

Protecting our Oceans by Enforcing EU Nature Laws

Although marine protected areas (MPAs) can be powerful tools in protecting and restoring Europe's seas, they are underutilised due to weak enforcement and management, in violation of EU nature protection laws. Their effective management is critical for biodiversity, climate and fisheries.

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A healthy marine environment is essential for climate regulation, biodiversity, and sustainable fisheries, offering vital ecosystem services that support both environmental and economic stability. However, this crucial resource is under severe threat, particularly from unsustainable fishing practices like bottom trawling, which endanger critical marine ecosystems, food security, and coastal livelihoods.

Facts:

- The EU and its Member States have committed to the “30 x 30” goal, pledging to legally and effectively protect 30% of their seas by 2030, with 10% under strict protection, and to reduce the impact of fishing activities on marine species and ecosystems.
- Member States are legally obligated under the EU Birds and Habitats Directivesⁱ and the Common Fisheries Policyⁱⁱ to take measures to maintain or restore protected habitats and species to favourable conservation status.
- Yet, progress remains significantly lacking:
 - Only 11.4% of EU seas have been designated as MPAs.
 - No marine habitats in 4 out of 5 marine biogeographical regions are in ‘favourable’ conservation status.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - Only 4% of the surface area of Natura 2000 sites have fisheries management measures in place.^{iv}
 - Destructive fishing practices continue to occur illegally within EU MPAs.
- Reducing the footprint of bottom trawling in MPAs would have limited impacts on fish landings, while providing considerable benefits to marine ecosystems that are home to commercially exploited fish species.^v

MEPs must urge Commissioners to strengthen marine environment protection by:

- 1. Enforcing existing laws:** More than 30 years since the establishment of the Natura 2000 legal framework, inconsistent enforcement has left many protected sites vulnerable to degradation. The European Commission must take action to ensure that Member States fulfil their obligations under the Birds and Habitats Directives by banning bottom trawling and other destructive fishing practices within Natura 2000 sites.
- 2. Preventing policy weakening:** Ensure that any evaluations of environmental and associated sectoral policies (e.g. the Common Fisheries Policy, Marine Strategy Framework Directive) do not result in proposals for weaker standards and that any proposed measures prioritise closing existing implementation gaps.
- 3. Investing in effective management and monitoring:** Proper management and monitoring of MPAs are crucial for delivering the necessary ecological benefits within the existing and future network. This will promote accountability and transparency at local, national, and global level, supporting the tracking of progress towards conservation targets.

ⁱ Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.

ⁱⁱ Regulation (EU) 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy.

ⁱⁱⁱ European Environmental Agency (2020) 'State of nature in the EU: Results from reporting under the nature directives 2013-2018.' No 10/2020; p. 42.

^{iv} European Environment Agency, April 2024.

^v ICES (2024) EU request on spatial trade-off analysis between reducing the extent of mobile bottom-contacting gear (MBCG) disturbance to seabed habitats and potential costs to fisheries, ICES Advice: Special Requests.