

Our seas - vital statistics



Covering two thirds of our planet, the sea holds 80% of all life on Earth. Every second breath we take comes from the oceans - providing half the oxygen we need to survive, stabilising our climate and circulating nutrients around the planet. The European Union's (EU) coastline stretches over 100,000 km and seas make up more than half of its territory. Twenty of the 25 Member States are coastal states, with more than €500-1,000 billion worth of economic assets located within 500 metres of the coastline (new Member States not included in the statistic), more than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Netherlands.

Many people have an affinity to the sea: at least 16% of the EU population live by the coast; many more depend on the sea for work, spend leisure time at the coast, swim and pursue water sports, eat seafood or find inspiration in the sea. Tourism is now the largest economic sector in many coastal areas, providing an estimated 43% of jobs in coastal France, for example, and generating more revenue than fishing or shipping.

Most people are unaware of what is happening just beyond the beach, however. The list of threats to our seas is long: destructive fishing practices, littering and pollution at sea and from the shore, noise pollution from shipping, oil drilling and underwater acoustic devices, invasive species, the impacts of climate change, gravel extraction, oil exploration and coastal construction to name but a few.

Marine ecosystems are collapsing. In its 2005 State of the Environment report, the European Environment Agency (EEA) warns that an estimated two-thirds of Europe's coastal wetlands have disappeared in the past century and that the same amount of top predators, such as tuna and swordfish, has been lost in the last 50 years. The International Council for Exploration of Seas (ICES) reported in 2003 that 61% of Europe's demersal fish stocks (bottom dwelling) were outside safe biological limits, together with 22% of pelagic stocks (living in the open ocean), 31% benthic stocks (living on the seabed) and 41% of industrial stocks (fished for fish oil or fish meal). Each year, about 10,000 harbour porpoises and thousands of other small cetaceans in European waters are caught in EU fishing nets; more than their populations can withstand long-term.

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The Marine Strategy Directive A sea-change for Europe's seas

In October 2005, after three years of consultation, the European Commission proposed a draft marine protection law for the EU (COM(2005)505). The proposed Marine Strategy Directive is aimed at filling a gap in the EU's environment policy, which remains land-focused. It proposes a framework for the development of strategies to improve the health of Europe's seas by 2021.

The Commission's proposal falls under the co-decision procedure, and will be discussed by the European Parliament during the first half of 2006.

Regrettably, the proposal falls far short of ambitious targets outlined in the Commission's earlier Communication 'Towards a Marine Strategy' (COM(2002)539), and during the extensive consultation process, among others:

- to protect, allow recovery and, where practicable, restore the function and structure of marine biodiversity and ecosystems in order to achieve and maintain good ecological status of these ecosystems;
- to institute a change in fisheries management to reverse the decline in stocks and ensure sustainable fisheries and a healthy ecosystem, both in the EU and globally;
- to phase out pollution in the marine environment so as to ensure that there are no significant impacts or risk to human and on ecosystem health and/or on uses of the sea;
- to eliminate human-induced eutrophication by 2010;
- to reach concentrations near background values for naturally occurring radioactive substances and close to zero for artificial radioactive substances by 2020;
- to contain the use of marine services and goods and other activities in marine areas to levels that are sustainable and that do not compromise uses and activities of future generations nor the capacity of marine ecosystem to respond to changes; and
- to apply the principles of good governance, both within Europe and globally.



6 Ways to Strengthen the Marine Strategy Directive



We call upon European decision makers to embrace Europe's vision of biologically diverse and dynamic oceans and seas that are safe, clean, healthy and productive now and in the future.



The NGO coalition welcomes the publication of the Commission's proposal for a Marine Strategy Directive, as it believes that action based on common targets and deadlines is urgently required to halt and reverse the dramatic decline and deterioration of Europe's marine environment.

However, the Commission's proposal falls far short of establishing the overarching framework needed to apply an ecosystem approach to the management of Europe's seas. Most importantly, it fails to establish targets to improve the status of Europe's seas and defers key decisions on what constitutes a healthy marine environment to a later date. In addition, it makes no attempt to consolidate existing measures into a single legal framework, and fails to address adequately the various impacts (including cumulative) of different sectors on the marine environment. Without common targets the proposed Directive may prove difficult or impossible to enforce, and will be less effective in terms of harmonisation and simplification of EU law. Moreover, if agreed as proposed, the Directive is not sufficient in itself to form the 'environment pillar' of the future Maritime Policy and related Commission Green Book.

The European Union must be much more ambitious if it is to save its marine environment and protect those that rely on it for a livelihood.

1 Set a strong objective

Member States should be obliged to achieve good environmental status (GES) and to improve the health of Europe's seas. Currently, the proposed Directive requires Member States to draw up national strategies 'designed to achieve good environmental status'. This is not strong enough to ensure results.

Solution: introduce the objective that Member States shall achieve GES by [2021] at the latest.

2 Define a healthy marine environment

The proposal contains no clear vision of what constitutes a healthy marine environment. Instead, the Commission proposes that 'generic qualitative descriptors, detailed criteria and standards for the recognition of good environmental status' be established by means of the *Comitology procedure* two years after the Directive is adopted. This delays important decisions, excludes key actors from discussions, and creates ambiguity in determining whether proposed measures are appropriately ambitious and comparable between Member States.

Solution: introduce a set of criteria for what constitutes GES, including reference to the maintenance and recovery of biodiversity, fish stocks and ecosystem functions, the reduction of synthetic substances in the marine environment and the prevention of eutrophication, ocean noise and the introduction of non-native species.

3 Identify the threats

The proposal fails to identify and address specific threats to Europe's seas. An ecosystem-based approach to the management of activities in the marine environment requires that all sectors and their possible impacts are addressed.

Solution: introduce provisions that embed the objectives of the Directive into all relevant EC policies, help consolidate measures and clarify interactions between the Directive and other EC law, to ensure that GES can be achieved in the context of other policies such as the Common Fisheries Policy.

4 Ensure collective responsibility

Action to protect Europe's seas will have to respond to regional threats, sensitivities and socio-economic fabric. However, without an obligation for collective responsibility, Member States may set different national standards, draw up different definitions of GES, and consequently set different priorities for monitoring and assessing the marine environment.

Solution: introduce the provision that 'Member States must produce a single Regional Marine Strategy per Marine Region or sub-region'.

5 Guiding principles of EU environmental policy should apply

Any new marine law should be based on and contain explicit reference to the guiding principles of EU environmental policy, including the precautionary and polluter-pays principles, the ecosystem approach, the principle that preventive action should be taken and damages should as a priority be rectified at the source.

Solution: introduce provisions that set these principles as the context for the Directive.

6 Make more of existing laws

The establishment of areas of the sea that are protected from human activities has been shown to result in long-lasting and often rapid increases in marine productivity, populations and diversity. The Directive should acknowledge and build on this and ensure full implementation of relevant EU legislation and international agreements. Similarly, the proposal misses an opportunity to put into context and build on the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and other laws.

Solution: include provisions for the use of protected areas as a component of marine strategies and ensure consistency with the definition of good status and provisions for River Basin Management plans contained in the WFD.