

**EUROPEAN**  
BLUE FORUM

# EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM STAKEHOLDER POSITION PAPER 1

What do we need from European Seas  
by 2030? Are we asking too much?

FEBRUARY 2024





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## WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM?

The European Blue Forum is intended to be a **pan-European Stakeholder group**, able to come together to discuss **shared challenges and priorities** over the medium term with the aim of **finding consensus, synergies and solutions** towards a common vision. However more than this, it should be a **'safe' moderated space** for all users of the sea, to identify innovative solutions to deliver bold and ambitious change, **bringing real benefits to people and communities** throughout Europe.

The European Blue Forum is intended to be fully representative of the European Sustainable Blue Economy. It will give **opportunities to often under-represented stakeholder groups**, as well as **new and emerging sectors**, to express the challenges they face and explore possible solutions and synergies **alongside more established sectors**.





## HOW IT STARTED?

In **May 2021**, the European Commission published a Communication [“on a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU - Transforming the EU’s Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future”](#), in which it supports maritime and coastal activities while acknowledging the related pressures on the marine environment, and the need to decarbonise the blue economy. In this communication the Commission committed to create a Blue Forum to **“coordinate a dialogue between offshore operators, stakeholders and scientists engaged in fisheries, aquaculture, shipping, tourism, renewable energy and other activities”** – all users of the sea – with the aim to **“develop synergies between their activities and reconcile competing uses of the sea.”**

Two years on, **May 2023** marked the beginning of the European Blue Forum which was successfully launched back-to-back with European Maritime Days in Brest, France, and embodied the birth of its work in shaping the future of the European Blue Economy. More than 150 people attended the launch event in Océanopolis and a further 250 joined the meeting online. Two dynamic panel sessions gathered stakeholders from different backgrounds and sometimes, different views to catalyse discussions around two broad questions: What do we need from European Seas by 2030, and are we asking too much? and what does a fossil fuel free blue economy look like, and how can we as a community support the transition?

After an intense launch event, we found ourselves with a wide range of topics which emerged from the discussions between our panellists and the inputs from participants.

To develop these discussions further with our European Blue Forum Members, these key topics were used as entry points for the organisation of two deep-dive workshops. These questions, and the discussions they catalysed formed the core of our first year of work. Since April 2023 and throughout this year, maritime stakeholders have been invited to become members of the European Blue Forum and actively contribute to the discussions by participating to our events (launch, workshops) and providing written inputs. The interest generated by this forum, promoting a bottom-up approach and representativeness, was illustrated by the diversity and number stakeholders who registered: all five EU sea basins and all EU countries are represented, and many stakeholders from non-EU countries (e.g., Canada, Chile, Japan, Morocco) or non-EU territories (e.g., Turks and Caicos, Jersey) have also joined the forum.

## WHAT DO WE NEED FROM EUROPEAN SEAS BY 2030? ARE WE ASKING TOO MUCH?

**The ocean is fundamental to all life on earth and plays an essential role in our daily lives.** It covers 70% of the planet, produces 50% of the oxygen and is critical to the global climate system, absorbing and redistributing CO<sub>2</sub> and heat. It is home to a wide variety of biodiversity and unique ecosystems which support human life and socio-economic activities with food, medicines, renewable energy, transport, tourism, communications .... **The ocean is at the heart of human well-being, beliefs, and cultural values, and its beauty has inspired artists for centuries. And we have still to discover all it has to offer.**

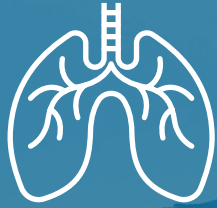
Encompassing all sectors and activities related to ocean, seas, and coasts, **the blue economy is becoming a central concept for all coastal States.** Under this “Blue Wave”, initiatives and developments at sea are being driven forward and encouraged all over Europe. However, in some cases, this continuous development has already led to overexploitation, unsustainable practices, and overcrowded spaces. New tensions have emerged between users of the sea competing for space.

While economic activities have long been concentrated on coastlines, their increasing development further offshore could be a significant game changer, opening up new areas of sea space for potential economic development. However, **this multiplication of activities, sometimes within ecologically sensitive areas such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and their cumulative impacts could be highly damaging to the marine environment if not well understood, managed and monitored.**

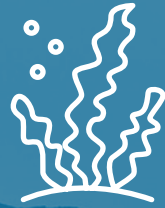


## IS EVERYTHING BLUE SUSTAINABLE? IS THE DEBATE ON THE SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY ACTUALLY ABOUT DEGROWTH?





**THE OCEAN  
PRODUCES ~50% OF  
EARTH'S OXYGEN**



**HOSTS 80% OF ALL  
BIODIVERSITY**



**ONLY 25% OF THE  
SEABED IS MAPPED**



**SUPPORTS 80% OF  
GOODS TRANSPORT**



**200 MILLION EU CITIZENS  
LIVE IN COASTAL REGIONS  
OR ON ISLANDS**



**€523 BILLION IN  
TURNOVER IN  
THE EU (2020)**



**3,34 MILLION PEOPLE  
EMPLOYED IN THE EU  
BLUE ECONOMY (2020)**

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, characterized by the decline in wildlife populations is one of this decade's biggest threats, further worsened by climate change.

The rate of the ocean warming has doubled since 1998, associated with increased acidification and a reduction in oxygen, which are major threats to marine biodiversity. The average global sea level is rising, and accelerating in recent decades. This exacerbates coastal erosion, jeopardises socio-economic sectors and increasingly populated coastal communities. These impacts, predicted for decades by scientists, are now observed with, for instance, new annual records for temperatures frequently exceeded and the acceleration of weather-related extreme events (heat waves, downpours, floods, etc.).

**Climate change is inevitably accelerating and so must our actions, as everything we know about the ocean is about to change!**





2030 has been set as a milestone by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the European Green Deal, to address these multiple challenges. Accordingly, we have strengthened our commitments for biodiversity protection, low-impact food systems and targets in terms of energy transition.

**We now have a set of ambitious goals that require radical change and the uptake of strong measures in order to tackle the crises we are all facing.**

To meet these objectives, EU seas need to accommodate six and a half times more offshore renewable energy by 2030 (up from the 17GW installed in 2022 to 111GW by 2030), and 25 times more by 2050. The European demand for seaweed, for food and feed products, pharmaceuticals, bio-based packaging, and cosmetics, is estimated to increase 30-fold, reaching eight million tons by 2030. Protection of marine space needs to increase from 12.1% in 2021 to 30% by 2030. All these sectoral commitments can only be fulfilled by using more space sustainably, and using our available space smarter, not only at sea but also at the coast. On top of this, we as humans expect our ocean and coastal spaces to

be protected as places of well-being and beauty, with nothing but a blue horizon. Considering these objectives, goals and the challenges related to food and energy security, is making space for our wellbeing and "blue health" a priority?

We need to acknowledge both the limits of marine and coastal ecosystems and the imperative for nature protection. In that regard, the question arises: can human activities at sea continue developing, especially when we have failed in reaching some of our previous objectives, such as achieving Good Environmental Status by 2020 as mandated by the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive. To protect our seas, we need to think differently, and change the way we do things.

## **ARE WE ASKING TOO MUCH OF OUR SEAS?**

### **2030 EU OBJECTIVES**



**RESTORE AT LEAST 20% OF EU LAND AND SEAS**




**30% MARINE PROTECTED AREAS INCLUDING 10% STRICTLY PROTECTED**



**111 GW OF OFFSHORE WIND AND 1GW OF OCEAN ENERGY**





The maritime community is already mobilised in designing social and technical solutions, such as alternative propulsion towards zero emission vessels, the recycling of fishing nets and the production of innovative biodegradable materials derived from algae to replace plastic. Innovative approaches are being developed such as the multi-use of sea space, for example combining offshore wind with nature protection or mussel/seaweed farming, to create synergies between uses.

New initiatives are emerging, designing pathways towards a more sustainable future, requiring new skills and knowledge. At the same time, both emerging and existing sectors need to further adapt and contribute to the environmental, social, and economic changes ahead, with new practices, equipment, and competences. This evolution needs to be supported by suitable (re) training and education, by raising awareness of blue job opportunities, developing ocean literacy, but also accompanied with the necessary financial support.

**However, the solution will not be the same for all sectors and stakeholders.** It needs to be **holistic** (considering the complexity of the marine environment as a whole), **integrated** (between all sectors and activities) and **multidisciplinary** (bringing together all lessons learnt). It is about making sure we support a fair and equitable transition for all.

## ARE WE DOING ENOUGH?



**To achieve successful implementation, these solutions should be deployed alongside continuous dialogue and through a trust-based bottom-up approach.** Stakeholders need to be involved in the decision-making process from the outset, so that different perspectives and challenges can be brought to the table, to find common solutions. Bringing local stakeholders into the discussion ensures the actions we take can deliver the greatest impact, based on local knowledge and the empowerment of communities.

People need to have **an active role in creating the changes they want to see**, and they need guidance and support to do so.

Within the European Blue Forum, we need to work together across all scales and sectors as one maritime community, **to shape the seas we want for tomorrow and to build the legacy we will leave to future generations.** How? By empowering individuals and creating collective ownership of the sea to engage all sea users, not only sectoral representatives but also European citizens.

Achieving cooperative and effective collaboration would require all parties **to reach a shared vision, with guiding principles from the outset, and to be genuinely invested in mutual success.** Nevertheless, is avoiding tensions at sea really achievable?

These tensions certainly need to be acknowledged and understood to identify trade-offs within sectors and between existing alternatives.

## **HOW DO WE MAKE SURE WE HAVE THE RIGHT INFORMATION TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES?**





Sharing of knowledge and **the use of science as a basis for consensus are of vital importance** and a fundamental objective of the European Blue Forum. To take decisions, we need good observations of what is happening in the ocean and how things evolve, both in time and space, to provide common knowledge and feed models to anticipate upcoming changes. Initiatives such as the Digital Twin of the ocean might allow us to understand the “butterfly effect” of our actions. Debates should be based on independent and interdisciplinary science, but cooperation with industry on data and expertise sharing is also key to build a common understanding of our seas.

## IS THIS POSSIBLE?







## POSITION OF THE EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM MEMBERS

The members of the European Blue forum collectively agree on the following key messages:

- › **The need to end siloed approaches** that have long characterised maritime policies, making them primarily sector-based and compartmentalised. We **need to consider** the **intrinsic connectivity of the marine environment** and the **inter-connections** between the marine, coastal and terrestrial areas; as well as between maritime activities and the surrounding environment they depend on.
- › **To fully integrate Land-sea interactions (LSI)** at all scales of intervention, when setting up projects, planning processes and developing protection measures. These LSI are key to understanding the impacts

of land-based activities on the coastal environment, such as pollution, and which particularly affect certain maritime activities (such as fisheries and aquaculture affected by eutrophication). The lack of integrated coastal zone management, and sometimes policy coherence, was recognised and calls were made for more cooperation between land-based and maritime decision-makers and the integration of LSI in Maritime Spatial Planning.

- › **To consider local specificities and issues** when implementing European and national policies. The local level is recognised as being particularly key to the successful implementation of public policies. The integration of local knowledge and communities ensures that measures are adapted to the local context, therefore facilitating social acceptance, efficient implementation, and policy coherence.

- › **To involve stakeholders early in the development of blue economy strategies and in the debates it may generate.** This consultation must be systematic and must give a voice to each of the maritime and coastal actors, enabling them to share and highlight their specific issues. It is all the more important as it should support equity within the decision-making process, to which some stakeholders have easier access through dedicated networks and within decision-making bodies. It is important to bear in mind that some sectors have more fragmented and diffused forms of governance (e.g., tourism), which can be a barrier when making their voices heard, particularly at European level.



## CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS EXPRESSED BY THE EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM MEMBERS:

- › To **implement holistic approaches in the Blue Economy** whether when establishing/ managing sectors (e.g., cumulative impact, life cycle assessment) or implementing policies (e.g., integrated management, land-sea interactions, transboundary issues), in order to better tackle systemic impacts and challenges (such as pollution, sea bottom habitat degradation).
- › To **better assess cumulative impacts of all maritime and coastal activities at sea**. So far there is **too little knowledge about how the different activities and their associated impacts (direct and indirect, long-term and short-term) are collectively affecting the marine environment**. Implementing and improving the assessment of cumulative and in-combination impacts would support better management of activities at sea, ensure their sustainability and help establish efficient protection measures or even develop regenerative activities.

- › To **strengthen data collection and monitoring** of the marine environment and of the impacts of activities. The need for data is also driven by the need to better understand and anticipate the impacts of climate change on ecosystems and the effects these impacts will have on maritime activities. On the other hand, **it was pointed out by some members that we already have a huge amount of data** and scientific research on the state of the marine environment and the impact of activities. Therefore, we also need to **understand what the barriers are to accessing, sharing and using these data to be able to define and implement concrete actions**.
- › To **raise public awareness and encourage citizen engagement, not just by those living on the coast but also inland**, on the issues that affect our coasts and seas. The global ocean is key for coastal populations, but it also supports the whole climate system and is important for the population overall. It is essential to improve public understanding of the importance of our ocean and seas. In this context, two measures can be implemented: (i) **ocean literacy**, accessible to all citizens, not only coastal populations and (ii) **better communicate** scientific research and results, as well as existing solutions and initiatives, **to citizens, decision makers and industry**.





- › To **improve both: (i) sectoral planning**, to provide all maritime activities with a long-term vision for stakeholders to aim at, defining clear objectives and actions on a long-term basis to achieve the numerous goals set for 2030; and **(ii) existing planning processes** at sea, such as Maritime Spatial Planning, by strengthening the Ecosystem Based Approach and improving stakeholder engagement.
- › To **foster multi-level maritime governance to enable bottom-up approaches**. In this context, sea basin(s) appeared to be one of the most appropriate scales to gather local, regional and transnational voices to European institutions and highlight regional specificities .
- › To **strengthen cooperation and dialogue between maritime stakeholders**, both within and between sectors (e.g., multi-use at sea), as well as **between private and public stakeholders** (e.g., community co-owned offshore wind farms). This cooperation is essential and should be supported by sharing best practices across the EU and enabling stakeholders to meet – not only virtually but also face to face.





**After several months of discussion, and beyond the commonly agreed principles listed above, diverging views from the Members appeared during discussions on the following points:**

### **1. Access to space at sea for activities**

Space at sea and on the coast is subject to growing competition between activities and users. On top of that, the increasing impacts and pressures on the environment and ecosystems, as well as the effects of climate change, require the establishment of protection and restoration policies. This is why the EU Biodiversity Strategy is targeting 30% protection of the marine space, including 10% strict protection. Therefore, how does one reconcile both the establishment or development of maritime activities while still protecting the environment? Three different positions emerged during the last months of discussions. Some members of the European Blue Forum advocate for: (i) **stronger protection measures** and the definition of strict Marine Protected Areas that would exclude most maritime activities. Strict protection is also promoted to efficiently restore those ecosystems, which can be achieved by passive or active restoration (e.g., eliminating invasive species) of the ecosystems.

For other members, (ii) it is necessary to **phase out the most impactful activities**, especially in Marine Protected Areas and other conservation areas. They also reminded us that, when introducing new activities at sea, the precautionary principle should prevail in cases where scientific evidence of a threat to either the environment or human health are uncertain.

Finally other members highlighted that (iii) **humans and the environment form social-ecological systems** where humans are fully integrated into nature. In this context, the impacts of activities should be avoided as far as possible, and subsequently reduced, mitigated and compensated in line with existing legislation (Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Maritime Spatial Planning Directive). Management of pressures and impacts can be improved through data and monitoring. This is especially important for those historical activities with a cultural tradition which would need support in order to better adapt.

### **2. What society model do we want?**

In a world where planetary limits are finite, can we continue to aim for growth? Some members of the European Blue Forum want to see a paradigm shift, away from a society based on growth to a 'post-growth' society in which the priority is sustainability, well-being and a reduction in our consumption. This means changing our way of consuming and producing. To consume less, but better-quality products by promoting local distribution, local seafood products and producers, supporting more sustainable and economically viable fishing, aquaculture, etc. This implies a fundamental change in our practices, perhaps even in our cultural values, with the creation of new metrics (is Gross Domestic Product still a relevant indicator?), giving more space to equity and well-being.

Some members acknowledged the fact that the global population is growing, and some countries are still aspiring to a greater level of development. Therefore, emphasis shouldn't be put on degrowth as such but on resource efficiency and decoupling technologies, and innovations to support us in reaching our 2030 targets.



## WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM?

The finalisation of this stakeholder position paper is only the beginning...as stated by the European Commission's Director-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Ms Charlina Vitcheva, **'Today we are creating a common vision. It will take time - it's not a sprint. It's a marathon!'**

**This position paper will now be presented to the European Commission, and on 7 March 2024 it will be presented and discussed at the European Parliament as part of the intergroup on Seas, Rivers, Islands and Coastal Areas (SEARICA).**

Since its inception, the European Blue Forum aims to ensure the voices of all our blue economy stakeholders are heard, and that they can have an influence on future EU policy on the Blue Economy. As communicated by DG MARE, **'the position papers will be used to shape the forthcoming public blue policies, and at the same time, we will strengthen coordination by engaging with all the Commission's Directorates-General, ensuring that the diverse outputs and recommendations generated within the forum resonate with other EU policies.'**

After this first year of cooperation with our Blue Community, this paper gathers the main challenges and needs of the European Blue Forum members and provides the main axes of action for the years to come. It also marks the beginning of a **new cycle of work which will be celebrated by our European Blue Forum Annual Meeting – 'From position to practice' which will be taking place during European Maritime Day in Svendborg** – please keep an eye on the [website](#) and Twitter account (EU\_MSP\_Platform) for more details.







## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the members of the European Blue Forum who participated in our events and contributed to the preparation of this Stakeholder Position Paper.

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For more information about the European Blue Forum, including how to join, events, recordings and publications please [visit the website here](#).



### Publication Editors

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