Building Blocks for an Ocean Act

# I. Ocean Protection and Restoration

## A healthy ocean first: Restoring Europe's blue natural capital

## Why is the Ocean Act needed for ocean health

Europe's marine ecosystems are under growing pressure from a combination of human activities. Scientific assessments consistently show continued degradation of marine habitats and biodiversity, in some instances reaching tipping points, driven by unsustainable fisheries and other human activities, pollution, habitat destruction, invasive species, and increasing competition for marine space.

These pressures are compounded by climate change. European seas are warming rapidly, particularly the Mediterranean, where recurrent marine heatwaves are already causing severe ecological disruption. At the same time, the ocean remains one of our most important allies in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, regulating the climate, producing oxygen, supporting food systems, sustaining coastal livelihoods, and providing essential ecosystem services. A healthy ocean is therefore not only an environmental objective. It is the foundation upon which all ocean-dependent activities and communities ultimately rely.

## Policy context and Ocean Pact commitments

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) remains the cornerstone of EU marine environmental policy. While it has improved monitoring and scientific understanding of Europe's seas, its objective of achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) by 2020 was not met. The ongoing review of the Directive provides a unique opportunity to strengthen its effectiveness through clearer targets, stronger implementation mechanisms, and greater coherence with related legislation.

The EU already possesses a substantial legal framework for ocean protection, including the MSFD but also the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the Water Framework Directive.

Internationally, the EU has committed to ambitious biodiversity and ocean objectives, notably through the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the recent BBNJ Agreement.

**The Ocean Pact recognised the need for stronger coherence across these frameworks and announced the revision of the MSFD as a flagship action.**

# Key measures for the Ocean Act

## 1. Establish Good Environmental Status (GES) as the overarching objective of EU ocean policy

The revised MSFD should explicitly position Good Environmental Status (GES) as the primary objective guiding all EU ocean-related policies. It should serve as the benchmark against which all ocean-dependent activities are assessed and around which maritime spatial planning is organised.

It should do so by leveraging the parallel revisions of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) to strengthen coherence between the two frameworks and require maritime spatial plans to demonstrate their contribution to the achievement of GES. The MSFD should define the ecological boundaries through GES, while the MSPD should serve as the operational instrument organising economic activities within those boundaries.

This objective should be supported by clear pressure-reduction targets, intermediate milestones for 2030, 2040 and 2050, and clear allocation of responsibilities among competent authorities.

In addition, the Ocean Act should align the two directives around common objectives, shared definitions, and a single framework for reporting obligations, such as "national ocean plans", to support reduction of administrative burden while facilitating implementation and maximising efficiency.

## 2. Reaffirm and operationalise core environmental principles

The Ocean Act should clarify and consolidate key principles that already underpin EU environmental law, including the ecosystem-based approach, the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays principle, the non-deterioration principle, and the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle.

Importantly, the precautionary principle should be consistently applied so that a lack of full scientific certainty does not delay action where there is sufficient evidence of significant risks to marine ecosystems.

The Ocean Act should also provide greater clarity regarding the definition and management objectives of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), building on IUCN's classification, to ensure fair and harmonised implementation across Member States.

## 3. Consolidate existing EU and global ocean targets

The Ocean Act should bring together existing EU and international ocean commitments within a single framework and, where appropriate, translate aspirational targets into binding obligations in order to strengthen implementation and accountability.

This includes:

- Restoring marine ecosystems: restore at least 20% of the seas by 2030, and 30% / 60% / 90% of degraded marine habitats by 2030 / 2040 / 2050 (Nature Restoration Regulation)
- Protecting marine areas: protect at least 30% of European seas by 2030, including 10% under strict protection (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, EU Biodiversity Strategy).
- Member States should be required to classify Marine Protected Areas according to the IUCN protected area categories within a defined timeframe and exclude activities that are incompatible with the achievement of conservation objectives. This would improve transparency, facilitate comparison across Member States and strengthen oversight of conservation outcomes.
- Reducing pollution: reduce marine plastic litter by 50% and microplastics by 30% by 2030 (Zero Pollution Action Plan).