



**LIFE Marine Platform Meeting  
22-23 March 2022**

# Marine protected area management experiences towards strictly protected areas

**POLICY MESSAGES**

**Hosted by LIFE IP MarHa, Nature Integrated Project for effective and equitable  
management of marine habitats in France  
La Rochelle, France**

The Platform Meeting was coordinated by LIFE IP MarHa and assisted by the NEEMO external monitoring team on behalf of the European Commission Directorate General for Environment and the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency

## Preamble

This document presents some of the important messages transmitted through the various presentations given at the meeting. The meeting was hybrid with 76 people present in person and between 200-250 participants in total including those registered online. The participants included LIFE project managers, site managers, officers from governmental, local or regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, academic and technical institutions, international organizations, CINEA, and DG ENV. The meeting considered how the member states can achieve 10% strictly protected marine areas in European Seas by 2030. Three main areas of discussion were pre-selected as areas of potential interest: ecology, economy and geopolitics. In addition, one day was devoted to case studies. These policy messages have been extracted from the presentations and summary sessions at the end of the meeting. The meeting was organised and hosted by the LIFE IP project MarHa.

## Is 10% by 2030 achievable?

What does 'strictly protected' look like? The Commission Staff Working Document<sup>1</sup> provides insight into how the European Commission expects the member states to build on strictly protected areas; the guidance largely reflects the well-established IUCN Protected Area Categories System<sup>2</sup> and is modelled on categories Ia and Ib, while category II, but also other categories, include areas which also correspond to the definition of strict protection. In 2004 at the 7th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP7) the CBD Working Group on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity agreed that marine protected areas (MPAs) are an essential tool for the conservation and sustainable use of marine and coastal living resources. It also agreed that a national network of MPAs should include multiple levels of protection, encompassing both areas that allow for sustainable uses and areas that prohibit extractive activities, i.e. no take zones.

The 2021 produced 'MPA Guide'<sup>3</sup> provided insight into the levels of protection that derive the most benefits. These are highly/fully protected and implemented/actively managed areas. There were few examples of MPAs where all activities were excluded except for research. While desirable, it seems very unlikely that the 10% will be met using only this type of very strict measure. From the information presented it was clear that the 'No Take Zone' approach which allows limited access to resources may be the most effective way of complying with 10%. Furthermore, fishing is not the only pressure on MPAs, and strict protection also requires limits to be set on other activities which have an impact on biodiversity.

Besides, only 0.06% of MPAs in the Mediterranean, and 0.02% of MPAs in the OSPAR region are fully protected against extractive activities which are not allowed. The meeting endorsed the fact that there needs to be significant upscaling of efforts if the 10% by 2030 target is to be met. How this can be achieved when 93% of Europe's marine area is under multiple pressures from human activities remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> SWD (2022) 23 Final. Criteria and Guidance for Protected Areas Designation defines strictly protected areas as areas in which natural processes are essentially undisturbed.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories>

<sup>3</sup> <https://mpa-guide.protectedplanet.net/>

## Headlines

- Follow the science, listen to the MPA managers, engage with the people, and find the political will to effectively manage strictly protected MPAs.
- The regulatory framework is in place, what we need is effective implementation of MPAs.
- It is not about having perfect knowledge – if we wait for that we shall never start.

## Overarching messages

The presentations clearly demonstrated that the right tools exist: there is a lot of evidence to show the benefits of MPAs for marine biodiversity conservation and fisheries, there are many pilot studies and examples of good practice so why are there so few effective MPAs? What prevents governments from acting?

- **Governance:** need to offer clear legal directive and authority to local bodies and experts in groups to deliver sustainable management, effective protection and a cross-sectoral integrated approach.
- **Stakeholder and rightsholder engagement:** involving all stakeholders – especially the local community – in co-design of MPAs through communication, awareness raising, and training.
- **Management and planning:** essential to apply marine spatial planning (including Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) if appropriate) to avoid conflict, maximise opportunities and explore co-location options (multi-use of MPAs through co-location of certain activities has been suggested as an option to ease demands on space, provided that the conservation objectives of the MPA are not compromised<sup>4</sup>).
- **Removing threats and restoration:** there may be no point in carrying out restoration efforts unless threats have been effectively addressed.
- **Cost and financing:** not possible to finance all the management required for all the MPAs through European or national public financing – other mechanisms need to be investigated to achieve sustainability.
- **Upscaling and implementing:** undeniable evidence that MPAs deliver benefits but there is an urgent need to find a way to upscale active management.

A more detailed synopsis of the key points underpinning these main messages is shared below.

## Governance

- Improve regulation to move from business as usual (often based on “paper parks”) towards highly/fully protected and implemented/actively managed MPAs (as defined in the MPA guide). Need better, more inclusive governance models to make the move from exploitation to sustainability.

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<sup>4</sup> Christie, N., Smyth, K., & M. Elliot. (2014). Co-location activities and designations: A means of solving or creating problems in marine spatial planning? *Marine Policy* 43: 254-261. [Doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2013.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2013.06.002)

- Consider different governance models in making MPAs effectively managed, and in the case of MPA regional networks, ensure transboundary governance and cooperation on cross-border issues. Essential to promote ecosystem-based approaches.
- Important to consider how stronger by-laws can be used to promote good governance at the local level, e.g. by determining fishing gears that can be best used in local contexts.
- A message strongly endorsed by the MPA practitioners was that by-laws can only lead to effective results if there is sufficient control and surveillance.
- Promote cultural shift (change of mindset) from accepting blanket exploitation of the marine resources to managing for wider ecosystem benefits.
- Give priority to governance and control to reduce the number of physical interventions (e.g. anti-trawl devices) that have to be installed, which also reduces the overall costs.
- It is important for decision making to be science based, but not to hinder the process (analysis not paralysis). We do not need the numbers exactly right but enough to move ahead and be willing to adapt as the process unfolds.
- Move biodiversity up the political agenda. Biodiversity and environmental issues are often perceived as a luxury and are overshadowed by the economy and jobs. Whereas a healthy marine environment will provide multiple benefits resulting in a healthy economy and a healthy society.
- Improve the technical capacity and knowledge of governance bodies regarding marine resources for a better uptake of MPA plans and strategies by authorities.
- Swift action can save valuable habitats. Very important in the case of the Darwin Cold Water Corals from discovery in the UK EEZ off the northwest of Scotland in 1999 to full protection in 2004. This even included resolving overlapping fishery interests at the European level.
- Need to resolve conflicts between EU policies – for example if a protected area is within a zone fished by more than one member state then all the members states need to agree to the protection measures – an almost impossible challenge.
- Adopt and implement the precautionary principle.
- Promote integration of marine conservation in all relevant EU policies (DG ENV, DG MARE, DG ENER, DG REGIO).

## Stakeholder/Rightsholder engagement

- Simplify the regulations. Regulatory frameworks in place are complex and difficult to understand which leads target stakeholders to ignore the rules because they are so confusing. Quote from a fisherman in Spain: "there are so many rules, that finally one thinks that none of them are important".
- Provide platforms for stakeholders and rightsholders to voice their opinions to the decision makers and MPA managers. It is essential to build trust and consensus amongst all interested parties from fisherfolk to extractive industries. Fisherfolk, in particular, need to be included in the decision-making process and possibly in Monitoring Control and Surveillance (MCS) activities.
- Early engagement is essential. If social acceptance is not considered at the beginning, there is a risk of taking a lot of time to manage conflicts afterwards. Everyone needs to be included in the discussions from the start – leave no-one behind. Effective public engagement leads to better decisions, builds credibility in key decisions especially when it is perceived as an open, transparent, and deliberative process.
- Social science is a vital component for effective decision-making, it is as important as the ecology, biology and physical processes.

- Promote innovation and creativity in public participation and stakeholder engagement mechanisms and tools. Small scale meetings for two-way engagement are more effective than big public meetings.
- Participation and co-management. Consider management and MCS activities implemented by the stakeholders through integration of existing public policies to manage the areas. Implementation does not always have to be by the public sector.

## Management and planning

- Maritime spatial planning needs to be properly implemented to establish where conflicting activities occur, where co-location opportunities arise and where strictly protected areas are necessary. For example, siting offshore windfarms in important fish spawning areas to completely protect the seabed from trawling and other fishing activities.
- ICZM Principles<sup>5</sup> can be included in maritime spatial planning. Guidance is available and it is desirable to promote these principles in the establishment of coastal MPAs. ICZM is a recommendation only (not obligatory) but the recommendations were adopted by the Council and Parliament so it was something that the member states endorsed.
- MPAs must be at the heart of maritime spatial planning. It is essential to protect the whole ecosystem, ensure connectivity and sustainable development.
- Do management plans need to be adopted? Many case studies indicated that they did not have an agreed management plan. We probably do not need the piece of paper, but we do need to undergo the participatory process of moving towards a management plan.
- Move towards adaptive management - building resilience into the planning is important. We are in a time of rapid change with inevitable (if undefined) impacts of climate change. Whatever plans we make are going to need adaptation and this needs to be acknowledged at the beginning of the consultation process with stakeholders so that revisions can be accepted.
- Trust the science. Make provision to take on board new knowledge which can be incorporated during the planning process again promoting adaptive planning and management to protect the range of biodiversity while minimizing the impacts on existing users. New technologies, together with improvements in habitat suitability modelling can now provide scientists/stakeholders with useful information for the design and management of MPAs.
- Recognise role of science to develop a map of ecoregions. Use the best available science to establish ecoregions, use this to underpin policy reform and to influence the policy outcome.
- Complex planning programmes rarely happen as initially envisaged. Timing, resources and politics can all change over time and lead to unforeseen issues that need to be addressed, highlighting the importance of building in flexibility.

## Removing threats and implementing restoration action

- Important to decrease pressures in areas with multiple existing activities to achieve management plan objectives in the marine space. It is not enough to take just the easy wins of protecting remote and largely inaccessible areas with little human involvement because these are not representative of different marine biodiversity areas.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32002H0413>

- It is essential to remove threats: not just those arising from the sea-based activities but also threats from land-based sources. This requires better communication and integration of policies and decision making amongst organisations and authorities with responsibility for land and sea.
- Ensure that threats do not return – or are not replaced by new threats.
- Enable MPA managers and authorities to repair damaged habitats through innovative restoration techniques which will provide multiple benefits over time (e.g. ecological moorings, low impact fishing, changes in shellfish farming practices and managed retreat).
- Improve assessment of impacts before responsible authorities grant licences/permits for the use of marine resources. The regulatory framework is in place (Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment Directives, Habitats and Birds Directives) but implementation is clearly insufficient.
- Promote recovery of degraded areas (through active management, no-take zones, restoration).
- Mandate and finance the adoption of low impact fishing gears and solutions, e.g. reduction of by-catch of sharks, mammals and seabirds, hand collection of molluscs, establishing optimum potting densities and controlling illegal fishing.
- In a geopolitical context, maritime transport is responsible for 74% of all goods transported. The Mediterranean has 1/3 of the world's maritime traffic and only 1% of the marine space is free from maritime transport. Some major ports across Europe now depend on foreign (mainly Chinese) investments.
- Europe is the most visited continent by tourists and coastal tourism is set to increase. Mass tourism is incompatible with the objectives of strictly protected areas as it increases coastal development, increases pollution, water consumption and marine litter.

## Costs and financing

- The blue economy contributes directly to 1.5% of the EU GDP and 2.3% of European total employment. Protection generates added value and strictly protected areas seem to increase the value added.
- While there was overwhelming agreement that MPAs need to be properly implemented and actively managed, many of the case studies pointed to a lack of secure finances (especially for monitoring, control and surveillance) as a limitation. Public financing needs to be significantly increased to finance 10% strictly protected areas otherwise it will never happen.
- Need more emphasis on financing MPAs from European financing programmes (including European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund) and less emphasis on funding extractive industries.
- Encourage a wide range of financing mechanisms. Can governments really afford to finance all the work that is needed to implement fully highly protected MPAs which are actively managed from public finances? Stimulate opening up the financial envelope to allow the private sector to be more engaged and involved.
- Stimulate the investment market. The marginal gains of investment on biodiversity protection decrease as the quality of the habitats increase, so there is generally more willingness for recovering degraded habitats than for protecting habitats which are already in a comparatively good state.
- Adopt and incorporate innovative financial instruments such as offsetting blue carbon (saltmarshes and seagrass beds), payment for ecosystem services, and maintaining natural capital to derive multiple economic and societal benefits (e.g. mitigating climate change).

- Stimulate wider acceptance of the value of ecosystem services as an economic metric. The ecological, cultural, economic and societal benefits are not always about fish. MPAs contribute to most SDG 14 targets. Meta studies show that levels of benefits are higher across the board for all metrics within strictly protected areas.

## Upscaling designation and implementation

- *“Europe’s environment is at a tipping point. We have a narrow window of opportunity in the next decade to scale up measures to protect nature”*. Hans Bruyninckx (EEA Director, December 2019).
- Business as usual would see Europe reaching the target of 30% designated protected areas but would not make it possible to move from ineffectively managed “paper parks” to effectively managed areas.
- Upscaling requires that we move forward more rapidly. We are still describing things as new or innovative even though they may be neither. We have many pilots or demonstrations. We constantly come up with new terms like ‘natural capital’ and ‘blue carbon’ in an effort to attract financing. Decision makers need to trust the science and make arrangements to expand the MPA networks without delay.
- Better engagement with the policy makers is needed. All stakeholders need to be agents of change to make sure the knowledge is heard and duly considered at all relevant levels.
- No take zones have been shown to be more resilient and resistant to changes, including climate change. Therefore, it is crucially important to include more of these areas within MPAs, including Natura 2000 sites.
- Broader spatial management is essential as a framework for ecosystem recovery. No take zones are not so successful if they are not surrounded by a buffer zone. It is most effective to have a scaled system of management.
- Adopt the MPA guide and embed it in national policy to better understand national progress towards fully/highly protected and implemented/actively managed MPAs which could count towards the strictly protected areas target.
- Regulations inside a strictly protected MPA must be different from those governing activities outside the MPA. In the Mediterranean (a global biodiversity hotspot) only 0.3% of MPAs have different regulations within the MPA to those outside the MPA.