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# THE EUROPEAN OCEAN ACT

Turning Ocean Governance into Delivery

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Credit: Arnaud Abadie



Protecting People and Planet



The ocean is a strategic economic, environmental and security asset for Europe, generating €263 billion in gross value added and supporting 4.9 million jobs.<sup>1</sup> It underpins Europe's critical sectors, including fisheries, offshore energy and maritime transport, and plays a central role in Europe's food security, climate resilience and economic competitiveness.

Yet despite an extensive body of EU marine legislation, Europe's marine ecosystems continue to deteriorate. Around 93% of Europe's marine ecosystems are affected by multiple human pressures,<sup>2</sup> Good Environmental Status (GES) has not been achieved,<sup>3</sup> and implementation gaps continue to undermine the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks.<sup>4</sup>



This is no longer only an environmental challenge. Ecological degradation increasingly weakens Europe's economic resilience, maritime security and strategic autonomy. Fragmented governance, weak enforcement and cumulative pressures create growing vulnerabilities for fisheries productivity, offshore infrastructure, marine resources, food systems and maritime supply chains.

At a time of increasing geopolitical pressure and growing competition on marine resources, the EU's credibility as a global standard-setter in ocean governance will depend on its ability to implement enforceable rules within its own waters.

The Ocean Act represents a critical opportunity to move from fragmented commitments to implementation and measurable delivery, while creating a more coherent and effective framework for EU ocean governance. However, it should not become a deregulatory vehicle for weakening environmental protections. Ecological security should be a precondition for Europe's economic security, maritime resilience and strategic autonomy.

## Key recommendations:

To address these challenges and manage 100% of EU waters sustainably and transparently, the European Ocean Act should focus on five priorities:

- 1** Anchor Good Environmental Status as the binding ecological baseline for all maritime sectors, requiring that activities demonstrate compatibility with GES before authorisation or spatial allocation.
- 2** Make the EU's 30% marine protection target legally enforceable, including 10% strict protection and effective management requirements.
- 3** Strengthen accountability and transparency through harmonised monitoring, public reporting and effective enforcement mechanisms.
- 4** Reinforce integrated ocean governance through strengthened maritime spatial planning and sea-basin coordination.
- 5** Align EU funding with environmental objectives, phasing out support for harmful practices and prioritising restoration and low-impact activities.

## 1 Strategic objective: managing 100% of EU waters sustainably and transparently

To support economic resilience and social equity, the European Ocean Act should ensure that all EU waters are managed sustainably within ecological limits, consistent with emerging international principles on “100% sustainable ocean management”.<sup>5</sup> A thriving ocean economy and the well-being of coastal communities will be best secured by investing in the health of marine ecosystems.

This requires moving away from a model that allocates maritime space between competing sectors first and addresses environmental impacts afterwards, toward a governance framework where ecological limits define the conditions within which maritime activities operate.<sup>6</sup>

In that sense, the 30x30 targets<sup>7</sup> and GES should be established as the binding ecological baseline for all ocean uses, while the ecosystem-based approach should define how these objectives are implemented in practice.

This strategic priority will translate into the following key outcomes:

### • Healthy marine ecosystems

Healthy marine ecosystems are not an environmental add-on to economic policy. They are the ecological foundation on which Europe’s maritime economy depends.

Effective sustainable management of EU marine waters will result in the recovery and long-term resilience of marine ecosystems.

This will contribute to progress toward Good Environmental Status across sea basins, reduce cumulative environmental pressures, and strengthen the effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas.

This includes restoring seabed integrity, protecting blue carbon ecosystems, and reducing cumulative pressures from activities such as bottom trawling, pollution and coastal development.





Credit: iStock / pilesasmiles

### • **Ecological security as the foundation of economic security**

Managing ocean uses within ecological limits will support a resilient and sustainable ocean economy. This will maintain long-term productivity of marine ecosystems, underpin fisheries sustainability, and support the long-term economic viability of maritime activities, including the sustainable development of emerging sectors.

Only healthy and resilient marine ecosystems can sustain fisheries productivity, food security, coastal livelihoods and long-term investment in sectors such as offshore energy and blue infrastructure. Ecological degradation ultimately weakens Europe's economic resilience, increases strategic dependencies and heightens vulnerabilities linked to marine resources and maritime supply chains.

By improving predictability, reducing user conflicts and strengthening regulatory coherence, effective ocean governance can also create a more stable and transparent framework for sustainable investment and long-term planning across maritime sectors.

### • **Fair and inclusive ocean governance**

Improved governance frameworks should lead to more balanced and transparent allocation of maritime space, reducing conflicts between sectors while ensuring fair consideration of fisheries, coastal communities and conservation objectives within spatial planning processes. This also requires meaningful stakeholder participation, sectoral impact assessments and equitable access to decision-making processes, particularly for small-scale fishers and coastal communities most affected by new management measures.

In this sense, the Ocean Act should embed a stronger social and human rights dimension within ocean governance, ensuring that sustainability objectives are implemented in a fair, inclusive and socially equitable manner. Supporting fair transition pathways will be essential to ensure that ocean sustainability objectives reinforce, rather than undermine, social and economic resilience.

## 2 From ambition to delivery: a strong governance framework for Europe's ocean

While recent debates on maritime spatial planning<sup>8</sup> rightly highlight growing competition between fisheries, offshore energy, shipping, aquaculture and conservation objectives, the Ocean Act must not become an instrument for reallocating maritime space between sectors at the expense of ecological recovery. Its primary function should be to ensure that all maritime activities are planned and managed within binding ecological limits.

A stronger and more coherent governance framework is necessary to strengthen Europe's maritime resilience and reduce strategic vulnerabilities linked to fragmented oversight, weak enforcement and increasing pressure on marine resources and infrastructure.

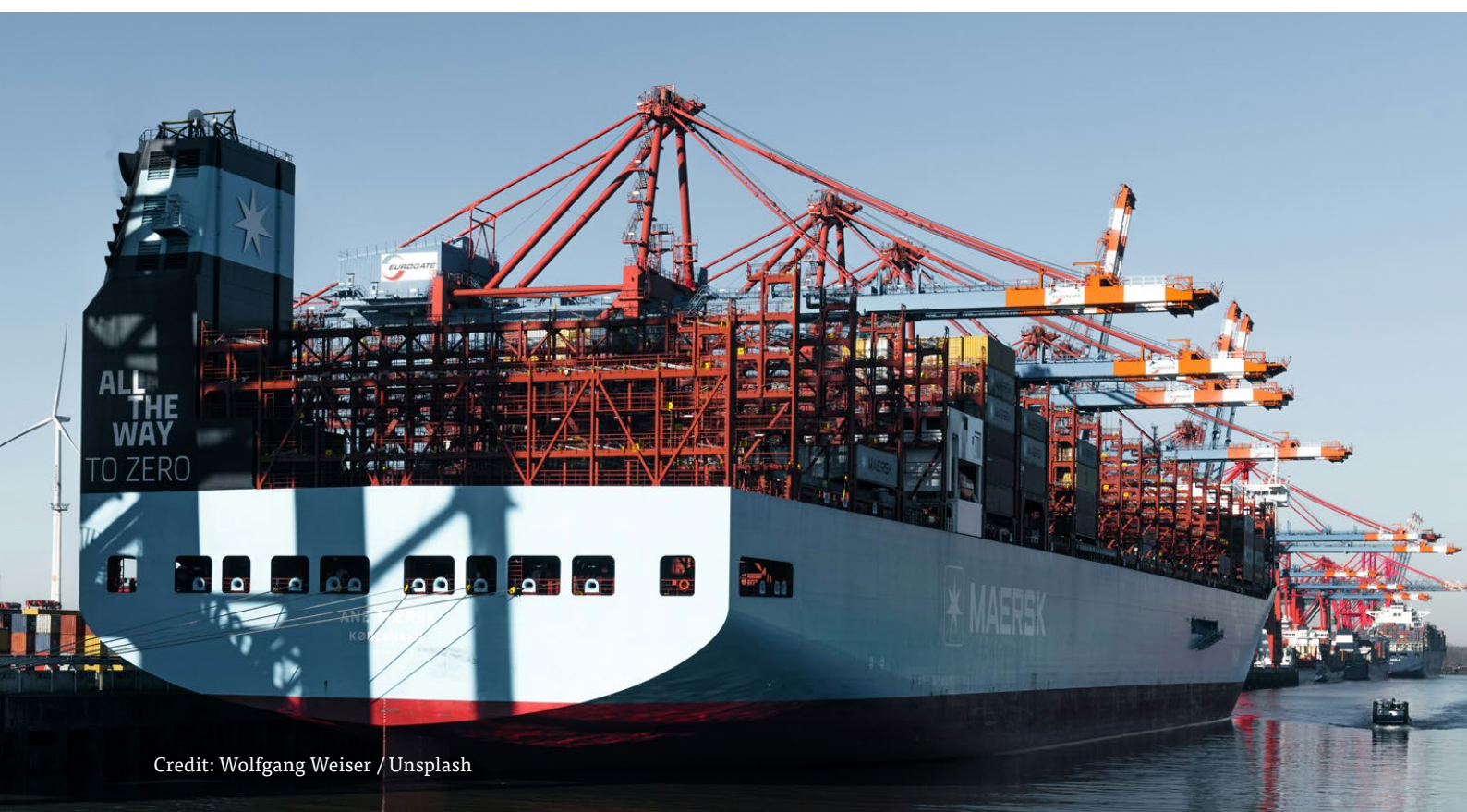
The Ocean Act should therefore establish the governance architecture needed for existing EU policies to operate coherently and effectively. This includes improving coordination, aligning planning cycles, strengthening monitoring and accountability, and engaging maritime sectors as partners in delivering ocean sustainability objectives.

### • Enhanced maritime spatial planning

Without stronger governance, maritime spatial planning (MSP) risks exacerbating conflicts rather than resolving them. It should therefore function as a strategic tool for coordinating ocean uses within ecological limits. Member States should be required to identify ecological constraints, including cumulative impacts, land-sea interactions and climate-biodiversity links, before allocating maritime space. Ecological limits must serve as the foundation of spatial planning and decision-making, not as one criterion among others.

Within those limits, the Ocean Act should strengthen sea-basin coordination for activities with clear cross-border implications, including offshore energy, shipping, fisheries and marine protected areas. Spatial decisions should be guided by transparent criteria that account for food and energy security, ecosystem resilience, and impacts on coastal communities.

More coherent and transparent spatial planning can also help reduce conflicts between maritime sectors by providing clearer ecological baselines, transparent allocation criteria and greater predictability for ocean users.<sup>9</sup>



## • Science-based ocean management

Effective governance depends on robust and integrated knowledge systems. While the EU has strong data infrastructures (EMODnet, Copernicus, EEA), these remain fragmented.

The Ocean Act should improve data integration and interoperability, strengthen ocean observation systems, and enhance monitoring of human activities at sea to support adaptive, ecosystem-based management, while ensuring proportionate and efficient data collection and reporting requirements.

A stronger science–policy interface is needed to ensure that decisions on fisheries, spatial planning and conservation measures are systematically based on the best available scientific evidence and precautionary principles.

Improved coherence, monitoring, cross-sectoral coordination and transparency would also strengthen the EU's capacity to detect and respond to security risks affecting European waters, offshore infrastructure and strategic maritime assets, particularly amid unprecedented hybrid threats to ocean-based activities, maritime traffic, and undersea critical infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

## • Accountability and implementation architecture

Closing the implementation gap requires stronger transparency and oversight. The Ocean Act should establish a coherent accountability framework, including harmonised monitoring systems, transparent public reporting, structured stakeholder participation, and regular Commission assessments of Member State performance.

This framework should also include clear compliance indicators, public scoreboards, and clear trigger

mechanisms for Commission enforcement action, including infringement procedures where Member States fail to comply with EU environmental law. For the fisheries sector specifically, alignment with the 10 principles of the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency<sup>11</sup> should be prioritised in order to strengthen accountability.

The objective must be to ensure that policy commitments translate into measurable outcomes and real-world implementation across all EU waters.

## • Aligning funding with ocean sustainability

Public investment must support, not undermine, Europe's long-term ecological and economic resilience. To close the gap between commitments and delivery, the Ocean Act should link a clear implementation roadmap to EU funding instruments. Recent European Parliament analysis highlights the need for adequate and stable funding to support ocean governance and the long-term resilience of coastal communities.<sup>12</sup>

The Ocean Act should ensure three funding principles: blue conditionality (funding linked to compliance with environmental obligations), spatial conditionality (alignment with maritime spatial planning and conservation objectives), and smart investment (prioritising restoration, sustainable fisheries, low-impact innovation and multi-use solutions).

Public funding should not support activities that undermine Good Environmental Status, including harmful fishing practices or damage to protected habitats. Redirecting financial support toward low-impact fisheries, ecosystem restoration and just transition measures will be essential to ensure fairness and long-term resilience across maritime sectors.



## Way forward

The Ocean Act comes at a pivotal moment for Europe.

The EU cannot build long-term competitiveness, energy resilience and strategic autonomy on degraded marine ecosystems and fragmented governance.

### **The Act is an opportunity to:**

- strengthen Europe's maritime resilience;
- reduce strategic vulnerabilities;
- support sustainable economic growth;
- improve implementation of existing legislation;
- restore credibility in EU ocean governance.

**Ultimately, the success of the Ocean Act will depend on whether it can deliver measurable ecological outcomes, stronger accountability and a coherent governance framework capable of securing Europe's environmental, economic and strategic resilience.**



- 1 European Commission. (2025). The EU Blue Economy Report 2025. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/2333701>
- 2 European Environment Agency (2019). Marine Messages II: Navigating the course towards clean, healthy and productive seas.
- 3 European Commission (2020). Report on the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (Directive 2008/56/EC) {COM(2020) 259 final}
- 4 European Environment Agency (2024). Healthy seas, thriving fisheries: transitioning to an environmentally sustainable sector. Publications ISBN: 978-92-9480-675-8 - ISSN: 2467-3196 - doi: 10.2800/85288
- 5 High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, *Transformations for a Sustainable Ocean Economy* (2020); Ocean Panel Action Agenda for “100% Sustainable Ocean Management”.
- 6 High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, *100% Sustainable Ocean Management*, pp. 6–7: ecosystem-based planning and integrated ocean governance.
- 7 CBD COP, 2022. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Decision 15/4*. Convention on Biological Diversity.
- 8 European Parliament, Report on the impact of the implementation of Directive 2014/89/EU, the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, on fisheries in selected fishing areas and sea basins 23.4.2026 - ([2024/2126\(INI\)](#))
- 9 High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, *100% Sustainable Ocean Management*, pp. 5–6: reducing competition and avoiding conflicts through integrated planning.
- 10 European Commission. (2025). White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dco-3867b4373019\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dco-3867b4373019_en)
- 11 The Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency is an internationally recognised framework that sets out 10 practical principles to improve transparency and accountability in the fisheries sector across three core areas: vessel identity and information, fishing activity, and fisheries management and governance. The principles are designed to be pragmatic and implementable - representing low- to no-cost measures that build on information governments already collect or can readily access. <https://fisheriestransparency.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Coalition-for-Fisheries-Transparency-Global-Charter-2024-EN.pdf>
- 12 European Parliament. (2026, April 28). *European Parliament resolution of 28 April 2026 on the role of ocean diplomacy for the competitiveness of EU fisheries and aquaculture (2025/2054(INI))* [P10\_TA(2026)0121].



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