World Oceans Day 2020

Every year, 8 June marks World Oceans Day, celebrated since 1992 and officially designated by the United Nations in 2008. Its aim is to raise global awareness of the crucial role oceans play in sustaining life on earth and our duty to protect its rich marine biodiversity and to use its resources sustainably. This year's specific theme, 'Innovation for a Sustainable Ocean', highlights the need for innovative solutions to deal with the challenges oceans are facing. World Oceans Day also offers an opportunity to take stock of progress, globally and in the EU.

Benefits from oceans

The importance of oceans in sustaining human life on earth cannot be under-estimated. They provide a rich biodiversity, seafood and ingredients for medicines and are vital to the air we breathe. Marine resources constitute an important source of protein. EU citizens consume on average 24 kg of seafood per year. Phytoplankton produce about half of the world's oxygen. Furthermore, oceans mitigate the negative impacts of human activities. Seagrass and seaweed function as a biological purification system, by storing nitrogen and phosphorous compounds from land areas. By storing and spreading heat and by holding 50 times more carbon dioxide than the atmosphere, oceans also largely absorb the impacts of climate change. Many people also depend on oceans for their income, worldwide some 3 billion people. In the EU, some 4 million people are employed in the blue economy, covering traditional sectors such as fisheries, coastal tourism and maritime transport and emerging sectors such as aquaculture, blue biotechnology and in particular offshore wind and ocean energy, sectors in which Europe is a world leader.

Pressures on oceans

However, oceans are increasingly under pressure from human activity. Excess nutrients from agriculture or wastewater cause eutrophication, a process that can lead to harmful algal blooms and ultimately to oxygen depletion. Other well-known polluting factors are oil spills and marine litter. A major problem is plastic waste, representing some three quarters of all marine litter. Research indicates that 4.8 to 12.7 million tonnes of plastic enters the oceans each year and that single-use plastics even occur at depths over 6 000 m. According to one prediction, without significant action, plastic in the oceans might outweigh fish by 2050. Oceans also literally took the heat from climate change by absorbing more than 90 % of the excess heat produced since 1970. Ocean heatwaves are harming vulnerable ecosystems, especially warm-water coral reefs, leading to a loss of biodiversity and threatening small-scale fisheries (especially in lower latitude zones affecting mostly developing countries). Rising seawater temperatures are leading both to an overall loss in biomass and a poleward shift in fish stocks. Up to a quarter of fisheries' catch potential could be lost by the end of the century due to unabated emissions. By storing carbon emissions (some 20 % to 30 % of these emissions to date), oceans are also becoming more acidified. Ocean acidification, in combination with increasing water temperatures, aggravates the impacts of climate change, affecting not only fisheries but also marine aquaculture. Fish stocks are also suffering from past and current overfishing.

EU action and policies

The EU is an active player in shaping global ocean governance through established policies, new legislative initiatives and international commitments.

The common fisheries policy requires an exploitation of stocks in line with the maximum sustainable yield (MSY), a target which has been largely achieved in the north-east Atlantic and adjacent seas. In the Mediterranean and the Black Sea however, the state of the stocks remain a serious concern, with an average level of exploitation indicating long-term overfishing, at more than twice the MSY level. Scientific advice is the basis for setting fishing opportunities, and if necessary a fishery is closed in order to allow stock recovery (for example currently for eastern Baltic cod, which is suffering from various pressures, including low oxygen and high water temperatures).

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The [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#), adopted in 2008, provides a framework for EU action in the field of marine environmental policy. It aims to achieve 'good environmental status' in EU waters. A recent Commission [assessment](#), complemented by a [staff working document](#), states that Member States have made considerable efforts to develop their national programmes by integrating existing policies and processes while also developing completely new measures – about 25 % of all measures – for the purpose of this directive. However, it also mentioned that not all pressures on the marine environment were covered properly and that achieving 'good environment status' by 2020 therefore remained unlikely.

Marine protected areas ([MPAs](#)) are an important conservation tool, used for both the protection of marine biodiversity and as a traditional fisheries management measure (in particular for protecting juveniles and spawning areas). They also enhance ocean [resilience](#) against climate change for many reasons. For instance, they improve the ability of marine organisms to adapt (as areas of reduced stress) and allow increased carbon take-up (e.g. through the restoration of degraded coastal habitats). Well-integrated networks of MPAs also increase species survival by allowing them to migrate from one area to another. The EU has [achieved](#) its international [commitment](#) to establish MPAs in 10 % of its waters, although with shortcomings such as an uneven geographical distribution and a [lack](#) of proper management.

Increased competition for maritime space between blue economy sectors highlights the need to manage our waters more coherently. These activities often also cross national boundaries. Maritime spatial planning ([MSP](#)) has therefore become a key EU [instrument](#) to manage competition for maritime space sustainably, with a [directive](#) requiring Member States establish such plans by 2021. At global level, the EU is supporting work on accelerating MSP processes worldwide, e.g. via the [MSPglobal](#) initiative, [launched](#) in 2018.

Ocean pollution, in particular plastics, has received greater attention in recent years, both from the public and among policy-makers. A recent EU directive, the [Single-use Plastics Directive](#), seeks to address the top 10 single-use plastics and discarded fishing gear found on European beaches, through bans and requirements relating to consumption reduction, product design, labelling and awareness-raising and additional extended producer-responsibility requirements. The EU also adapted its rules on [port reception facilities for the collection of waste from ships](#) by restructuring relevant fees in a way that does not incite ships to dump waste into the sea, as well as to check what waste they have delivered. Member States have until mid-2021 to implement the new directives in their national legislation.

Other examples of EU action in the field of global ocean governance are the commitments made each year during the Our Ocean conferences. At the latest, [2019](#) conference in Oslo, the EU made [22](#) new commitments (worth almost €540 million).

Important EU programmes supporting innovation, the theme of this year's [World Oceans Day 2020](#), are the [blue growth projects](#) funded by the [EU's research programme](#) and the [blue labs and career](#) projects funded by the [European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.](#) Innovation is also supported by the EU through the sharing of open data and by stimulating ocean literacy. [Copernicus](#), the EU earth observation programme, contains a [marine environment monitoring service](#), and currently offers some [250](#) open data ocean products. Furthermore, the European marine observation and data network ([EMODnet](#)) collects and makes marine data from [more than 150](#) private and public organisations freely available. The EMODnet project also includes the well-known [European atlas of the seas](#) project, where users, particularly schools, researchers and professionals can explore, collate and create their own marine and coastal maps from more than 200 layers. On developing labour skills, an [expert group](#) was set up to advise the Commission on education, training, skills and career development within the blue economy and published three compendiums, including on [ocean literacy](#) (understanding the ocean's influence on humans and vice versa).

In a [2018 resolution](#) on ocean governance, the European Parliament called for a number of actions, including an international moratorium on commercial deep-sea mining until the effects have been studied and for pilot projects to be set up to collect marine litter (e.g. fishing for litter). More recently, in a [2020 resolution](#) on the [European Green Deal](#), Parliament urges the Commission to give the Green Deal a 'blue' dimension, fully recognising the ecosystem services oceans provide by developing an 'oceans and aquaculture action plan'.

During the [virtual ocean literacy summit](#) on World Oceans Day 2020, the Commission [launches](#) '[EU4Ocean](#)', connecting diverse organisations, projects and people that contribute to ocean literacy.