

Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact

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What is the Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact?

The Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact proposes a ground-breaking initiative aimed at catalysing a transformative approach to ocean governance and sustainable economic development within the European Union. As a collaborative effort, initiated by Europe Jacques Delors and the Oceano Azul Foundation, this manifesto endeavours to drive forward a comprehensive agenda that recognises the intrinsic link between the well-being of our societies, the competitiveness of our economies and the health of our ocean and waters. A group of high-level stakeholders with deep knowledge and experience of the ocean and the European Union (EU) have nurtured its content and driven forward a robust commitment to the ocean within the next European legislature.

This manifesto advocates for a holistic approach that integrates economic prosperity and competitiveness, environmental regeneration and social equity.

It seeks to galvanise concerted political momentum towards transformative change, ensuring a healthy, resilient and prosperous future not only for the ocean and inland waters, but for the whole of the EU, which depends upon it. Indeed, Europe, as the most maritime continent of all, owes a great deal of its historical progress and success to its maritime geography and sailing prowess. Today, the ocean, as the biggest life support system of our threatened planet, is even more important to the Union. But considering the EU's governance framework, and the frequent absence of the ocean among its key political and economic priorities, it is clear that the Union still lacks a proper understanding of its real dependence on the ocean and the hydrosphere which encompasses coastal and inland waters as well as the cryosphere and the atmosphere's water. This is a shortcoming that ought to be addressed at a time when we have the window of opportunity to ramp up our efforts to fix the planet's problems. The upcoming European election and the new mandate are the proper occasion for doing just that.

Introduction

The future of Europe will be significantly shaped by today's EU approach to the ocean. The ocean is Earth's greatest climate regulator, serving as its largest carbon sink and absorbing more than 90% of the excess heat and energy trapped in its system. Without these services the atmosphere would not be viable anymore for human survival. Due to these facts, the ocean has been playing the role of Humanity's insurance policy. It is also one of its largest biodiversity reserves and a critical component of the hydrosphere system which supports all life on Earth. This interconnection with inland waters (and the cryosphere) requires a new integrated approach that embraces all water sources¹. Europe has also found in the ocean a source of prosperity with its many economic activities, providing us with food security, trade, globalisation and transport, coastal and maritime tourism, clean energy, data and aesthetic, cultural and spiritual services. In essence, the ocean stands as a one of a kind provider of indispensable services to the EU and offers a fertile ground for many sectors in transition to combine sustainability with competitiveness.

Owning the largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the world, the EU is one of the greatest marine and maritime powers. It is now showing leadership for ocean sustainability in multilateral fora and by launching its EU Ocean Governance strategy. It played a decisive role in the conclusion of the High Seas Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, and the upcoming United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, France in 2025 will allow the EU to assert its leadership at international level.

Yet, at European level, with the exception of the Starfish Mission for Healthy Ocean, Seas and Waters, the EU's approach to ocean governance remains too piecemeal. While there is an EU Integrated Maritime Policy, the ocean is often addressed in a fragmented way, which handicaps effective and comprehensive action. The interconnectedness of all hydrosphere components, in particular the ocean, coastal and inland waters and the cryosphere, is not really reflected in EU legislation nor in the coordination within the EU institutions. Although some progress was made during the last few years, the European Green Deal and EU environmental policies have not yet paid enough attention to ocean and waters sustainability despite their relevance in achieving climate goals and biodiversity protection. At the same time, a persistent gap in implementing EU policies hinders their effectiveness.

Similarly, the urgency and the scale of the transition to a truly sustainable blue economy have only started to be acknowledged recently, even though its sectors are able to combine sustainability with competitiveness, creating long-term wealth and jobs. Totalling 5.4 million in the EU in 2019, the number of jobs in the blue economy should double by 2030, with value chains extending far beyond the coastline, calling for new blue skills. It also has the potential to rejuvenate mature industries, such as fisheries, by steering them toward a sustainable future. A decarbonised blue economy with leading sectors like offshore wind and green ports and vessels will benefit the whole EU economy and support its competitiveness. This presents an opportunity to reindustrialise while making an outstanding contribution to the green transition and alleviating pressures on terrestrial sectors.

Furthermore, at a time when the ocean has become again a space for the expression of power and influence, the EU has not yet internalised the geopolitical fact that it is the world's largest marine and maritime power. Fundamental dimensions of the European project like peace, security, defence and responsible global leadership require the EU to shape an integrated geostrategic vision of the ocean. The EU's sovereignty, meaning its ability to master its own destiny, depends upon it.

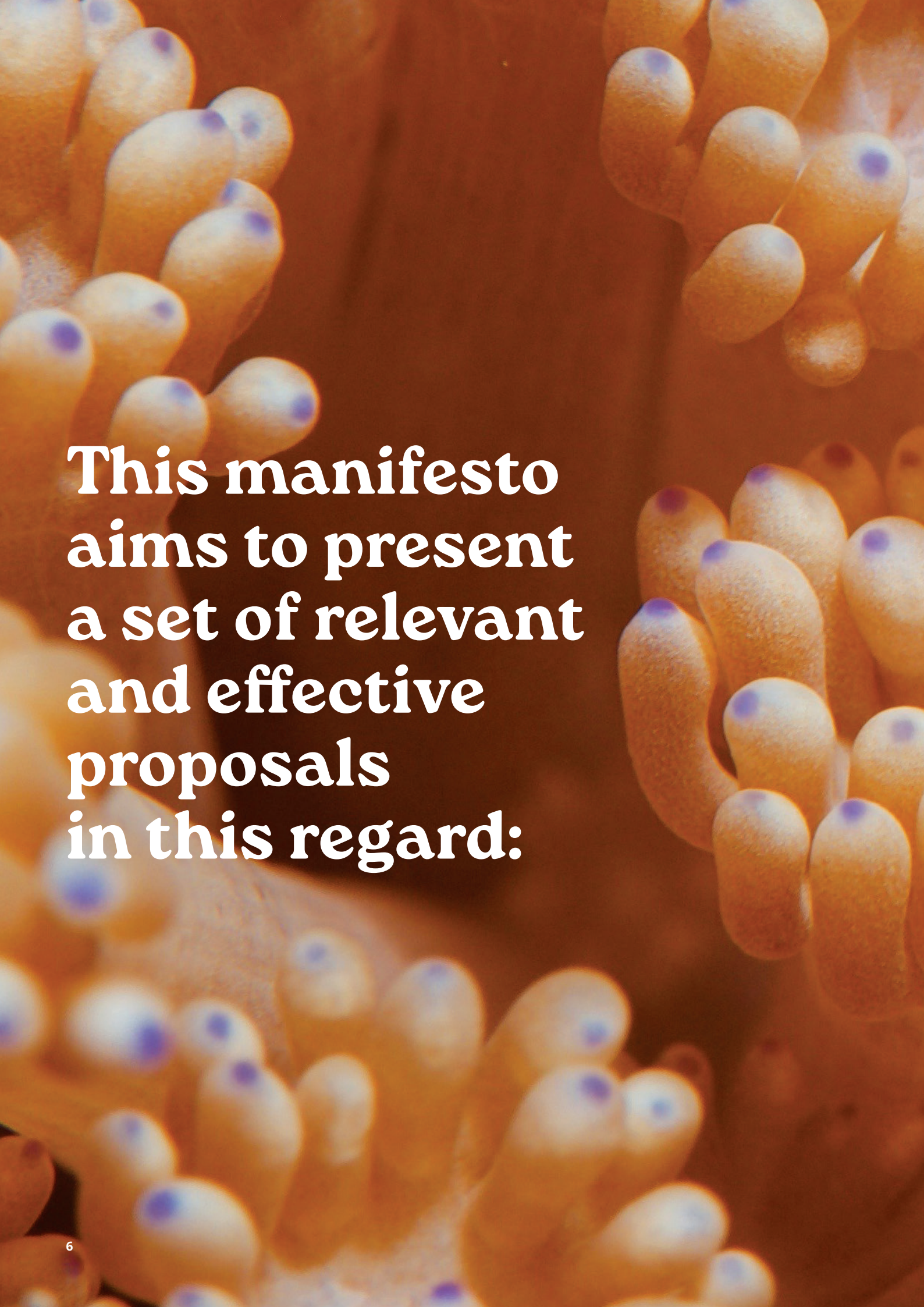
Last, our society's relationship to the ocean is inherently unsustainable, suffering badly from a lack of knowledge and emotional disconnect between people and ocean. Citizen engagement and empowerment must be part of this integrated approach to ocean sustainability.

Thus, it is clear that the ocean has so much to offer to the EU but is today under vital threat. The human-induced triple planetary crisis – climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – has already caused very tangible - and sometimes irreversible – damage to the ocean, such as rising global sea-level and ocean temperatures, acidification, massive biomass and biodiversity loss, including through coral bleaching, eutrophication and the spread of ocean dead zones. The decline in the ocean's health already negatively affects every European citizen, foremost among them coastal communities whose livelihood, well-being and prosperity directly depend upon it. EU outermost regions, which are unique human, cultural, environmental and geostrategic assets to the EU, are severely exposed to declining oceanic health on top of current structural challenges. In the EU as whole, 41% of the population lives within 50 kilometres of the coast. Without a healthy ocean, there can be no sustainable and competitive future for the European Union.

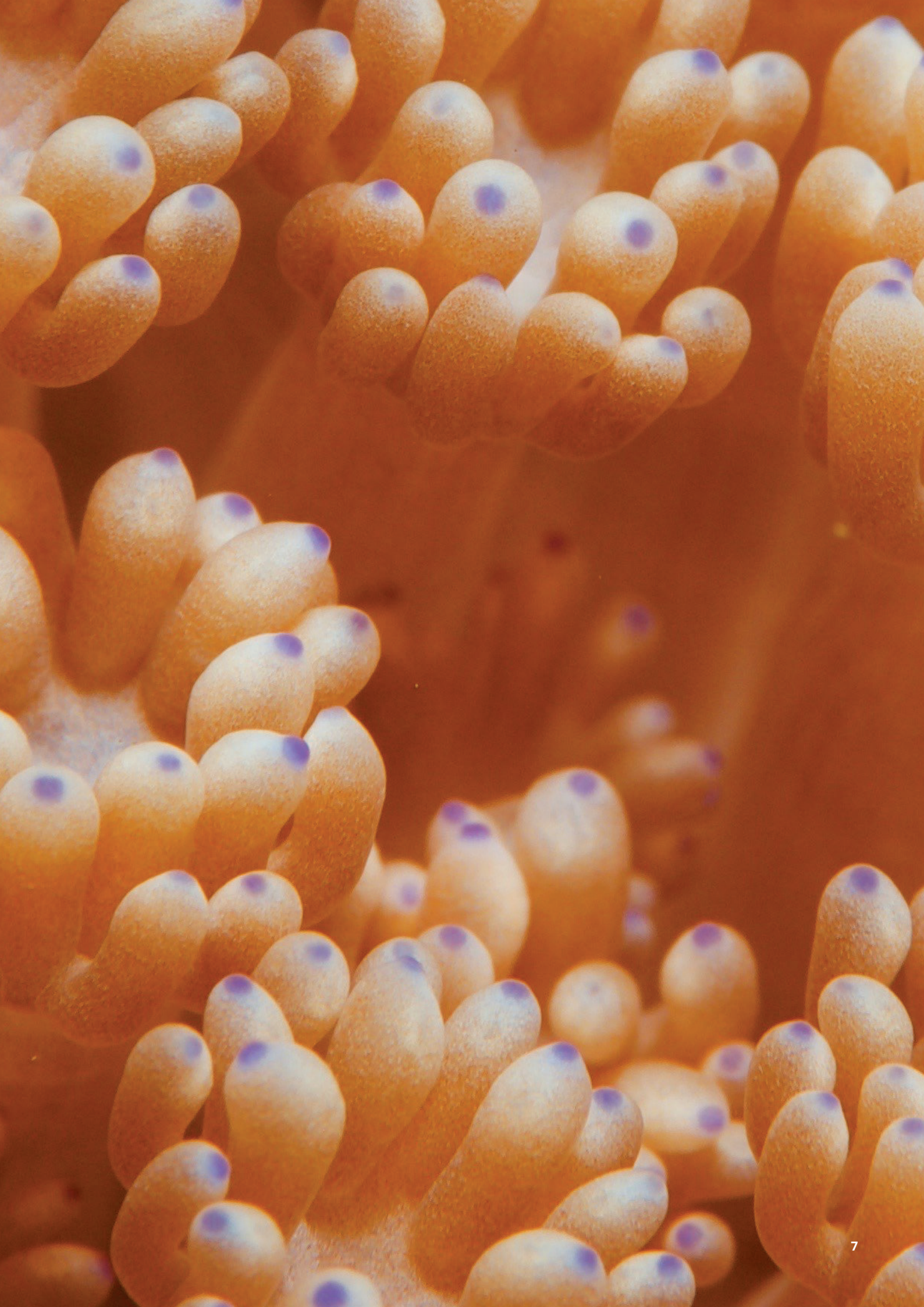
With the right approach and means to harness the potential of their seas and waterways, the ocean can become the EU's best ally in delivering on its key environmental, social, geopolitical and economic objectives. The essential support for the transition of the established sectors of the blue economy towards more sustainable practices like decarbonised maritime transport and sustainable coastal tourism, coupled with the emergence of new sectors, will enhance competitiveness, create new jobs and business opportunities, and contribute to the EU's green transition. The ocean also provides a frontier for disruptive scientific discovery and innovation. Better knowledge of marine and coastal ecosystems will help to maximise the delivery of ecosystem services, such as carbon capture. The largely unknown marine genetic resources residing beneath the surface are invaluable for innovation, with application in medicine, technologies and industries. Finally, the EU's marine and maritime power remains largely untapped. A revamped approach to the EU's maritime security strategy and its geostrategy as a whole is not only necessary in the context of renewed international tensions, but also to secure European strategic autonomy in crucial domains such as food, energy and transport.

The cost and consequences of allowing the degradation of the ocean to continue not only disproportionately exceed those of restoring its health but also fatefully mortgage all current and future benefits hailing from it. The window of opportunity to address the ocean's health decline and channel the many opportunities it provides still exists, but not for much longer. This is why it is urgent that the EU adopts an ambitious European Ocean Pact.

¹ Hence, ocean always encompasses all EU ocean, seas, coastal, estuarine and inland waters.

The background of the slide is a close-up photograph of sea anemone tentacles. The tentacles are a vibrant orange color with small, dark purple spots at their tips. They are arranged in clusters and appear to be gently waving or moving. The lighting is soft, creating a warm and textured appearance.

**This manifesto
aims to present
a set of relevant
and effective
proposals
in this regard:**



An underwater photograph of seaweed in clear, teal water. A large, bold, yellow letter 'I' is positioned in the upper left quadrant. The seaweed consists of dark green, elongated blades and yellowish-brown stalks with small, bulbous structures.

I

**Prioritising a strong
and competitive
European sustainable
blue economy**

a) Tap into the economic potential of developing existing sustainable ocean industries

- > Revitalise the European shipbuilding sector in alignment with a comprehensive European plan to decarbonise the maritime transport industry (not only via e-fuels but also wind propulsion) and establish the “European Maritime Alliance”. Support the transition towards green smart ports, harnessing their potential to become platforms for decarbonisation (e.g. offshore energy and vessel terminals), innovation and training/upskilling at the ocean-inland interface.
- > Develop further offshore energy infrastructures, industrial value chains and jobs, in particular wind farms, and accelerate the achievement of the full potential of offshore renewable energy applying an ecosystem-based approach while supporting the regeneration of marine biodiversity around these offshore infrastructures.
- > Support a transition to fair and regenerative fisheries² (in terms of bycatch, habitat disturbance, quality employment and carbon emissions), ending overfishing and subsidies for harmful fisheries and gradually banning destructive fishing practices, such as unsustainable bottom-trawling practices, while acknowledging the challenge in finding a fair transition for fishers and so the importance of reinforcing a constructive dialogue.
- > Better integrate, in future blue economy strategies, the interlinkages between littoral and inland areas with regard to downstream blue economy industries and the communities making a living from these sectors.

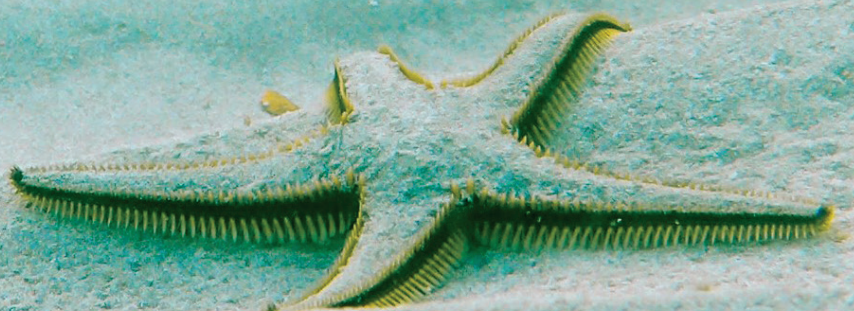
b) Promote innovative sustainable carbon neutral blue economy sectors

- > Develop wind farms in particular through floating platforms which can be combined with innovative forms of aquaculture, appropriately developed with adequate maritime spatial planning and an ecosystem-based approach. Also support emerging renewable marine energies, such as tidal and wave energy, and floating solar panels.
- > Promote a more sustainable consumption of seafood and aquatic food in the EU, notably through the development of least impact aquacultures (sustainable and herbivorous fish farming, multi-trophic aquaculture, shellfish farming and algaculture), internalisation of carbon and environmental externalities in seafood imports, as well as significant reduction of fish waste.
- > Develop an innovative blue bioeconomy through marine biotechnology applications to pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, cosmetics, textiles, polymers, other biomaterials and other products from marine organisms that can provide sustainable alternatives to unsustainable land-based resources; thereby allowing to dissociate our raw materials from natural resource extraction.

² or ‘pesco-ecology’, an emerging concept supported by scientists and defined as the sustainable agro-ecology of fishing and one which addresses all the dimensions of sustainability.

II

Protect and restore the ocean and waters to recover not only their natural capital and ecosystem services, but also allow for the functioning of the overall oceanic system



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- > Protect and restore blue carbon ecosystems, especially those with high carbon sequestration (mangroves, seagrass beds, coastal salt marshes and macro-algae forests) and climate buffer potential located in outermost regions, along with marine animal populations and organisms which greatly contribute to the biological carbon pump of the ocean. This involves integrating blue carbon into climate legislation (a structuring issue, as it addresses pollution upstream, accelerates regeneration and feeds the coastal economy downstream). A new economic model, giving a value to blue carbon sequestration, should contribute to regenerating our ocean.
 - > Promote and closely monitor the implementation of protection and restoration initiatives and legislation such as the 30x30 international commitment, the High Seas BBNJ Agreement and the objectives of the Nature Restoration Law, including on freshwaters, once officially adopted. In this vein, the adoption of an EU Road Map for 30x30 is an essential component of the European Ocean Pact.
 - > Better integrate the ocean-climate nexus within European and international legal frameworks by ratcheting up the ambition of ocean-related measures for climate mitigation and adaptation, notably in the upcoming EU Nationally Determined Contributions. Recognise that one of the greatest threats to both the ocean and cryosphere stems from anthropogenic climate change. Promote synergies between ocean, climate and biodiversity international conventions.
 - > Following up on RISE UP 4 the Ocean Blue Call to Action, prioritise access to the 12 nautical mile zone for responsible and sustainable small-scale fishers and upskill the new generation of fishers with ocean protection and restoration capabilities.
 - > Halt new fisheries potentially harming the functioning of the ocean system, such as krill fishing and mesopelagic species fishing, until sufficient protection is in place. End illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.
 - > Ban deep-seabed mineral exploitation activities within national jurisdictions in the EU and support a moratorium on deep-seabed mining in international waters until sufficient and robust scientific information has been obtained to ensure that exploitation activities cause no harm to the marine environment.³

³ The Belgian position on seabed mining is that any potential request for an exploration license for seabed mining can only be considered if the precautionary principle has been respected, if enough scientific knowledge is available, if the mining code under the International Seabed Authority has been finalised and if the target of 30% of ocean protection of the Global Biodiversity Framework's Target 3 has been achieved.

III

Zero Pollution: A commitment to cleaning European ocean and waters

> Acknowledge the necessity of treating the hydrosphere as one system. Therefore, a condition for the health of the ocean is the restoration of inland and groundwaters.

> Reduce marine litter through the implementation of binding measures, including for industries, to prevent debris pollution, in particular plastics litter. Measures should include educating and raising awareness about the importance of reducing waste generation, especially single-use plastics, improving waste management and recycling systems, promoting zero waste approaches and incentivising fishers to recycle their equipment.

> Tackle marine and freshwater pollution from other land-based sources – agricultural runoff, industrial discharges and sewage – that continue to contaminate Europe’s marine and coastal environments with organic and chemical, including pharmaceutical, forms of pollution. As enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, the precautionary principle and control at source should be the basis for all action. Thus, it is necessary to improve wastewater treatment, support better agricultural practices and regulate industrial discharges.



IV

**Building
knowledge and citizen
awareness for ocean
sustainability**

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- > Support ocean and hydrosphere literacy efforts and advance the development of blue education programmes and initiatives that may amount to introducing blue literacy in formal education curricula and develop at large scale a European Blue Schools network. Blue education programmes should also address decision makers and institutions.
 - > Ensure citizens' access to information relating to seafood consumption by promoting better traceability and labelling of seafood products, including full supply chain transparency for transformed products and products coming from aquaculture.
 - > Strengthen the EU's Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet), including on seabed mapping and marine ecosystems knowledge to improve habitat restoration.
 - > Operationalise the Digital Twin of the Ocean – as proposed by the Starfish Mission Board for healthy Ocean, Seas and Waters - by 2030, and support the development of digital twins for regional seas and oceans, including the Southern Ocean.
 - > Encourage citizens' engagement with citizen science, deliberative forums and public consultation.



V

**An improved
ocean
governance**

a) Revamp the ocean and seas governance in the EU

The European Commission, the Parliament, the Council and the agencies involved in maritime affairs should reflect an integrated approach to maritime issues.

> Establish a “maritime group of commissioners” within the Commission led by a senior vice-president in charge of preparing a “Integrated Ocean Strategy” by 2026. This strategy should cut across various policy domains, considering the Maritime Spatial Planning approach, and involve the Directorates-General for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, for Research, Science and Innovation, Industry, Mobility, Energy and Climate Action.

> Transform the European Parliament’s Committee on Fisheries into a Committee on Marine and Maritime Issues (or Committee on Integrated Maritime Policy) dealing with fishery policies but also environment, energy, transport and tourism policies that are ocean-related, while being responsible for the Ocean Pact. The European Parliament intergroup SEARICA should play a complementary mobilisation role throughout all relevant parliamentary committees.

> Create a European Sea Agency (or Alliance) to coordinate maritime matters among the relevant European agencies, and a “Friends of the Ocean” group within the Council of the EU and/or organise a joint Council meeting of Environment, Energy, Economy, Fisheries and Transport ministers within each Council of the European Union to make progress on the implementation of the Ocean Pact.

> Create a European Ocean Fund and take advantage of the revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework to provide an adequate budget to deliver on the European Ocean Pact objectives, in particular by giving a stronger role to Research and Innovation (R&I). The revenues stemming from the inclusion of maritime transport in the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) should be allocated to the European Ocean Fund and earmarked to support the transition of the shipping sector and the restoration of marine ecosystems.

> Steer the focus towards positive financing mechanisms such as blue bonds. Along with EU public funding and regulation which remain necessary to trigger innovation, private sector engagement is a crucial component for financing the European Ocean Pact.

> Address the EU democratic deficit and the implementation gap of EU policies by enhancing transparency, accountability and inclusivity across all EU decision making processes, giving a stronger role to citizens and ensuring that answers to European Citizens’ Initiatives address their concerns, collaborating with member states to identify and allocate the resources needed for smooth policy implementation and, strengthening accountability systems at all levels.

b) Strengthen international cooperation and coordination

- > Foster the European voice in international negotiations linked to the ocean in line with SDG 14 objectives, including for completing an ambitious fisheries subsidies agreement within the World Trade Organisation, and deliver the objectives to be achieved at UNOC3 in June 2025 (High Seas BBNJ Agreement entry into force, Plastics Treaty, deep sea mining moratorium, etc.).
- > Encourage greater international collaboration in protecting and enhancing ocean resources. Use the high technology of the European Space Agency to monitor seabeds, drawing parallels with the role of the Agency in space exploration.
- > Help ramp up efforts to fill the ocean science gap under the umbrella of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission in scaling up various existing EU initiatives or programmes, e.g. EU Digital Twin of the Ocean, Mercator Ocean, and setting up the International Panel for Ocean Sustainability.
- > Align EU negotiation resources in international ocean-related fora with the EU's stated global leadership ambition. Specifically, engaging adequate human resources to negotiate in international fora – e.g. Regional Fisheries Management Organisations - is critical to succeed in externalising EU environmental and social standards and hence ensure a level playing field.
- > Enhance EU-Africa cooperation for the development of innovative nature-based solutions and blue economy and finance mechanisms, sustainable small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, and common international action towards an effective implementation of the High Seas BBNJ Agreement and the signing of an ambitious Plastics Treaty. This approach should also be extended to other third partners building upon the Samoa Agreement, the new partnership agreement between EU Member States and 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific States, and its chapter on ocean governance.
- > Further engage in the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) to establish a representative system of marine protected areas in the Southern Ocean, recognising its role as the largest carbon sink and a pivotal regulator of the climate.
- > Consolidate the work of the “All-Atlantic Ocean Research and Innovation Alliance” in welcoming new strategic partners.
- > Create a “European Sea Rescue Force” to better coordinate national sea rescue resources and operations. Design a European Union flag for vessels - without replacing national ones to establish common social and environmental standards, and to guarantee access to European ports for all ships flying the European flag.

c) Adopt a new geostrategic approach to the ocean for a sovereign, safe and powerful Europe

- > Pay stronger attention to submarine cables to ensure security of communication.
- > Recognise the strategic importance of the ocean for Europe's security and competitiveness, as it provides access to global markets, energy resources and trade routes, and the need to keep all activities at sea within planetary boundaries.
- > Ensure the safety and security of Europe's maritime domain, including its sea lanes, ports and critical infrastructure, to protect against threats such as piracy, terrorism and maritime crime.
- > Ensure a thorough implementation of the EU Maritime Security Strategy. Particular attention should be paid to defence collaborations (e.g. the annual naval exercise at EU level) and capabilities improvement (e.g. developing common requirements for defence technologies in the maritime domain). Include the geostrategic dimension in blue education and training.

Conclusion

With the 2024 European elections, the EU is entering into a pivotal moment not only for the future of its ocean but also for the Europe of tomorrow. Geopolitically, Europe is a global ocean player and an ocean giant. But it is an Ocean Union without an ocean policy.

A European Ocean Pact is needed to put the ocean at the centre of the EU's most critical political and economic options. A European Ocean Pact is also needed to promote a path to restore the health of our greatest asset in the fight against the triple planetary crisis while sustainably harnessing the full potential of the ocean for fair, competitive and harmonious development.

Continued improvement of ocean health could lead to the flourishing of fisheries, preservation of biodiversity and mitigation of climate change. Success in effectively addressing marine and freshwater pollution would bring further benefits to human health and aquatic wildlife.

Overall, the adoption of an Ocean Pact is equally crucial for the economic and social well-being of EU's member states, regions and citizens. It also represents an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate transformative leadership in global ocean governance and to work towards achieving the targets set out in international agreements such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, followed by the Paris Agreement, and the United Nations Framework for Biodiversity. Indeed, Europe today is under pressure to combine economic growth and competitiveness with the transition to a green economy. A new blue economy with its contribution to decarbonisation (via offshore clean energy, clean shipping, and sustainable aquaculture) facilitates new avenues of growth that lead us to the green economy without putting extra pressure on traditional economic sectors, including agriculture. Blue makes attaining green easier.

Thus, the Ocean Pact aims to lead Europe towards a transformative future by redefining its relationship with the ocean, addressing challenges and harnessing its potential sustainably. Working hand in hand with complementary endeavours such as the "Ocean of Change 2024", a joint manifesto from European ocean civil society organisations will also serve to achieve the ocean breakthrough the EU needs.

The ocean has always made the difference for Europe. It allowed Europeans to spread all over the world and brought power and wealth to this continent. Today Europe is still the most powerful maritime region: number one in the world in long distance shipping, in innovative, high-tech shipbuilding and marine equipment, in offshore wind energy, in fish consumption, in coastal and maritime tourism and in ocean science. All this can make the European Union a maritime superpower provided it embarks on a new, ambitious and forward-looking strategy that combines economic, environmental and social sustainability: the European Ocean Pact.

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