

EUROPEAN BLUE FORUM



Charting the Course: The Blue Forum's Role in Advancing the Ocean Pact

Reflection paper - April 2026

Since its inception, the European Blue Forum (EBF) has played a central role in shaping the collective vision for Europe's maritime future. Through a series of events and thematic discussion papers, **the European Blue Forum has captured the concerns, ambitions, and proposals of ocean stakeholders, from small-scale fisheries to coastal communities and emerging sectors.** Reflected in its position papers, subsequent annual report, and support to the Fisheries and Ocean Dialogues, the EBF has articulated a broad and inclusive work plan.

The publication of the European Commission's Ocean Pact, on 5 June 2025, marks a pivotal moment in the EU's commitment to a sustainable blue economy. It offers a strategic policy framework to better protect marine ecosystems, accelerate the decarbonisation of maritime sectors, and promote coastal well-being. As encapsulated in this paper, European Blue Forum members can take pride in seeing many of their priorities reflected in this key strategic document.

THE EUROPEAN OCEAN DAYS 2026: A LANDMARK MOMENT

This event now holds a special resonance for the European Blue Forum community. For it was during the 2025 EU Ocean Days that the EBF hosted the European Commission's first Fisheries and Ocean Dialogue, an unprecedented opportunity for the community to make its voice and proposals heard in order to influence the policies that will shape the future of our ocean. In 2026, the policies that dialogue helped shape are now generating their first major operational deliverables.

The 2026 edition of EU Ocean Days marked a qualitative shift in the nature of the event itself. While previous editions focused on building a shared vision and developing the policy framework, this year's programme was explicitly organised around the question of operationalisation: how does the Ocean Pact translate into governance structures, coordination mechanisms, and concrete funding instruments? Ocean policy is no longer niche: it is being placed alongside energy, defence and industrial competitiveness as a foundational component of European sovereignty.



Both the Ocean Pact and the European Blue Forum share a systemic and integrated vision of a sustainable blue economy. Many of the central themes explored in the Blue Forum's publications resonate clearly within the structure and ambitions of the Ocean Pact.

The flagship announcement of European Ocean Days 2026 was **the formal launch of OceanEye**, the European Ocean Observation Initiative, described by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as “our window on the ocean” in her opening address on 2 March 2026. The OceanEye **directly answers one of the most consistent demands expressed throughout the European Blue Forum's work: the need for better, more accessible and standardised marine data as a prerequisite for sustainable ocean governance.** That knowledge infrastructure now has a name, a funding envelope and a governance architecture.

The Pact positions decarbonisation as a strategic priority, reflecting the emphasis placed on this issue in the Forum's second paper. Launched in the same week as EU Ocean Days, **the Industrial Maritime Strategy and the EU Ports Strategy** formally reinforce the link between ocean sustainability and industrial sovereignty, supply chains and security. Both strategies are explicitly presented as delivery instruments of the European Ocean Pact. Sessions at EU Ocean Days repeatedly connected ocean sustainability to competitiveness and strategic autonomy, reflecting a broader shift in how EU policymakers frame the blue economy, no longer as a niche environmental sector, but as a pillar of European industrial and security policy.

Integrated maritime governance, including the improvement of spatial planning processes, is expected to be addressed through the forthcoming Ocean Act, which will include the revision of the MSP Directive, an institutional response to the Forum's repeated calls for coherent, cross-sectoral governance tools.

On the social front, **the Ocean Pact introduces a strategy for coastal communities**, for which a dedicated call for evidence was open in February 2026, **responding to the Forum's emphasis on inclusion and the need for more tailored support mechanisms.** Access to innovation and technologies, (highlighted by Forum participants as a key challenge, especially for smaller actors) is addressed through the continued deployment of initiatives such as BlueInvest and Horizon Europe.

Emerging gaps

Despite its strengths, the Ocean Pact leaves several of the Forum's concerns either unaddressed or insufficiently developed. **Two topics recurrently raised by our members are still missing from the Pact's objectives:** while referenced conceptually, the Pact lacks a standardised methodology or a clear framework for integrating cumulative impact assessment into planning processes. Another principle acknowledged, but not operationalised in the Pact is the improved understanding and management of Land-Sea Interactions (LSI).

Other important topics are recognised in the Pact but still await operational translation, amongst them, questions of **governance and inclusion**. While the Pact includes mechanisms for stakeholder involvement, for example through the European Ocean Board, it remains unclear how equitable representation of small-scale or non-institutional actors in decision-making processes will be achieved.

Administrative complexity, especially as it affects innovation deployment, was another recurring theme in Forum discussions. The EU Ocean Days 2026 sessions resonated strongly with these challenges, as policymakers and industry stressed the need to simplify regulatory frameworks and better link research, innovation and deployment, particularly for fisheries, aquaculture and emerging blue industries. While the direction is clear, specific proposals to reduce bureaucratic burdens for local actors and innovators remain to be delivered, and the Forum is well placed to advocate for concrete measures in this area.

A related gap concerns **the role of science-to-policy and science-to-practice interfaces** in the implementation phase. As the focus shifts from policy design to delivery, the contribution of research and innovation actors becomes increasingly important, not only evidence providers, but as active partners in testing, piloting and deploying solutions in real-world conditions. The European Blue Forum members have stressed that making knowledge actionable requires structured mechanisms through which research outputs can inform decision-makers and practitioners on the ground. This dimension remains insufficiently addressed in the Ocean Pact, even though the OceanEye constitutes a first step.

Finally, while many stakeholders view sustainability not only as a matter of technological innovation, but as a deeper shift in values, priorities, and economic assumptions, the Ocean Pact **doesn't question current practices**. The emerging concept of a "Regenerative Blue Economy" is mentioned, but its potential as a pathway and strategy to restore a productive ocean, the very foundation of a competitive blue economy, remains underexplored.

Achieving such a transition requires more than policy ambition: it depends on the awareness, understanding and active engagement of the people most connected to the ocean. In this regard, **the role of coastal communities cannot be overstated : they are at the core of the legitimacy and long-term social anchoring of any transformative ocean policy**.





The European Blue Forum as a strategic actor

In this evolving policy landscape, the European Blue Forum can and should take on a stronger strategic role. As a platform already recognised for its ability to convene diverse maritime actors across Europe, the Forum can support the implementation of the Ocean Pact in four key ways.

1

First, it can serve as **a bridge between EU-level policies and local realities**. By maintaining its grassroots and multi-level dialogue structure, the Forum can translate policy objectives into actionable ideas grounded in the lived experiences of maritime communities.

2

Second, it can act as a **stakeholder observatory**, monitoring the evolving needs, concerns, and capacities of those actors—particularly small or underrepresented ones—who may not have direct access to EU policymaking channels.

3

Third, the European Blue Forum can function as **a facilitator of innovation and good practices**, by sharing and amplifying successful initiatives that align with the Pact's goals, especially those rooted in inclusive and cooperative models.

4

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Forum should **retain its capacity for critical reflection**. It must continue to ask difficult questions about the long-term direction of the blue economy, including the tension between growth and sustainability, the limits of technological fixes, and the need for systemic societal transformation.

Toward a participatory ocean future

The Ocean Pact is an important step forward, reflecting many of the values and recommendations developed within the European Blue Forum. Its success, embedded through the implementation of the upcoming Ocean Act, described by Commissioner Kadis as 'the legal component of the Pact' will depend not only on institutional leadership but on the continuous involvement of those who work, live with, and depend on the ocean.

The DNA of the Blue Forum is grounded in structured stakeholder exchange, a principle echoed in the Ocean Pact's establishment of an Ocean Board and planned support to thematic strategies for underrepresented groups such as youth and women. The Blue Forum is well placed to support this journey, not simply as a facilitator of dialogue, but as an engine for shared stewardship. In this spirit, it will continue to chart the course toward a fairer, healthier, and more resilient future for Europe's seas and its communities.

Furthermore, with the upcoming Ocean Act, the Forum must prepare to play an active role in the consultations that will precede its adoption.

This is the most significant upcoming legislative moment for the marine environment, and the Forum's voice should be heard clearly throughout the process.

Publication Editors

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European Blue Forum Secretariat, a component of the Support and Expert Services on Maritime Spatial Planning and for the Establishment of a European Blue Forum Contract. CINEA/EMFAF/2022-3.5.1/SI2.885676



This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the European Blue Forum and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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