

# Informal meeting of EU Environment Ministers

14 May 2014, Athens

“The marine environment under threat? How to create the basis for sustainable blue growth!”

## Introduction

Europe’s seas cover approximately 11,220,000 km<sup>2</sup> – more than the land territory of Europe. Nearly half the EU population lives within 50km of the sea, and even more use it for tourism. The sea helps provide food security (through fisheries and aquaculture), is a key transportation route (including short sea shipping), provides important cultural services and has significant potential for new activities (offshore energy, blue biotechnology, supply of raw materials etc.).

Through the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU has set the objective to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2020. The ‘Blue Growth’ initiative aims to develop the maritime dimension of the Europe 2020 strategy. Blue Growth can thus be defined as “*smart, sustainable and inclusive economic and employment growth from the oceans, seas and coasts*”. The Blue Growth Agenda includes the valorising of the diversity of marine ecosystems; the sustainable harvesting the deep-sea bio-georesources; the new offshore challenges; the ocean observation technologies; and the socio-economic dimension. Europe’s ‘blue’ economy represents 5.4 million jobs and a gross added value of about €500 billion a year. It has the potential to provide challenging, rewarding jobs that meet the expectations of our young generation.

However, human activity generates significant pressure on the marine environment. Many European industries have growing cumulative impacts on the sea, including transport, fishing, offshore energy and tourism. Overfishing, pollution, eutrophication, littering, growing acidification do not allow our seas to deliver to their full potential. A sea can only prosper economically if ‘blue’ activities are carried out within sustainable boundaries. A healthy marine environment in ‘good status’ is thus a prerequisite for the economic and social activities upon which blue growth ensures food, energy and mineral resources, “blue” jobs, human development and wellbeing.

Achieving a high level of marine protection requires maritime activities to adopt an integrated ecosystem-based approach with a long-term vision, responding to the world’s resource, climate and environmental challenges, and supported by policies at the local, national, EU and international level. We must act, without delay, to reconcile our oceans and seas and the uses to which we put them. Failing to do so jeopardises the sustainability of our marine ecosystems and the services they provide us on a daily basis.

## Growing pressures

All of the stressors we place on our oceans and seas – from over-fishing to sea-floor damage and pollution – have contributed to their “bad environmental status” and, in some case, to unhealthy coastal waters. We have altered – and continue to alter – the chemistry of our marine waters, through acidification from greenhouse gases with significant impacts on marine life and the functioning of marine ecosystems. In the last 25 years, sea surface temperatures have increased approximately 10 times faster than in other similar periods during the previous century or beyond. Marine waters have already absorbed more than 80% of the heat fluctuations added to our climate system since the early 1960’s<sup>1</sup>, and around 30% of the carbon dioxide emitted by human activities. Such warming and greater acidity is threatening marine ecosystems, in Europe and beyond, as species are pushed to extinction when their natural habitats are destroyed.

Different seas face different problems. Eutrophication is suffocating the oxygen-deprived “dead zones” in the Baltic and Black Seas, while trawling has decimated large swathes of the seabed in the North Sea. The beaches of the Mediterranean are blighted by marine litter, much of it generated by tourists.

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC direct observations, 2007

However, more important than any single issue is the cumulative effect of different pressures, many of which are inter-dependent. For example, higher temperatures also increase oxygen depletion, restricting the flow to marine life, while increasing CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere acidify the oceans. These changes disrupt the biogeochemical cycles, the function of pelagic and benthic ecosystems and the production of carbonate tissue and shells of marine organisms.

Many of these pressures have their roots in land-based activities and result from increased efforts to harvest marine resources. We are thus faced with serious challenges in order to manage these activities sustainably, in particular those sectors targeted by the Blue Growth agenda.<sup>2</sup> Europe's growing aquaculture sector, for example, raises significant concerns due to its potential to increase contaminant levels in water from feed or medicines, the introduction of invasive alien species and the impact on benthic biodiversity. Nevertheless, if managed sustainably, aquaculture can play an important role in reducing pressure on wild fish stocks while meeting the growing EU demand for seafood.

Similarly, the sustainable growth of coastal and maritime tourism, Europe's largest maritime activity in terms of gross value added and employment, is essential for the prosperity and well-being of coastal regions and their economy. However, geographical and temporal concentration of activities can create significant environmental pressures, in terms of water quality, increased demand for land and waste generation (and the knock-on impacts of increased marine litter). These may be exacerbated as the impacts of climate change emerge. Driving sustainable growth in tourism must be done in the context of an integrated approach to the sustainable use and development of marine and coastal resources.

### **Political/policy context**

The Council held a lunchtime discussion focussed on the marine environment in June 2013, under the Irish presidency. Member States broadly agreed on the need for greater regional cooperation, including with 3<sup>rd</sup> countries, through the Regional Sea Conventions, and for more efforts to integrate the effects of other (land-based) policies on the marine environment.

A year later, we know lot more: the recent "Marine Messages" report from the EEA<sup>3</sup> highlights the increase in marine pressures, while the Commission's report on the first round of implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) demonstrates that we are not on track to reach Good Environmental Status by 2020 (see below). The HOPE marine conference (**H**ealthy **O**ceans – **P**roductive **E**cosystems), held in March of this year offered ministers a first opportunity to digest these findings, with many of us taking the floor to reiterate the need for urgent action. The "Declaration of HOPE"<sup>4</sup>, which emerged from the discussions, urges political leaders to take the measures necessary to ensure that Europe's marine environment is in good status by 2020.

Under the Greek Presidency, a new Directive on Maritime Spatial Planning was also adopted which will help Member States manage the cumulative environmental impacts of maritime activities by taking into account land-sea interactions and facilitating an integrated approach to the sustainable use of marine resources. It is a valuable tool for the appropriate development and implementation of integrated sea basin and macro-regional strategies to drive sustainable growth in coastal regions, enhance connectivity of islands and coastal regions with the hinterland and promote social and territorial cohesion.

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<sup>2</sup> The Commission Communication on "Blue Growth opportunities for marine and maritime sustainable growth" (COM/2012/494) identifies aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, ocean energy and seabed mining as specific sectors of growth potential.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eea.europa.eu/media/newsreleases/marine-messages-briefing>

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/hope-conference/pdf/HOPE%20Conference%20Declaration.pdf>

Meanwhile, work is continuing on the implementation of the Marine Knowledge 2020 Roadmap in order to ensure that marine data is easily accessible, interoperable and free of restrictions on its use, and to develop a multi-resolution map of the entire seabed and overlying water column of European waters by 2020, as a flagship initiative. Bringing together data from diverse sources will help industry, public authorities and researchers to find the data they need and to use them more effectively to develop new products and services, to improve our understanding of how the seas behave, and ultimately to be able to ensure a more efficient and cost-effective protection of the marine environment.

At the international level, work is underway to take forward the conclusions of the Rio+20 conference<sup>5</sup>, in order to set the framework for the post-2015 development agenda, including the establishment of Sustainable Development Goals, and associated targets. At the same time, the increasing environmental impact from maritime activities taking place in areas beyond national jurisdiction means there is a need for stronger international ocean governance in the framework of the United Nations. An UNCLOS implementing agreement for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, in particular addressing marine protected areas, environmental impact assessments and the access to and benefits sharing of genetic resources, would be an important next step.

### **The Marine Strategy Framework Directive**

With the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) the EU has at its disposal one of the most modern tools for ocean protection, driven by the 2020 target to achieve “Good Environmental Status” (GES), and paving the way for integrated assessments, joined up action and greater cooperation at sea-basin level. The need to integrate the objectives of environmental protection into socio-economic activities and into other European policies is stressed in the MSFD, together with the necessity to manage the marine environment and coastal areas in an integrated manner. By considering overall cumulative impacts, rather than regulating specific uses in isolation, the MSFD contributes to the integrated adaptive management of marine activities.

However, any tool is only as good as its use: the first phase of implementation of the MSFD consisted of a detailed reporting exercise from Member States on the state of their marine waters, and the targets they set to achieve GES, specifically defined for their waters. The Commission’s subsequent assessment<sup>6</sup> of this exercise found that while we now have a clearer understanding than ever before of the state of our seas and oceans, and the pressures they face, a more intensive and coordinated effort is required if we are to achieve GES. Cooperation through the Regional Sea Conventions (RSCs) is vital to ensure the coherent and effective protection of the marine environment on which Blue Growth depends. The Commission also believes that Member States could ensure better marine protection, at lower cost, by integrating implementation of the MSFD with other EU instruments (e.g. the Common Fisheries Policy, the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats Directive etc.). The report thus argues that efficiency, effectiveness and cost considerations should drive a number of immediate steps, summarised as follows:

- review and make more coherent the definitions of GES and targets of the MSFD, in preparation for forthcoming monitoring and measures programmes;
- establish joint monitoring programmes at sea-basin or subsea-basin level, and use them to address shortcomings and gaps;
- systematically use standards stemming from EU legislation as minimum requirements in the context of MSFD implementation.

We have the opportunity to respond to these findings, already this year, when submitting the first monitoring programmes under the MSFD. Even more importantly, in 2015 we will put forward our proposed “programmes of

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The Future We Want’:

<http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> COM/2014/097: [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/eu-coast-and-marine-policy/implementation/reports\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/eu-coast-and-marine-policy/implementation/reports_en.htm)

measures” outlining concretely the actions which must be taken in order to achieve GES by 2020. It is vital that these programmes have the required ambition, regional coherence and internal consistency if we are to reach this goal. Above all, Marine Strategies must be developed in *cooperation* with neighbouring countries, including by using existing regional cooperation structures such as the Regional Sea Conventions.

For its part, the Commission can support better implementation, by facilitating a more coherent legal and scientific understanding of Good Environmental Status, including by strengthening the current Decision on Good Environmental Status (2010/477/EU), reviewing Annex III of the MSFD which sets out indicative lists of characteristics, pressures and impacts related to the marine environment, as well as through the development of an effective data and information sharing system between the EU (through the EEA) and the RSCs (“WISE-Marine”).

## **Conclusion**

Europe’s marine environment provides a wealth of resources which, if managed sustainably, can provide prosperity and well-being for generations to come. The Blue Growth agenda provides a clear framework for the further development of economic activities in our oceans and sea, and in their surrounding coastal areas. However, this growth can only be developed to its full potential if it operates within the sustainable boundaries of the marine environment. There is strong evidence to suggest these boundaries are under severe pressure, and will be breached unless corrective action is taken. Meeting the 2020 goal of achieving Good Environmental Status, and thereby safeguarding the basis for sustainable blue growth requires commitment, cooperation and above all action. Our discussions should focus on what this action should be and how to carry it forward.

## **Questions for discussion**

1. What measures should Member States take, and at what geographical level(s), in order to maximise the efficiency, effectiveness and coherence of protection of our seas and oceans through marine environmental legislation, thereby providing a basis for blue growth? How can cooperation and coordination at regional level be enhanced?
2. How best should the EU improve cooperation with 3<sup>rd</sup> countries and advocate for stronger international ocean governance in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, including the setting of Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets?