



Analysing the European Ocean Pact origins, commitments and what lies ahead

Policy Brief
November 2025

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	
Key recommendations for the European Ocean Act	1
Introduction	1
1. The making of the Pact: from the Starfish mission to an extensive stakeholder engagement and the Third United Nations Ocean Conference	2
2. A reading of the Pact: achievements and areas for improvement	3
2.1. The content of the Pact: strengths, concerns and our assessment	3
2.2. Lessons learned from the past: the Integrated Maritime Policy	6
3. Prospects for the European Ocean Act and the implementation path beyond the Pact	8
3.1. A proposed architecture for the Ocean Act	8
3.2. Supporting mechanisms	9
3.3. Coherence in Europe's ocean governance: The Ocean Act as a bridge between the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and Marine Strategy Framework Directive	11
3.3.1. Overcoming the limitations of the MSPD.....	11
3.3.2. The case for a joint revision	12
3.3.3. Practical recommendations for the revisions	12
Conclusion	13

Executive Summary

The European Ocean Pact represents a landmark effort to strengthen ocean governance at EU level. This publication examines the evolution and context that paved the way for the Pact, tracing its roots to the *Starfish Mission* and the *Manifesto for an ambitious European Ocean Pact*. The Pact's development was shaped by extensive stakeholder engagement, including public consultations, highlighting the importance of participatory processes in defining ambitious yet actionable policy frameworks.

At the heart of this analysis lies a critical question: can the European Ocean Pact drive a true shift in the way Europe governs its seas, from fragmented, sectoral management without a clear, long-term vision of the ocean's geopolitical, economic and environmental importance, to an integrated, structured and strategic approach? This policy brief presents a detailed review of the Pact's structure, six thematic pillars, and proposed initiatives, assessing both achievements and areas for improvement. While the Pact marks an important step forward in integrating environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness, and social equity, its

lack of strategic vision, persistent institutional silos, limited cross-pillar integration, and gaps in financing and implementation mechanisms remain key challenges.

Looking ahead, the forthcoming European Ocean Act will be the true test for Europe's readiness and commitment to build the "Ocean Union" announced in the Pact. This publication examines critical questions regarding the Ocean Act's legal foundation, governance architecture, financing, and the degree of integration across multiple policy domains. Success will depend on establishing a structured and concrete vision, integrating and upgrading ocean governance in the European institutions, consolidating enforceable measures, binding targets, and robust monitoring mechanisms, alongside adequate and stable funding streams. The analysis highlights the opportunities for the Act to materialise the ocean ambition carried forward by European leaders when presenting the Ocean Pact during the 3rd UN Ocean Conference. To that end, strengthening coherence and delivering measurable results across all six pillars will be necessary, ensuring that Europe can safeguard marine ecosystems, support regenerative blue economy, and maintain its credibility as a global ocean leader.



Key recommendations for the European Ocean Act

1. Adopt a high-level political vision for the ocean, revamping Europe's approach to ocean governance.
2. Present an umbrella architecture that unifies dispersed ocean-related targets from existing EU legislation into a single, coherent framework, including clear timelines and monitoring mechanisms to track progress.
3. Embed international commitments – including the 30x30 marine protection target – into binding EU law, using IUCN's MPA definition to ensure uniform protection standards.
4. Define cross-cutting principles, such as the ecosystem-based approach, precautionary principle, and use of best available science to ensure coherence across sectors.
5. Bridge the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) and Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) by using their parallel revision to synchronise reporting cycles, align objectives, embed the ecosystem-based approach in maritime spatial plans, and merge marine strategies and maritime spatial plans into National Ocean Plans.
6. Establish ambitious governance structures to ensure policy coherence and political ownership, including an intersectoral group of Commissioners on Ocean Affairs, complemented by an inter-DG Ocean Taskforce for day-to-day coordination, and supported by a strong Ocean Board that effectively bridges high-level structures with stakeholder engagement.
7. Ensure adequate and predictable financing, with strong integration in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and complementary tools such as ETS revenues, blue bonds, and public-private partnerships.
8. Introduce a coherence evaluation mechanism – integrated within the Ocean Dashboard – comprising a preliminary fitness check of all relevant ocean policies covered by the Act, followed by regular assessments of their combined impact on the ocean, while promoting ocean mainstreaming across the whole range of EU legislation.
9. Promote transparency and evidence-based policymaking, linking monitoring data from the Ocean Observation Initiative to policy evaluation and enforcement.

Introduction

Europe has, through history and up to this day, found in the ocean a source of prosperity, and harnessed it to become a maritime power. Yet, for decades, the European Union has grappled with persistent fragmentation in its maritime policies. Ocean governance has long involved a complex patchwork of competences, divided between different Directorates-General in the European Commission and varying degrees of EU competence. Efforts to unify, harmonise, and bring coherence to this patchwork have been ongoing since the early 2000s.

The launch of the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) in 2007 under Commission President José Manuel Barroso

sought to provide a holistic framework for maritime governance. It aimed to foster sustainable development across all sea-based activities while promoting tools such as maritime spatial planning, integrated surveillance, and sea-basin strategies. Financial support through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (Regulation (EU) No. 508/2014), together with initiatives like the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Horizon 2020, further strengthened the knowledge base and advanced sustainability in maritime sectors. Significant progress was achieved in promoting "blue growth", including advances in offshore renewable energy, aquaculture, coastal and maritime tourism, and innovation for sustainable marine industries.^{1,2} As part of this broader effort to better coordinate ocean-related policies within the EU, the transi-

¹ European Parliament (2025), [Integrated Maritime Policy of the European Union](#), pp. 1-3.

² European Parliament and Council (2014), [Regulation \(EU\) no. 508/2014 on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund](#).



tion from DG FISH to DG MARE in 2008 expanded the Commission's focus beyond fisheries to encompass the full range of maritime affairs. This institutional shift marked an important step towards a more integrated governance approach. In parallel, the Council established the Working Party on Maritime Affairs/Integrated Maritime Policy to oversee the policy's implementation and ensure that its cross-sectoral vision was reflected at the Member State level. However, despite these efforts, the IMP did not fully overcome structural fragmentation. Silos persisted between Directorates-General and policy areas, limiting the policy's effectiveness and reducing its capacity to coordinate the full spectrum of maritime activities. Similarly, integration within the European Parliament remained limited, as the PECH Committee largely retained its traditional sectoral structure rather than evolving into a body reflecting the IMP's broader, cross-sectoral vision. Overall, this mixed picture highlighted the need for stronger governance mechanisms and more integrated approaches.

The European Green Deal in 2019 further deepened the integration of ocean and the blue economy within the EU's sustainability agenda, highlighting the need to reduce emissions from fishing vessels, protect marine biodiversity through spatial planning, enhance ocean literacy, and align maritime activities with the EU's broader environmental and climate objectives.³

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In June 2025, the European Commission published its very first European Ocean Pact, establishing the state of play and reinforcing it with new initiatives, most significantly the development of a follow-up Ocean Act. Yet, critical questions remain: will the Pact and forthcoming Act deliver

on their commitments? Will the Act provide the cross-sectoral, long-term ocean vision that Europe needs? Can this new governance framework effectively address both long-standing and emerging challenges? This policy brief provides an overview and analysis of the Pact, reflecting on how the Ocean Act can operationalise its vision and give practical effect to its commitments.

1. The making of the Pact: from the Starfish mission to an extensive stakeholder engagement and the Third United Nations Ocean Conference

This chapter examines the evolution and context that paved the way for the European Ocean Pact. It highlights the pivotal role of the Starfish Mission in shaping holistic policy objectives, details the participatory processes that informed the Pact, and underscores the urgency of effective implementation for Europe's credibility and global leadership.

For years, the European Union sought to create a coherent framework for maritime governance through the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP). While the IMP established important tools such as maritime spatial planning and promoted sustainable development across marine sectors, a number of obstacles, including persistent institutional silos and implementation gaps, limited its overall effectiveness.

An important shift came in 2019 with the launch of the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030", also known as the Starfish Mission, or 'Mission Ocean'. Inspired by the shape of a starfish with five interdependent branches, the Mission put forward an integrated approach focused on regenerating ecosystems, decarbonising seas and waters, reforming governance, eliminating pollution, and closing both the knowledge and emotional gap between citizens and the ocean. This marked a decisive

³ European Commission (2019), Communication on the European Green Deal.

move towards a more holistic and transformative vision for European ocean governance – one which had yet to be fully translated into policy.⁴

In early 2024, as discussions on the new European Commission's political priorities were underway, Europe Jacques Delors and the Oceano Azul Foundation published the Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact.⁵ Drawing directly on the Starfish Mission, the Manifesto translated its five branches into five policy pillars. Developed with input from a high-level group of experts and stakeholders, the Manifesto sought to catalyse a new phase of European ocean governance. The ideas put forward by both Europe Jacques Delors and Oceano Azul Foundation, and by the "Blue Manifesto" of a group of NGOs, quickly resonated at the highest political level, and made their way into the election programmes of several political groups and parties across Europe.⁶ In the 2024-2029 political guidelines, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen endorsed the concept of a European Ocean Pact and introduced the proposal for a Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans.⁷

The process moved into a broader participatory phase in early 2025, when the European Commission launched a public consultation and call for evidence on the Pact. More than 900 contributions were received, showing strong engagement across civil society, academia, business, and NGOs.⁸ On 5 June 2025, the European Ocean Pact was formally presented by the President of the European Commission alongside several European heads of state and government at the Third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice. As one of the EU's flagship contributions to the global agenda, its launch marked a critical first step in Europe's efforts to position itself as a leader in ocean governance.

2. A reading of the Pact: achievements and areas for improvement

Is the European Ocean Pact the governance instrument fit for purpose? Will it, and if so how, overcome the pre-existing challenges of fragmented European ocean governance? This chapter presents the content of the Pact and offers an analysis of its main features, achievements, and limitations.

2.1 The content of the Pact: strengths, concerns and our assessment

With the publication of the Pact, the European Commission proposed a framework recognising the ocean as a strategic, ecological, and economic pillar of Europe's future, laying the foundation for what could evolve into a genuine European Ocean Union.

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The Pact is structured around six key pillars: protection and restoration of ocean health; promotion of a sustainable and competitive blue economy; support for coastal, island, and outermost regions; advancement of ocean research and innovation; enhancement of maritime security and defence; and strengthening of EU ocean diplomacy.

⁴ European Commission (2020), [Mission Starfish 2030: Restore our Ocean and Waters Report of the Mission Board Healthy Oceans, Seas, Coastal and Inland Waters](#).

⁵ Europe Jacques Delors & Oceano Azul Foundation (2024), [Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact](#).

⁶ Seas at Risk et al. (2024), [Blue Manifesto: the roadmap for a healthy ocean in 2030](#).

⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for the European Commission President, (2024), [Europe's choice, political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029](#), p. 21

⁸ European Commission (2025), [The European Oceans Pact Call for evidence](#).



The infographic below highlights the Pact's key strengths and concerns, while the remainder of the analysis provides a broader assessment of its overall content.

1 STRENGTHENED GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Strengths

- The European Ocean Pact marks a major political recognition of the ocean as strategic for Europe's future. Its six pillars reflect our Manifesto priorities and elevate the EU's ambition to act as an Ocean Union.
- Introduction of an Ocean Act, expected to be a landmark for coherent governance.
- Ocean Dashboard and Ocean Board to keep track of progress and involve stakeholders in the implementation of the Pact.
- Call for simplifying and streamlining administrative processes in view of facilitating more effective implementation.

Concerns

- Lacks clarity on what the future Ocean Act will be and how it will align with the revisions of the two Directives – the MSPD and MSFD. The Ocean Act should outline concrete actions across the six pillars.
- Ocean Dashboard and Ocean Board: timelines for operationalisation are vague, no clarity on what kind of stakeholders will be in the Ocean Board nor how its advice will be considered.
- Lack of detail on simplification of reporting obligations.
- On financing, no clear information on how much money will be invested, by which means and by when.
- No clear high-level strategic guidance provided, contrary to what is advanced.

2 INTEGRATED APPROACH FOR OCEAN HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Strengths

- Places ocean health and restoration as the first and overarching priority.
- Support to the achievement of the targets under the Nature Restoration Regulation (20% of degraded areas by 2030 – 100% by 2050).
- Use of R&I to effectively monitor MPAs protection.
- Recognition of the importance of blue carbon reserves.
- Acknowledges land-sea interactions with the "source-to-sea" approach.
- Revision of the MSFD to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) of EU seas.

Concerns

- No common EU definition of marine protected areas (MPAs) and their levels of protection, aligned with international standards such as those set by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the MPA Guide.
- No inclusion of the global 30x30 and 10x30 protection objectives into EU legislation.

3 BOOSTING THE SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY TOWARDS GREATER COMPETITIVENESS

Strengths

- Commitment to mobilise €1 billion for global ocean action and investment in new technologies.
- Focus on nature-positive solutions and innovation (e.g. offshore renewables, green shipping, sustainable aquaculture).

Concerns

- No detail on financing mechanisms, allocation criteria, or timeline.
- The 2040 Vision for fisheries and aquaculture, while providing a necessary roadmap for the long-term transformation of the sectors, sets **targets that are too distant**, limiting the potential for timely action and adaptation in the short- to medium-term.
- The non-binding vademecum on best practices in the allocation of fishing opportunities may not be sufficient to genuinely **strengthen the sector, especially for Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF)**. Stronger, binding measures are needed to ensure that Article 17 is effectively implemented, guaranteeing a fair and sustainable

allocation of fishing opportunities. Moreover, this initiative is not entirely new and would benefit from greater ambition.⁹

- The proposal to create a separate **SSF Advisory Council** presents both opportunities and risks: it could fragment existing structures and limit overall impact, but it could also ensure stronger representation of SSFs in decision-making. This concept warrants further exploration to balance effectiveness with inclusiveness.
- The timing of the Industrial Maritime Strategy remains unclear. A **holistic Industrial Blue Economy Strategy** should be prioritised, integrating ports, tourism, generational renewal, and related policies.

⁹ European Commission (2023), **The common fisheries policy today and tomorrow: a Fisheries and Oceans Pact towards sustainable, science-based, innovative and inclusive fisheries management.**



4 PROTECTING AND EMPOWERING COASTAL COMMUNITIES AND ISLANDS

Strengths

- Recognises regional specificities and the special needs of outermost regions.
- Ongoing consultation for an island strategy and updated outermost regions strategy.
- Attention to small-scale fisheries and community resilience.

Concerns

- Measures too general; lack of concrete tools to support adaptation, diversification, and cultural heritage of coastal communities.
- The Pact does not sufficiently recognise the cultural significance of coastal communities. Small-scale fisheries (SSF) play a key role in social structures and cultural heritage, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) should be acknowledged and preserved alongside economic considerations.

5 OCEAN RESEARCH, KNOWLEDGE, LITERACY AND SKILLS FOR BLUE INNOVATION

Strengths

- Strong push for an integrated observation system with the EU Ocean Observation Initiative, which will feed the European Digital Twin of the Ocean (DTO).
- Link to security and resilience through improved monitoring technologies.
- Scale-up of EU4Ocean literacy and youth initiatives.

Concerns

- Timelines unclear: when will the Observation Initiative become operational?
- Science-policy interface is underdeveloped; there is a risk new knowledge won't influence decisions. The proposed International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS) could help bridge that gap.
- Funding for research and skills is not specified; risks relying on fragmented programmes.

6 MARITIME SECURITY AND DEFENCE AS AN UNDERLYING CONDITION

Strengths

- Recognition of maritime security as essential to preserve the EU's independence and resilience.
- Commitment to expand surveillance, sanctions enforcement, and drone fleets.

Concerns

- Heavy focus on surveillance tools without safeguards to prevent environmental harms.
- Potential of dual-use technologies is underexplored: for example, surveillance drones could also monitor environmental hazards, illegal fishing, or oil spills.
- Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) removal strategy not yet linked to ecological safety standards.

This chapter remains rather light and could benefit from greater strategic foresight. Security issues are increasingly central: beyond the Russian shadow fleet and sanctions enforcement, there are challenges such as illegal fishing,

maritime cyber threats, territorial disputes, and trafficking at sea. Addressing these would make the chapter more forward-looking and aligned with the current maritime security context.

7 INTERNATIONAL OCEAN GOVERNANCE AND REINFORCED OCEAN DIPLOMACY

Strengths

- Commitment to uphold a rules-based multilateral order, and clear recognition of UNCLOS as the main framework.
- Commitment to the adoption and implementation of the Global Plastics Treaty, WTO agreements, the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ), and to maintain a precautionary approach to deep-sea mining.
- Proposal to advance MPAs in the Southern Ocean to preserve Antarctica's unique ecosystems.
- International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS) to enhance the science-policy interface.

Concerns

- CCAMLR deadlock on MPAs persists; EU needs to increase diplomatic leverage. Closer coordination between DG MARE and DG ENV could help present a more unified and effective EU position.
- Enhance the EU's ability to drive positive outcomes at International Seabed Authority (ISA) negotiations on deep-sea mining and call for a precautionary pause.
- Weak commitment to strengthen cooperation with African countries.
- The precautionary principle should be applied to marine geoengineering and carbon dioxide removal technologies.



The Commission's effort to highlight a range of initiatives across the six thematic pillars of the Pact represents a positive step towards enhanced coherence in European ocean governance. The structured approach of proposing flagship actions supported by concrete projects is key to effective implementation. However, the Pact currently lacks clear prioritisation, with legislative proposals mixed alongside non-binding communications and other related initiatives, which risks diluting its impact. Similarly, the overall ambition of the Pact does not match its narrative, best captured by the call to "build an Ocean Union". Stronger cross-pillar integration would also reinforce the Pact's internal coherence and transformative potential. At present, the Pact appears to lack a unifying strategic thread connecting its various elements. Without such overarching coordination, there is a risk that its holistic and coherent vision could fragment back into sectoral silos. To mitigate this risk, each section of the Pact should be implemented using an integrated approach linking environmental and social sustainability, competitiveness, and security. This cross-cutting perspective should be clearly articulated and consistently applied throughout.

Of the 30 flagship actions put forward in the Ocean Pact, only six are accompanied by time-bound commitments. Besides, the Commission's Work Programme for 2026 indicates that two additional initiatives will advance during the year, namely the evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy Regulation and the preparation of a renewed Vision for fisheries and aquaculture.¹⁰ Still, this highlights significant room for improvement in attaching clearer timelines to the wide range of initiatives proposed.

Several proposed actions could also benefit from greater ambition and precision to better reflect the urgency and scale of current ocean challenges, well captured in the Pact's introduction. While many initiatives are promising, they often provide limited detail on practical implementation. A stronger focus on implementation mechanisms

– through clearer references to legislative instruments, funding streams, governance tools, and performance indicators – would significantly enhance the Pact's operational credibility.

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In terms of governance, it remains unclear how the Pact envisages overcoming existing institutional silos. Greater clarity on this aspect would be desirable, particularly regarding the possible establishment of cross-DG coordination mechanisms within the European Commission. On the Parliament side, a more integrated committee structure would help ensure coherent oversight of ocean and maritime issues. Similarly, within the Council, a clearer configuration dedicated to ocean affairs would facilitate coordination and policy consistency. Without such integrated governance arrangements, the Pact risks replicating the fragmented implementation that has long characterised EU ocean governance.

2.2 Lessons learned from the past: the Integrated Maritime Policy

Many valuable lessons can be drawn from past experiences. In 2007, the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) was proposed as a framework to provide an integrated vision for ocean governance. Eighteen years later, a key question arises: has the Ocean Pact built upon the lessons learned from the IMP? Can it deliver where the IMP could not and is it properly equipped to overcome the institutional barriers that have long constrained European ocean governance?

The IMP aimed to transform policymaking by addressing the structural obstacles stemming from the absence of a single legal basis and the fragmented distribution of EU

¹⁰ European Commission (2025), *Commission work programme 2026, Europe's Independence Moment*, pp. 5-6.



competences across ocean-related sectors.¹¹ A first notable difference between the two Communications – the IMP and the Pact – lies in their respective implementation frameworks. The IMP was accompanied by an Action Plan and supported by the development of national integrated maritime policies. The Ocean Pact, by contrast, is expected to be followed by a European Ocean Act, without the establishment of corresponding national strategies. Furthermore, the IMP relied on a set of horizontal planning tools to promote good governance, notably maritime surveillance, maritime spatial planning, and data and information sharing. These tools were designed to enhance coordination and efficiency across maritime sectors but remained primarily technical and procedural.¹²

The Ocean Pact moves beyond this functional distinction, adopting a more holistic and cross-cutting approach to ocean governance. This represents a shift from coordination tools to a systemic understanding of the ocean as an interconnected and interdependent system.

A further and substantive difference lies in the prioritisation of thematic areas. The IMP defined five main areas of action: maximising the sustainable use of oceans and seas, building knowledge and innovation, improving quality of life in coastal regions, promoting Europe's leadership in international maritime affairs, and raising the visibility of "Maritime Europe". While climate change was addressed under the objective of maximising sustainable use, ecosystem protection and restoration were not identified as standalone priorities. This reflected a policy context in which the environmental dimension of ocean governance remained secondary. By contrast, the Ocean Pact establishes the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems as the first of its six central pillars, placing ecological sustainability and resilience at the core of the EU's ocean agenda. The recognition that environmental health underpins socio-economic prosperity – a link firmly supported

by science – illustrates the gradual evolution of European ocean policy from a primarily economic and sectoral focus towards one increasingly grounded in environmental stewardship and systemic sustainability.

The recognition that environmental health underpins socio-economic prosperity – a link firmly supported by science – illustrates the gradual evolution of European ocean policy from a primarily economic and sectoral focus towards one increasingly grounded in environmental stewardship and systemic sustainability.

While the Pact represents a clear evolution from the IMP in several respects, it's worth noting that it also builds upon many of the same instruments – including the MSFD, the MSPD, a ports strategy, and a marine innovation agenda, to name a few. As such, it is fair to question to what extent the Pact will serve as a truly transformational framework rather than an adjustment of pre-existing initiatives, particularly as the Pact is best described as a consolidated compilation of EU marine policies, rather than a strategy-setting Communication. The success of the Pact in learning from the IMP will ultimately hinge on its ability to move beyond coordination and deliver a clear strategic vision, meaningful policy integration, and tangible results on the ground.

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¹¹ Pascal Lamy, Geneviève Pons, Isabelle Garzon (2022), "Revamping EU blue governance: why and how?", Europe Jacques Delors, pp. 7-8.

¹² Ibid.



3. Prospects for the European Ocean Act and the implementation path beyond the Pact

Analysing the shortcomings of the European Ocean Pact provides a valuable exercise to understand where the forthcoming Ocean Act should intervene and raise the level of ambition. The Ocean Act will be a decisive test of the EU's capacity to adopt its first long-term, legally binding ocean strategy. As the discussions advance, several questions remain open concerning its legal basis, governance design, financing strategy, and monitoring framework. This chapter explores the Act's potential architecture, identifies the institutional and procedural mechanisms required for effective implementation, and analyses how it could bridge existing legislative gaps to bring about true coherence in European ocean governance.

3.1. A proposed architecture for the Ocean Act

According to the timeline announced in the Commission Work Programme for 2026, the Ocean Act is expected to be presented in the fourth quarter of that year.¹³ The Act is intended to build on the revision of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD). While this link may provide a valuable legal anchor, limiting the Act to the revision of a planning directive risks constraining its ambition and perpetuating uneven implementation across Member States. The Ocean Act should not be conceived as a mere technical update, but rather as a foundational legal and political instrument that consolidates and organises Europe's ocean commitments into a coherent framework, providing clarity, measurable objectives across sectors and policy areas.

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The Ocean Pact's annex identifies twenty-five ocean-related targets already part of the EU acquis, seventeen being legally binding and eight aspirational. The Ocean Act could serve as the binding architecture that brings these scattered commitments under one coherent framework. By consolidating them into a single register of ocean-related obligations, the Act would harmonise dispersed objectives from instruments such as the MSFD, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the MSPD, the Birds and Habitats Directives, and the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR). This consolidation would provide a unified reference for EU ocean policy and greatly facilitate implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement.

Beyond its role as a unifier, the Act could be even more ambitious by translating the EU's international commitments, particularly under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, into EU law, for example by embedding the 30×30 marine protection objective. To ensure consistent interpretation, the Act should adopt the IUCN definition of Marine Protected Areas and include a technical annex specifying which activities are compatible or incompatible with different levels of protection. Such measures would address current interpretative gaps and bring EU law in line with global standards.

¹³ European Commission (2025), *Commission work programme 2026, Europe's Independence Moment*, pp. 5-6.

The Act should further define key cross-cutting concepts, including the ecosystem-based approach and the use of best available science, which are frequently cited but inconsistently applied across EU marine policies. Establishing shared definitions and a set of baseline governance principles would strengthen coherence, ensure comparability across Member States, and guide decision-making that balances ecological integrity, sustainable use, and socio-economic objectives.

3.2 Supporting mechanisms

The effectiveness of the Ocean Act will depend not only on its substantive provisions but also on the governance, financing, and monitoring mechanisms underpinning its implementation.

The Act should clearly delineate chains of responsibility and accountability at EU, national, and regional levels. It should specify which institutions are responsible for implementation, thereby addressing the diffusion of accountability that has historically hindered EU ocean governance.

Institutional coordination will be essential. The success of the Act requires sustained cooperation between the Directorates-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE), Environment (DG ENV), Research and Innovation (DG RTD), as well as Climate Action (DG CLIMA), Energy (DG ENER), Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), Trade and Economic Security (DG TRADE), alongside strong political commitment at the highest levels. In practice, the creation of an inter-DG Ocean taskforce could strengthen day-to-day coordination and ensure policy coherence throughout the revision process and beyond. This taskforce could be chaired by the Secretariat-General, and be composed of DG MARE, ENV, and RTD as core members (reflecting the Pact's balance between protection, sustainable use, and innovation), as well as relevant DGs (CLIMA, ENER, MOVE, TRADE, GROW, REGIO, EMPL, HOME) with the support of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the European Environment Agency (EEA) for scientific input.

In order to guarantee lasting political ownership, the Commission should consider establishing an intersectoral group of Commissioners on Ocean Affairs, coordinated by an Executive Vice-President with "Ocean" explicitly included in their portfolio.

Beyond technical coordination and in order to guarantee lasting political ownership, the Commission should consider establishing an intersectoral group of Commissioners on Ocean Affairs, coordinated by an Executive Vice-President with "Ocean" explicitly included in their portfolio. This would provide a high-level political anchor for the EU's ocean agenda, ensuring that ocean-related objectives are systematically integrated across policies and reflected in major strategic initiatives. These high-level governance structures need to be backed up by strong stakeholder engagement, a role which the Ocean Board can play if fully empowered. The Board should bridge the gap between high-level structures and actors across science, industry, civil society, and regional authorities, ensuring that decisions are informed by diverse expertise and on-the-ground realities.

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In the longer term, the establishment – under the Ocean Act or a separate founding regulation – of a European Ocean Agency, as suggested in the latest Starfish Mission Board report, could provide lasting administrative capacity for integrated ocean governance.



It is also important to emphasise that, since the Ocean Act will be subject to the ordinary legislative procedure, securing support within both the Council and the European Parliament will be essential.¹⁴ This aligns closely with the idea already proposed in the Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact of establishing a “Friends of the Ocean” group within the Council, aimed at ensuring active engagement from Member States in the Pact’s implementation.¹⁵ A similar approach should be pursued in the European Parliament, fostering cross-party support and enabling Members of the European Parliament to champion the objectives of the Ocean Act throughout the legislative process. In the longer term, these efforts could pave the way for more structured governance arrangements across European institutions – for instance, evolving beyond the current AGRIFISH Council and PECH Committee setups towards configurations better suited to addressing ocean affairs in an integrated manner.

Adequate and stable financial resources are indispensable for the credibility and delivery of the Ocean Act. The Ocean Act should contribute to mobilising sufficient resources for ocean-related activities. This includes securing a strong EU-level funding within the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and ensuring that national funding streams as part of the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) are aligned with shared European objectives and adhere to the “do no significant harm” (DNSH) principle.¹⁶ Beyond the MFF, the Ocean Act should explore

alternative financing mechanisms – such as the potential use of EU Emission Trading System (ETS) revenues, the issuance of blue bonds, and the development of public-private partnerships – to harness additional resources for the Pact’s implementation and long-term financial credibility.¹⁷

To ensure sustained alignment across policies, the Ocean Act should establish a coherence evaluation mechanism to periodically assess how EU instruments collectively affect the ocean.

To ensure sustained alignment across policies, the Ocean Act should establish a coherence evaluation mechanism to periodically assess how EU instruments collectively affect the ocean. The Better Regulation Guidelines currently provide coherence checks when evaluating individual policies, but no dedicated tool exists for analysing the broader set of ocean policies together.¹⁸ This new mechanism could be coordinated by the inter-DG Taskforce and draw on data from the Ocean Observation Initiative. Its findings should be reviewed by the Ocean Board and inform the Ocean Dashboard, making progress and enforcement efforts visible to stakeholders and citizens. In addition, collaboration between DG MARE and DG ENV should be deepened, e.g., through joint contributions to the Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) and the integration of environmental indicators into DG MARE’s Blue

¹⁴ “Under the Treaty of Lisbon, the Ordinary Legislative Procedure is the general rule for adopting legislation at the EU level. It involves the joint adoption of legislation by the European Parliament and the Council, on an equal footing. The process begins with a legislative proposal from the European Commission (usually in the form of a regulation, directive, or decision) and may include up to three readings. The co-legislators can agree on a joint text—and thereby conclude the procedure—at any stage of these readings.” Source: European Parliament, “[The Ordinary Legislative Procedure](#)” (accessed 29/10/2025).

¹⁵ Europe Jacques Delors & Oceano Azul Foundation (2024), [Manifesto for a European Ocean Pact](#), p. 17.

¹⁶ “‘do no significant harm’ means not supporting or carrying out economic activities that do significant harm to any environmental objective, where relevant, within the meaning of Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2020/852.” Source: European Commission, “[Supporting policy for scientific evidence - Do Not Significant Harm](#)” (accessed 30/10/2025).

¹⁷ “The EU ETS is based on a “cap and trade” principle. The cap refers to the limit set on the total amount of GHG that can be emitted by installations and operators covered under the scope of the system. This cap is reduced annually in line with the EU’s climate target, ensuring that overall EU emissions decrease over time.” Source: European Commission, “[About the EU ETS](#)” (accessed 30/10/2025).

¹⁸ European Commission (2021), [Better regulation: guidelines and toolbox](#).



Economy Report. Such measures would advance a culture of collaborative, evidence-based and transparent policy evaluation.

3.3. Coherence in Europe's ocean governance: The Ocean Act as a bridge between the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and Marine Strategy Framework Directive

3.3.1. Overcoming the limitations of the MSPD

The Communication on the European Ocean Pact specifically states that the Ocean Act will be based on the revision of the [Maritime Spatial Planning Directive \(MSPD\)](#). The Directive, adopted in 2014, established a legal framework for maritime spatial planning in EU Member States. Its objective is to promote the sustainable growth of maritime economies, the sustainable development of marine areas, and the sustainable use of marine resources.¹⁹

Implementation of the MSPD has been uneven across Member States, with significant variation in both the timeliness and quality of national plans. [Fragmentation and persistent policy silos continue to limit integration with biodiversity, fisheries, energy, and security policies](#). Administrative complexity further hampers progress, with delays in licensing and uneven stakeholder engagement. Transboundary cooperation and data harmonisation remain ongoing challenges, affecting the monitoring and evaluation of plan implementation.

// As a primarily spatial planning instrument, the MSPD is inherently limited in its capacity to deliver a truly ecosystem-based and holistic approach to ocean governance. //

It is important to note that, as a primarily spatial planning instrument, the MSPD is inherently limited in its capacity to deliver a truly ecosystem-based and holistic approach to ocean governance. For instance, while the MSPD sets objectives, it leaves significant discretion to Member States in transposition, which can undermine EU-wide coherence. [Financing mechanisms are also insufficiently robust, as the Directive does not provide dedicated funding streams](#). As a result, the MSPD is on its own insufficient to deliver the kind of integrated, cross-sectoral ocean governance required to match the ambitions of the Ocean Pact.

[The Pact also references the ongoing revision process of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive \(MSFD\), whose evaluation, published earlier this year, showed limited progress towards achieving Good Environmental Status \(GES\) and outlined key areas for improvement, notably in terms of reinforcing policy coherence with the MSPD.](#)^{20 21} [Limited integration between the MSFD and MSPD remains a major challenge to address.](#)²²

¹⁹ European Parliament and Council (2014), [Directive 2014/89/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning](#), p. 5

²⁰ The Good Environmental Status is "The environmental status of marine waters where these provide ecologically diverse and dynamic oceans and seas which are clean, healthy and productive". Source: European Commission, "[Marine environment](#)" (accessed 20/10/2025).

²¹ European Commission (2025), [Marine Strategy Framework Directive Evaluation 2025](#), pp. 39-40.

²² Pascal Lamy, Geneviève Pons, Isabelle Garzon (2022), "[Revamping EU blue governance: why and how?](#)", Europe Jacques Delors, pp. 7-8.



3.3.2. The case for a joint revision

In that respect, the Ocean Act should therefore serve as an **umbrella framework ensuring genuine integration between the MSFD – the environmental pillar – and MSPD – the economic and spatial planning pillar, so that human activities are truly managed in a sustainable way.**

At the moment, the differing timelines, targets, and governance structures of the MSPD and the MSFD pose a major obstacle to achieving a coherent, ecosystem-based approach to ocean governance. While the MSFD operates on a six-year environmental cycle aimed at achieving **Good Environmental Status**, the MSPD follows a ten-year planning cycle focused on balancing maritime uses and promoting blue growth. This temporal and functional mismatch results in uneven implementation, fragmented reporting, and limited coordination between marine strategies and spatial plans. Moreover, the two Directives are overseen by separate Commission services (DG MARE and DG ENV) which reinforces institutional silos and limits opportunities for cross-sectoral policy alignment.

The Ocean Act should serve as an umbrella framework ensuring genuine integration between the MSFD – the environmental pillar – and MSPD – the economic and spatial planning pillar, so that human activities are truly managed in a sustainable way.

Aligning their cycles, objectives, and governance structures – for example, by embedding the ecosystem-based approach in maritime spatial plans and synchronising reporting requirements – would ensure that spatial planning becomes a genuine tool to deliver on the MSFD's environmental objectives.

Given that the two Directives are being revised under overlapping timelines, growing attention has been given in recent debates to the possibility of a joint revision – a term that carries varying interpretations. It is important

to note, however, that integrating both Directives under a single legal act would likely prove overly complex and legally challenging. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether a complete merger would necessarily result in more effective implementation on the ground.

3.3.3. Practical recommendations for the revisions

In the short to medium term, a more pragmatic path lies in strengthening synergies and reinforcing coordination between the two frameworks, while respecting their specific mandates. Several complementary pathways could make this possible.

The MSPD should embed the ecosystem-based approach and require maritime spatial plans to explicitly demonstrate their contribution to GES, with sector-specific measures.

At the technical level, the MSPD should embed the ecosystem-based approach and require maritime spatial plans to explicitly demonstrate their contribution to GES, with sector-specific measures. At the procedural level, the reporting cycles of both Directives should be aligned, not only to reduce administrative burdens but to ensure coordination between marine strategies and maritime spatial plans. In some Member States, such as France, both processes are already merged in a single integrated document, offering a model for replication.

At the institutional level, the Commission services responsible for overseeing the Directives' implementation – respectively within DG MARE for the MSPD and DG ENV for the MSFD – should work hand-in-hand to ensure the revisions mutually support each other. While this coordination should ultimately be facilitated by the inter-DG Ocean Taskforce mentioned earlier, a dedicated line of collaboration between DG MARE and DG ENV is needed in the immediate term to support the drafting of the Ocean Act and the parallel development of both revisions. Similarly, at



Member State level, the Ocean Act could require the establishment of joint committees between environmental and maritime authorities to ensure coherent implementation.

By integrating the environmental objectives of the MSFD with the planning provisions of the MSPD, the Ocean Act can achieve what previous frameworks – including the IMP – fell short of delivering: a truly comprehensive and operational European Law of the Sea, balancing ecological limits with sustainable use.

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Conclusion

The urgency for ocean action could hardly be overstated, most recently underscored by the Copernicus State of the

Ocean Report, which confirms that no ocean is spared from the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.²³ Ocean health is deteriorating at an alarming pace, jeopardising the resilience of our societies, economies, and climate. These findings serve as a stark reminder of the need for bold and collective action to restore the ocean's balance – for the benefit of nature, people, and future generations.

The European Ocean Pact marks a positive and necessary step to turn the tide on this dire situation, but it is the forthcoming European Ocean Act which will determine the future of our Ocean Union. Rather than a single legislative update, the Act should serve as an umbrella instrument that consolidates existing objectives and introduces new binding targets, including to deliver on international commitments, alongside a clear strategic vision and a revamped ocean governance within EU institutions. The parallel revisions of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and Marine Spatial Planning Directive offer a critical window to finally bridge the historic divide between environmental protection and economic use in EU ocean policy. The momentum created by the Ocean Pact must now be seized to ensure that Europe's ocean ambitions are matched by tangible results in the water.

²³ Copernicus (2025), Ocean State Report 2025.

Disclaimer

This policy paper is one of the deliverables under the second contract "European Ocean Pact" between the Oceano Azul Foundation and Europe Jacques Delors.

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