



# Environment fact sheet:

# protecting and conserving the marine environment



- We depend on the seas for our survival. They are also essential for our economic prosperity, social well-being and quality of life. Yet the marine environment is deteriorating fast. We need to find better ways of managing it.
- The European Commission has adopted a proposal for a strategy that will significantly improve protection of the marine environment in Europe. It will expand the knowledge base that informs policy-making. It will use integrated and cost-effective measures to address pressures. And it will ensure, through monitoring and assessment, that goals are achieved and that actions bring results.
- The marine strategy will also form the environmental dimension of the wider EU maritime policy now in preparation. This policy is designed to harness all the economic potential of our oceans and seas.

## 2016 and 2021

The ultimate objective of the EU's marine strategy is to achieve good environmental status of the marine environment by 2021. The first programmes of measures will be ready by 2016 at the latest, and each measure will become operational within two years.

This is consistent with the water framework directive of 2000, which requires that surface freshwater and groundwater bodies (including lakes, streams and rivers, estuaries and coastal waters) should achieve good ecological status by 2015 and that the first review of the river basin management plan should take place in 2021.

The combined implementation of the water framework directive and of the marine strategy will bridge the gap between environmental protection of inland waters and the open seas.



## Fact 1: The marine environment is vital

The marine environment includes the waters of seas and estuaries, the seabed and its subsoils, and all marine wildlife and its sea and coastal habitats.

It is a precious asset; a heritage that must be protected, conserved and properly valued. The ultimate aim is to keep our oceans and seas biologically diverse and dynamic, and also safe, clean, healthy and productive.

The marine environment is a vital resource for life on Earth. Marine ecosystems perform a number of key environmental functions — they regulate the climate, prevent erosion, accumulate and distribute solar energy, absorb carbon dioxide, and maintain biological control.

The seas and oceans are our greatest source of biodiversity. They cover 71 % of the Earth's surface and they contain 90 % of the biosphere.

The marine environment is also a great contributor to economic prosperity, social well-being and quality of life. It constitutes a fund of resources which can be used to achieve greater economic potential, so its protection is crucial at a time when the European Union is seeking to revitalise its economy. The EU's aim — according to the Lisbon agenda — is to become the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010.

## Fact 2: Europe's marine environment is deteriorating fast

The marine environment is faced with a number of increasingly severe threats<sup>(1)</sup> These include loss or degradation of biodiversity and changes in its structures, loss of habitats, contamination from dangerous substances, and the impacts of climate change.

In some parts of Europe, the very structures and functions of our seas are being jeopardised. The Northeast Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are three of the world's seven 'problem' regions where fish stocks are in greatest need of recovery. The ecology of the Baltic region is reckoned to have 'crashed' and to be locked into permanent eutrophication (<http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/497/a/39302>). Marine habitats are being destroyed, degraded and disturbed.

These threats are caused by pressures from various sea-based activities like oil and gas exploration, dredging and extraction of sand and gravel, shipping, commercial fisheries and tourism. Meanwhile, land-based activities (agriculture and industry in general) account for 80 % of marine pollution. These pressures are exacerbated by the increasing impact of climate change. For example, the commercial fish species that require colder waters are now being driven northwards as sea temperatures rise.

Urgent efforts are needed to protect Europe's seas and oceans. The aim is to safeguard the long-term productivity of economic and social activities such as fisheries, maritime transport, agriculture, industry, tourism, and coastal and regional development.

## Fact 3: The present framework for managing Europe's marine environment is inadequate

Many of Europe's regional seas are the subject of international conventions: for example, the 1992 OSPAR Convention to regulate and control marine pollution in the North Sea and North Atlantic, the Helsinki Commission on the protection of the Baltic Sea (Helcom) and the Barcelona Convention on the protection of the Mediterranean Sea. A number of these have made excellent contributions to marine protection, but they have few enforcement powers. This can compromise their effectiveness in achieving agreed goals.

At Member State level, progress has also been hampered by the fact that purely national measures cannot influence the activities of other countries

<sup>(1)</sup> The European Commission described these threats in its communication of 2002 entitled 'Towards a strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment', COM(2002) 539.

bordering a given marine area and, at EU level, action to tackle human activities impacting on the maritime environment has been taken sector by sector rather than holistically.

Finally, there is a chronic lack of knowledge on the marine environment and on the impact and trends of the main uses, and the information that we do have is too fragmented. We need to develop a comprehensive knowledge base as a platform for informed policy-making at all levels of governance.

#### **Fact 4: The EU is determined to protect Europe's marine environment more effectively**

The marine environment is by its very nature a transboundary issue and so must be managed through cooperation and according to common principles.

On the basis of the EU's sixth environmental action programme 2002–12, the European Commission has proposed a 'thematic strategy' on the protection and conservation of the marine environment. In practice, the aim is to achieve 'good environmental status' of marine biodiversity and ecosystems by protecting them, allowing their recovery, and restoring their functions and structures.

The marine thematic strategy will build upon all the international, EU<sup>(2)</sup> and national policies which affect the marine environment. It will follow an ecosystem-based approach, considering all pressures and impacts and relying on the best available scientific knowledge about ecosystems and their dynamics. It will therefore bridge the current knowledge gap and result in measures specifically targeted at saving Europe's seas and oceans.

The strategy has identified four regions and eight potential subregions. The marine environment will therefore no longer be managed according to administrative borders, but at the level of environmentally homogeneous regions.

Within each region, Member States will be required to develop strategies for the waters under their sovereignty or jurisdiction, in close cooperation with one another, and with the non-EU countries concerned. EU Member States already cooperate with non-EU countries under regional conventions, and these can be natural vehicles for cooperation in implementing the EU marine strategy.

Marine strategies will be drawn up by the Member States under a legal instrument — a directive — to be adopted by the EU Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. When developing their strategies, the Member States will be required to submit key steps to the European Commission for approval.

The marine strategy will form the environmental dimension of the future EU maritime policy. Together they will ensure that Europe benefits from a dynamic maritime economy which is in harmony with the marine environment.

#### **Fact 5: The strategy will do much to help the EU economy become more competitive, dynamic and knowledge-driven**

First and foremost, the strategy will reverse the current deterioration of the marine environment — by taking action! This will offset the serious human, environmental and economic costs of failing to take action to save Europe's seas and oceans — the costs of non-action. The impact of non-action on human health would be enormous. Health is threatened by the

#### **Stakeholder participation — a key aspect of the marine strategy**

The marine strategy was prepared by the European Commission between 2002 and 2004, with the help of an extensive consultation process involving:

- all EU Member States and candidate countries;
- key non-EU countries that share oceans and seas with the EU;
- 16 international commissions and conventions;
- 21 key industry and civil society organisations;
- scientists and academics.

There were two major stakeholder conferences to open and close the consultation process, in November 2002 (Køge, Denmark) and November 2004 (Rotterdam, the Netherlands).

A public consultation exercise was conducted via the Internet from March to May 2005. The Commission received 113 responses. The results are available at:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/pdf/consultation\\_marine.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/pdf/consultation_marine.pdf)

The preparatory work focused in particular on:

- application of the ecosystem-based approach to the management of human activities impacting the marine environment;
- monitoring and assessment issues;
- the particular challenge of hazardous substances.

In addition, the Commission has also paid very close attention over the past three years to reports, studies and policy statements from national and regional organisations, countries, research institutes and United Nations bodies concerned with protection of the marine environment.

The marine strategy establishes mechanisms that will ensure continued stakeholder participation and a transparent reporting process.

<sup>(2)</sup> Other EU policies that will contribute to the marine strategy include fisheries, agriculture, transport, industry, employment, regional development, external relations, and development cooperation.





microbiological contamination of bathing water, illnesses caught on beaches, and contamination from sewage, chemicals, agriculture, household pollution and industrial sources.

Second, the strategy will sustain the future of marine industries by effectively protecting the resource base on which they depend. The key sector of tourism would strongly benefit from the strategy. It will have a positive impact on eco-tourism and should allow formerly polluted bathing sites to reopen. The strategy will also help safeguard productive populations of commercial fish species, thus safeguarding the industries and populations that depend on them. Benefits can also be expected for broader coastal development, which in turn will have a positive impact on other sectors.

Third, there will be new economic opportunities. The strategy should benefit scientific research, notably in the field of biotechnology. The study of marine species should result in potential applications for medicine, pharmacology, food production, agrichemicals, industrial innovation, environmental remediation, and cosmetics. It will also expand our basic scientific knowledge.

Finally, the strategy will bring significant benefits and efficiency gains for marine-related industries. Improved assessment and monitoring systems should help them plan their future investments efficiently and identify appropriate development sites.

### **Fact 6: The strategy will allow the EU to play a leading role in global marine governance**

The development and implementation of the strategy will boost the EU's profile and credibility on marine issues at international level. It will enable the EU to fulfil its obligations under international agreements. It will also improve the EU's contribution to globally agreed targets. This in turn will increase the EU's ability to persuade partners to improve global governance of the marine environment, in particular in the highly sensitive areas of conservation and use of deep-water resources.

The EU will continue to take the lead in the framework of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity by implementing decisions to halt the loss of biodiversity globally. The Commission will push for more sustainable fisheries agreements with developing countries under the common fisheries policy. Meanwhile, EU development cooperation policy remains essential to help them protect, conserve and sustainably exploit their own marine resources.

#### **Further reading**

- European Commission webpage on the marine strategy:  
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/marine.htm>
- Communication of 2002, 'Towards a strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment', COM(2002) 539.
- Communication of 2005, 'Thematic strategy on the protection and conservation of the marine environment', COM(2005) 504.
- Proposal for directive establishing a framework for Community action in the field of marine environmental policy, COM(2005) 505 final.
- Website of the Maritime Affairs Task Force:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/fisheries/maritime/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/fisheries/maritime/index_en.htm)
- An account of the preparatory analysis phase will be in the subject of a separate publication to be finalised by the end of 2005.

