



WWF

POSITION  
PAPER

FEBRUARY  
2020

# Achieving ecosystem-based marine spatial plans

WWF's vision is to ensure an ecosystem-based approach to marine spatial plans adopted by European Union (EU) Member States in all EU marine waters. This safeguards important ecological areas, reduces negative pressure on the marine ecosystem as a whole and ensures that there is space for nature in the marine spatial plans. This approach must apply within and across EU Member States' borders, delivering effective nature conservation and securing ocean resilience in light of the impacts of climate change, as well as supporting a Sustainable Blue Economy.

WWF advocates for effective, adaptive, ecosystem-based marine spatial plans with strategic environmental assessments to ensure that human activities at sea do not have negative effects on areas that contain particularly sensitive habitats, species and/or ecological processes.

**WWF calls on the EU and its Member States to (1) lead on the protection and conservation of marine ecosystems on which all marine sectors ultimately depend, (2) urge all EU Member States to intensify efforts to safeguard marine biodiversity and restore ocean health, (3) invite civil society, stakeholders and rights-holders to work together towards a thriving Sustainable Blue Economy.**

### Headline position

1. Protection and conservation of European Union (EU) seas is of utmost importance, not only for preserving marine habitats, ecosystems and exceptional biodiversity, but also for the livelihoods of millions of people. Marine sectors including fisheries, tourism and renewable energies are important parts of the EU economy and will only continue to provide millions of jobs to coastal communities if our ocean is healthy and resilient.
2. An ecosystem-based approach in planning how we use and access our seas acknowledges that the carrying capacity of marine ecosystems against human pressures is limited. The approach considers the marine space as an integrated system, providing a variety of uses and services including marine protection. Supported by the best available science and by participatory good governance, it addresses the cumulative effects of human activities on marine ecosystems over a long-term perspective. Accordingly, ecosystem-based management and planning can include trade-offs between maritime activities and limit expansion of marine uses in terms of space occupied, seasonal influence on the timing of different activities, and intensity of those activities to secure overarching ecosystem resilience and objectives for integrity of healthy ecosystems.
3. Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) analyses and organises existing and future human activities in marine and coastal areas, and identifies the most suitable way of managing them considering ecological, economic and social objectives. With increasing human demands and stresses on the ocean, effective marine spatial plans, which uphold the capacity of marine ecosystems to mitigate human-induced changes to marine ecosystems and processes, are key to maintaining healthy seas that are resilient to the impacts of climate change and which contribute to a thriving Sustainable Blue Economy.

## LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

4. By the end of March 2021, Article 4 of the Directive establishing a framework for Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) (2014/89/EU) requires EU Member States to draw up marine spatial plans that identify all existing human activities in EU waters and the most effective way of managing them, considering land-sea interactions and establishing appropriate cross-border cooperation. The MSP Directive also requires EU Member States to apply an ecosystem-based approach according to Article 1(3) of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive ([MSFD](#)) and to contribute to the protection, preservation and restoration of the marine environment (Article 5). They must also consult and cooperate with all stakeholders (Article 9) with the aim of ensuring that marine spatial plans are coherent and coordinated across the marine region concerned (Article 11).
5. The MSFD Article 1(3) defines the ecosystem-based approach as the process to “ensure that the collective pressure of [human] activities is kept within levels compatible with the achievement of Good Environmental Status and that the capacity of marine ecosystems to respond to human-induced changes is not compromised, while enabling the sustainable use of marine goods and services by present and future generations”.
6. Furthermore, the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach in fisheries management is defined in Article 2 of the EU Common Fisheries Policy ([CFP](#)) as an “integrated approach [...] [taken] within ecologically meaningful boundaries which seeks to manage the use of natural resources, taking account of fishing and other human activities, while preserving both the biological wealth and the biological processes necessary to safeguard the composition, structure and functioning of the habitats of the ecosystem affected, by taking into account the knowledge and uncertainties regarding biotic, abiotic and human components of ecosystems”.
7. MSP in European Seas must be coherent and integrated with all relevant European maritime policies and legislations (e.g. MSFD, Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, CFP, Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive), with regional conventions (e.g. [UNEP/MAP](#), [OSPAR](#), [HELCOM](#) and [Barcelona Convention](#)) as well as with intergovernmental agreements (e.g. [ACCOBAMS](#)), macro-regional strategies (e.g. [EUSAIR](#), Western Mediterranean, Baltic) and international conventions and commitments (e.g. the [UN SDG](#) and [CBD targets](#)). Such an integration allows for better consistency and compatibility of marine policies in the seas shared by EU Member States and neighbouring countries, for instance limiting the duplication of efforts towards shared objectives, accelerating reporting or facilitating data sharing.

## CONSERVATION MEASURES

8. Ecosystem-based MSP must be supported across all maritime sectors (e.g. fishing, tourism, infrastructure development, shipping, offshore renewable energy and aquaculture) and be complemented by integrated coastal zone management and area-based conservation management measures such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).
9. Ecosystem-based MSP must safeguard areas of ecological importance such as MPAs and ensure that the mitigation hierarchy is applied to current and future development that might compromise the ability of those sites to achieve their conservation objectives. Planning and decision making need to recognise relevant conditions, issues and goals at national and regional scales that could impact MPAs.
10. The ecosystem-based MSP process must also deliver, or at the very least enable, ecologically coherent, well connected, representative and effectively managed networks of MPAs and all marine areas of conservation value. Ecosystem conservation measures, including those outside of MPAs needs to be based on the best available science and incorporate spatio-temporal protection of habitats and species. For example, these measures should apply to ecosystems important for sustaining different phases of life (i.e. spawning, nursery grounds), as well as habitats of importance to migratory and highly mobile species. Finally, they must include effective measures to assess and mitigate the impacts of all human activities at sea on species, habitats and ecosystem functions and to restore ocean resilience.
11. The ecological coherence and connectivity of MPA networks and other conserved areas such as migration corridors must follow the ecosystem boundaries and where needed transcend national borders; sufficient coverage must also be secured on the level of regional seas. Ecosystem-based MSP takes into account the importance of an identified conservation network that is designed to achieve the goals of representation, replication, connectivity and resilience. Dynamic ocean management in response to changes in the ocean and its users through the integration of near real-time biological, oceanographic, social and/or economic data could help refine the ecological coherence of MPA networks as well as the temporal and spatial scale of managed areas, thereby better balancing ecological and socio-economic objectives.
12. Ecosystem-based MSP should also consider climate changes and future projections in social, ecological and economic conditions. To do so, ecosystem-based MSP must be based on the most recent and comprehensive data available. Appropriate assessments for the functionality of natural processes, ecosystem services and cumulative effects of human pressures, as well as for the current and potential future impacts of human uses on the

ecosystems are crucial. For instance, future renewable energy developments should not be placed within MPAs and other ecologically valuable areas for sensitive species and habitats and/or providing climate refugia.

13. The ecosystem-based MSP process needs to rely on the precautionary principle as a far-sighted, anticipatory and preventive planning measure that helps eliminate risks and hazards of human activities on the marine ecosystem. Robust environmental and strategic impact assessments must be required for all developments at sea, and they must cover the entire lifespan of the development, from construction with effective mitigation of adverse effects on the ecosystem where such occur, to operation, to decommissioning.
14. The ecosystem-based MSP and associated vulnerability assessments must be seen as the foremost tool to cope with and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Climate change is unequivocal and adaptive policies which urgently lower greenhouse gases emissions in all EU Member States and all sectors, including maritime sectors, are essential to minimise its environmental, social and economic consequences on our ocean. MSP directly contributes to the mitigation of climate change by securing sufficient space for renewable energy development, protecting and restoring critical habitats to increase ocean resilience and by allocating areas with carbon capture functions.

## TRANSPARENCY AND PROPER GOVERNANCE

15. Community and multi-stakeholder participation is essential for the development, implementation and buy-in of the ecosystem-based approach in MSP. Consultations enable a long term foundation for both cooperation among sectors and well-integrated decision making. Political considerations, social values, local livelihoods, and public attitudes are part of a living and dynamic ocean, and should be fully integrated into the MSP process to nurture a culture of compliance, participation and communication on the benefits of plans that reflect local values.
16. Ecosystem-based MSP aims at preventing conflicts and can at the same time increase synergies between sectors, and provides a holistic approach to regional seas. Transcending national borders is necessary for the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach. This must include cross-border cooperation in planning and aggregate assessments of sea uses, coastal construction and development, as well as large-scale mapping of major ecological features and future human activities.
17. Transparency in decision making processes is vital as a readily-accessible process to identify, hear and resolve complaints or disputes facilitates adoption of ecosystem-based MSP. Currently, many crucial parts of decision making, for example compliance assessment processes, are closed to non-governmental scrutiny. Marine resources are publicly owned assets, managed by government officials, financed by public funds and thus must be held as a

public goods enterprise with parties held accountable in case of infringement. Making information on compliance assessments and the subsequent action plans publicly available is a first step to increase transparency.

18. Ecosystem-based MSP objectives need to be measurable and sector-wide for all users of marine space and resources, as well as equitable in terms of access to and distribution of benefits to historical as well as new users.
19. Clear direction and an associated time frame need to be developed for the ecosystem-based MSP objectives. Coherent and well-communicated procedures are crucial for countries sharing a sea basin as these provide each country an integrated ecosystem-based approach in their planning. Social and economic impacts of the management of the sea need to be transparently reflected in management goals and objectives.

## MONITORING, ENFORCEABILITY AND FUNDING

20. Securing and using reliable long-term data of environmental descriptors and human activities is key to determine trends on marine species and activities, and to account for ecosystem capability and capacity to recover from human-induced changes. Electronic monitoring of at-sea activities<sup>1</sup> must become the norm and existing or adopted data-sharing mechanisms need to be widely promoted to allow for systematic data collection, timely data exchange and enforcement of marine protection. Improved monitoring will help environmental impact assessments and evaluation of the effectiveness of the ecosystem-based MSP process locally, including for important species and habitats, as well as the compliance of marine activities with the principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy.
21. EU Member States and marine stakeholders must keep in mind that ecosystem-based MSP is a proactive and iterative process which requires continued monitoring and adaptation. Opportunities to enhance social and economic benefits of a marine site for local communities and other stakeholders (where consistent with conservation values) as well as ecological status must be considered during reviews of the management plan and through adaptive governance, management and planning processes.
22. Ecosystem-based MSP needs to be regulatory and enforceable. Government agencies with an ocean-wide, legal and cross-sectoral responsibility should convene and lead the ecosystem-based MSP process that is subject to strategic environmental assessment. Coherent coordination is needed between different levels of planning (e.g. government departments) and, where possible, joint consultative bodies or joint decision making procedures. At minimum, marine spatial plans must be binding for public authorities' decision making on maritime uses and should be integrated into the sectoral

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance for fishing vessels: <http://www.iuuwatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Remote-Electronic-Monitoring.pdf>  
And especially for the EU small-scale fishing fleet <http://www.iuuwatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Small-Scale-Fisheries.pdf>

planning schemes (e.g. MPAs, fisheries, shipping). This shall be revised in the progress reports submitted by the European Commission every four years to the European Parliament and to the Council.

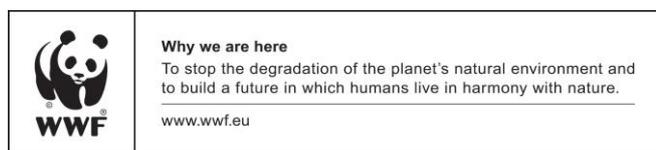
23. Sustainable and continued financing that is independent from private interests must be secured to provide objective, immediate and future marine monitoring, protection, enforcement, preservation, restoration etc. To fully implement the ecosystem-based approach in MSP, EU Member States and all marine stakeholders need to increase their use of the funds that are available: EU climate, transport or fisheries funds offer finance to protect and restore marine biodiversity and ecosystems, support for participation in decision making and participatory management of marine spaces, including MPAs, as well as support for monitoring, control, enforcement and data collection.
24. Ecosystem-based MSP must not be compromised by financial investments that harm the health and integrity of marine environments. Therefore, these must adhere to the Sustainable Blue Economy finance principles that deliver to all United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, as defined by the European Commission and the European Investment Bank and to the future EU taxonomy regulation.

**WWF's mission** is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

**WWF's principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy<sup>2</sup>:**

- provides social and economic benefits for current and future generations
- restores, protects and maintains the diversity, productivity, resilience, core functions, and intrinsic value of marine ecosystems, and
- is based on clean technologies, renewable energy, and circular material flows.

To ensure that the economic development of the ocean contributes to true prosperity and resilience, today and long into the future, WWF will continue to work with partners across government, industry and civil society to implement the principles for a sustainable blue economy and our vision for a healthy and resilient ocean.



**For further information:**

**Janica Borg**

Senior MSP & MPA Coordinator  
WWF European Policy Office  
Email: [jborg@wwf.eu](mailto:jborg@wwf.eu)

**Dr. Anne-Cécile Dragon**

Marine & Fisheries Policy Officer  
WWF European Policy Office  
Email: [acdragon@wwf.eu](mailto:acdragon@wwf.eu)

<sup>2</sup> [http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf\\_marine\\_briefing\\_principles\\_blue\\_economy.pdf](http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_marine_briefing_principles_blue_economy.pdf)