

OVER 80% OF EU MARINE PROTECTED AREA ONLY MARGINALLY REGULATES HUMAN ACTIVITIES

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Context assessment

1. The Ocean provides food, climate regulation, and well-being, but is threatened by heatwaves, overfishing, and ecosystem destruction due to ever-expanding human activities.
2. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are presented as one of the leading tools to protect marine biodiversity. They are part of both **EU and global biodiversity policy commitments**, including the Global Biodiversity Framework¹.
3. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030² targets 30% of MPA coverage and 10% of strict protection for each sea region.

The EU has designated 11.4% of its seas as MPAs (6,414 MPAs)

There are no assessments at EU scale of the protection levels ensured (i.e., level of regulations of activities). The implementation and effectiveness of these MPAs are heavily criticised.

Research findings

EU protection levels

- MPA coverage and protection levels are far from EU commitments.
- Only 0.2% of EU waters were fully or highly protected in 2022 (1.5% of MPA area).
- 86% of MPA area showed light, minimal, or no protection from potentially at least one impactful activities such as mining, dredging, or fishing.

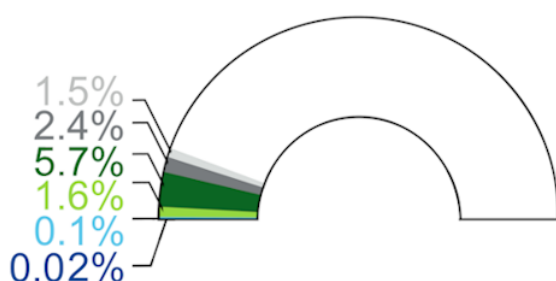
Countries & Regions

- Minimal protection was widespread across the 22 coastal countries of the EU and across all 4 regional seas (North-East Atlantic, Baltic, Mediterranean, & Black Seas).
- The Mediterranean and Black Seas demonstrated higher rates of full and high protection.

MPA types

- Full and high protection levels were mostly found in national designations and in coastal waters.
- The IUCN categorisation of protected areas is often used to describe the legislation in MPAs: **IUCN categories do not match with the level of regulations of most EU MPAs.**

11.4% of EU waters



Protection levels

Unclassified

Minimally extensive extraction & other impacts allowed

Highly only activities with low impacts

Incompatible with biodiversity conservation industrial activities allowed

Lightly substantial extraction & other impacts allowed

Fully no extractive or destructive activities

Policy recommendations

Strengthen regulations of impactful activities as preventive measures for MPAs to provide ecological benefits in the existing and future network

1. **Strengthen protection** to preserve vulnerable and intact ecosystems, as well as restore impacted ecosystems. MPAs should be places where human impacts are drastically reduced. **Protection levels should be reported** alongside coverage metrics.
2. **Focus on full implementation of existing national and EU frameworks.** The use of Joint Recommendations (CFP³) is needed in offshore waters, where many MPAs have been designated with limited protection. Legal requirements for conservation measures and impact assessments need to be implemented in the Natura 2000 network.
3. **Programmes of Measures and action plans (under MSFD, MSP, NRL³) must include additional measures** to allow the expansion of regulations beyond existing ones.
4. **Focus on collaboration and coordination across governance and legal frameworks** to facilitate the implementation of environmental measures, including within Regional Sea Conventions and Fisheries Organisations (e.g., HELCOM and OSPAR networks of MPAs, SPAMI sites in the Mediterranean, GFCM, NEAFC⁴).
5. **Improve monitoring of activities' impacts, to adjust and plan any needed regulations.**

Develop MPAs as spaces for democracy and politics

1. **Defining commitments and regulating activities towards effective protection must be achieved through democratic processes.** Activities in MPAs should be discussed and decided through representative and frequent meetings (e.g., management committees) at the MPA scale, with the help of social and ecological data, as well as acknowledging cultural, social values and interests.
2. **Dedicate time and funding to develop a comprehensive vision for sustainable sea uses** (in and outside MPAs), with a focus on ensuring adaptation and transition options for stakeholders, including consideration of compensation methods.
3. **Ensure updated, clear, and accessible information on regulations in MPAs,** originating from overlapping legal frameworks. This information must be centralised in management plans and dedicated databases, including geoportals developed for maritime spatial planning.

¹ <https://www.cbd.int/gbf> ; ² https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en ;

³ CFP: Common Fishery Policy; MSFD: Marine Strategy Framework Directive; MSP: Maritime Spatial Planning; NRL: Nature Restoration Law; Natura 2000 MPAs designated under the Habitats and Birds Directives;

⁴ Regional Sea Conventions: OSPAR for the North-East Atlantic, HELCOM in the Baltic Sea, and Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean (SPAMI sites); Regional Fisheries Management Organizations: General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), and North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC).