

Ocean protection: Hooked on heavenly habitat

Although oceans are essential to us in many ways, the state of marine biodiversity remains little known. What we do know, however, is that human activities create a number of pressures such as (over-)exploitation, carbon emissions, and pollution, including marine litter. The European Union (EU) has been active in promoting the sustainable use of the seas. In early 2018, the European Commission presented a strategy to address the issue of plastics pollution, including microplastics in our seas.

Oceans under pressure

Oceans provide essential benefits, not only environmentally, in terms of unique and beautiful natural ecosystems, but also in terms of jobs and economic stability for many Europeans. In the EU, industries whose activities rely on the seas and coasts are estimated to employ close to 7 million people. While some maritime sectors (such as fisheries and aquaculture) are stagnating, others are growing, in particular offshore energy production, shipping, and coastal tourism and recreation.

Yet our knowledge about oceans, especially on the state of marine biodiversity, remains limited. We still have no information on 80 % of marine species and habitats that need to be assessed under EU legislation. We do know, however, that oceans are impacted by past and present human activities. The situation is improving in some respects, but European seas are not yet in good shape. One pressure is over-exploitation of living resources: although fishing pressure on commercial stocks has considerably decreased in the past decade, many stocks are still being over-fished above their maximum sustainable yield.

Other pressures include climate change (affecting sea surface temperature); coastal eutrophication; pollution by known contaminants (such as lead or mercury), emerging pollutants (such as pharmaceutical products or endocrine disruptors) and marine litter (mainly plastics); ocean acidification as a result of carbon emissions; and the introduction of non-indigenous species, mostly through shipping and the Suez Canal.

It is estimated that there are over 150 million tonnes of plastic in the world's seas and that, without significant action, there may be more plastic than fish (by weight) in the sea by 2050. Some marine litter consists of microplastics; these originate from the breaking down of larger plastic pieces or are released directly into the environment. Directly released microplastics come mostly from the laundering of synthetic textiles (35 %) and the abrasion of tyres while driving (28 %), while microplastics in personal care products account for 2 %.

What is the European Union doing about it?

A common European policy on fisheries was first introduced in the 1970s and went through successive updates. In 2008, the EU adopted legislation aiming to achieve good environmental status of European marine waters by 2020, to promote the sustainable use of the seas, and to conserve marine ecosystems. In 2013, the common fisheries policy was given a new direction. In particular, it requires the exploitation of fish stocks to be based on the maximum sustainable yield, by 2020 at the latest. Also, in order to put an end to the practice of discarding unwanted catches at sea, all catches of species subject to catch limits or, in the Mediterranean, to rules on size, now have to be landed. On the issue of plastics, the European Commission presented a strategy in early 2018, which aims to tackle sources of marine litter and microplastics.

There are signs of improvements in a number of cases: in the Baltic Sea, the state of predators such as grey seals and white-tailed sea eagles has been improving over recent decades. The number of over-exploited fish stocks in the North-East Atlantic has been steadily decreasing, and encouraging trends have been observed for estuary fish diversity, as well as for the health of seabird colonies in areas that are now protected from species such as rats.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

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