritime governance,
- phase out polluting practices rather than managing their symptoms,
- use spatial planning to reduce cumulative impacts,
- ensure ports support, rather than undermine, ocean recovery,
- and deliver enforceable, measurable outcomes by 2030.

A credible Ocean Act is pro-ocean, pro-climate, and pro-long-term resilience of maritime transport itself.