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WHERE NEXT FOR
EUROPE'S SEAS? ● ● ● ● ●



Initial Outcomes

1. Purpose

This event, with a broad range of stakeholders, aimed to provide and harvest insights on what might be the collective pathways for Europe's Marine Future. In essence, the question to be addressed was: *What, in an wider, evolving future landscape, might be the pathways for Europe's Seas, with a perspective to 2050?* Such a reflection not only considered policy needs, but also the wider global, economic, technological and social transformations that are occurring within Europe and beyond.

2. Context

Europe's seas and natural environment are part of the social fabric of our Union and a source of great natural and economic wealth. At the same time, they also face a unique set of complex, inter-related challenges, from depleting fish stocks, to increasing environmental pressures, to increasing competition for sea space. As emphasised already in the Mission Letter for Commissioner Sinkevičius, upon his nomination as Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, it is an EU priority to preserve and protect our seas, to make the most of their potential by investing in their future and ensuring that future generations can benefit from their beauty and the opportunities they create.

To inform the discussions, relevant EU and international policy initiatives relating to Europe's seas and maritime activities, included the:

- package of measures, published in February 2023,⁽¹⁾ to improve the sustainability and resilience of the EU's fisheries and aquaculture sector, also as part of the Pact for Fisheries and Oceans;
- recent revision and future implementation of the EU Fisheries Control System;⁽²⁾
- actions to develop the Sustainable Blue Economy;⁽³⁾
- objectives of the EU Mission Ocean and Waters;⁽⁴⁾

⁽¹⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip_23_828

⁽²⁾ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/sustainable-fisheries-agreement-revision-fisheries-control-system-2023-05-31_en

⁽³⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2341

⁽⁴⁾ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/restore-our-ocean-and-waters_en

- Maritime Security, including in the framework of the revised EU Maritime Security Strategy;⁽⁵⁾
- potential impacts on Europe's seas of international commitments, like the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies⁽⁶⁾ and the UN Agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction,⁽⁷⁾ as well as
- EU's involvement in Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs)⁽⁸⁾ and Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs).⁽⁹⁾

Discussions were also informed by other reflections, such as those arising from the European Blue Forum, in particular the publication on “*What do we need from European Seas by 2030? Are we asking too much?*”⁽¹⁰⁾

Addressing all these aspects together, across and beyond silos with different stakeholders, is challenging, given each has their own complexity. But, given the inter-related challenges that societies are increasingly facing today, the event provided an opportunity to at least start the discussion at European level in a multifaceted and multidisciplinary forum.

3. Format

The day started with a high-level, inspirational scene-setting plenary with a video message from Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius, then a keynote address by Manuel Barange, Assistant Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, who then had a moderated discussion with Charlina Vitcheva, Director-General, DG MARE.

The bulk of the day was then spent in parallel, thematic breakout sessions with interactive discussions based around the following themes: Global drivers; Economy; Society; and Innovation. Guiding questions structured the discussions. Each theme looked at opportunities, enablers and barriers, as well as the interlinkages between the themes, with a shorter-term perspective to 2030 and more longer-term to 2050. The day ended in plenary with the sharing of initial insights and main takeaways.

There was also a display of Project Posters to inform the reflections, coming from relevant Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, EMFAF, Interreg, Erasmus+ and other (EU programme) projects. These posters served also as an opportunity to showcase projects that represent emblematic actions and future opportunities that could be scaled up in Member States. In addition, a Fishing Net, to catch views on the future of our seas was also exhibited.

Overall, some 130 participants coming from across Europe and different sectors (including public and (non-profit) private sectors, researchers, civil society, international organisations, philanthropy, consultants, city authority) attended the event. More details on the event, including the programme, photos, video recordings of the opening and closing plenary sessions, the keynote presentation and the Project Posters displayed, may be found on the event's webpage at https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/events/where-next-europes-seas-european-ocean-days-2024-03-06_en, plus in the short video to be found at <https://vimeo.com/922639059/423ce91c6c>.

⁽⁵⁾ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/ocean/blue-economy/other-sectors/maritime-security-strategy_en. As stated in the strategy, maritime security is essential for the development of the sustainable blue economy, including the deployment of offshore energy installations, aquaculture facilities, data and electrical cables, energy pipelines etc., and for the implementation of relevant EU initiatives and policies in the maritime domain.

⁽⁶⁾ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/rulesneg_e/fish_e/fish_e.htm

⁽⁷⁾ <https://www.un.org/bbnj/>

⁽⁸⁾ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/regional-fisheries-management-organisations-rfmos_en

⁽⁹⁾ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/sustainable-fisheries-partnership-agreements-sfpas_en

⁽¹⁰⁾ Available from <https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/european-blue-forum-publications>

4. Initial Outcomes

A short, synthesised report on the main outcomes of all the parallel thematic breakout group discussions was given in the final plenary session. These are given below based on the four main themes addressed. More analysis of the rich material arising from these numerous discussions is underway.

4.1 Global Drivers

Several drivers of change were identified, notably:

- Climate change together with biodiversity loss, leading to biosphere degradation.
- Overexploitation of ecosystems.
- Security/geopolitical situation (wars, economic/food/water security).
- Economic and population growth.
- Tourism.
- Exceeding planetary boundaries.
- Democracy.
- Migration movement to the coast leading to more pressure on coasts.

Of these, the ones that are expected to have the biggest impact on Europe were climate change, security (food/water/economic) and geopolitical concerns.

In terms of opportunities arising from the current global situation, these were identified as:

- Participatory approach: include local communities, indigenous communities, local knowledge to fill the gap of knowledge.
- EU having a bigger role of sharing knowledge we have in different areas.
- Trans-sectorial cooperation: multi-use and knowledge of seas between sectors to be shared better.
- Implementation/enforcement of rules needs to be better followed-up.
- Ocean literacy, not only of youth and citizens, but also of politicians is crucial.
- Incorporate citizen science in future policy developments to make sure we are using the best available science.
- Bilateral cooperation on data sharing/digitalizing opportunities.

The discussions also identified several developments that were considered to be needed, including:

- Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) for multi-use and multi-function purposes.
- No need for more legislation, but more action and putting actions into plans.
- Ecological Economy approach: account for a footprint budget (like, for example, done in Denmark) and account for externalities in the price.
- Europe must lead the way to 100% sustainable fishing.
- Need for a behavioural change by education of consumers/public and this through legislation: societal transformation.
- Need to drive back knowledge into the economy. Not only have funding for start-ups and research, but also the funding to follow up on upscaling of projects that are working. This would need more private investment for upscaling.
- Temporal and spatial cooperation.
- More confidence about our governance. In Europe we have the advantage that it is a democracy, we need to use this more to our advantage.
- Need to continue to involve young people, and need sufficient money to keep our European workforce in Europe.
- Need to look more at the bigger picture and include “land interactions” in our assessments of the ocean.
- Need a better ‘long-term’ planning with funders of projects.
- Need for even more integration of Mission Ocean projects and activities.
- Transboundary governance.

4.2 Economy

The discussions benefited from having all sectors of the blue economy take part, from the traditional to the emerging ones, such as carbon capture or desalination operators, but also academics and NGOs. It also showed how complex this sector is.

Some main challenges of the immediate future were quite well identified:

- The conflicts for space between the different sectors, such as windmills and marine aquaculture occupying more and more fishing grounds of coastal fishers. These conflicts are also increasing with the arrival of “non-blue economy operators” that progressively populate the seaside to access marine sources of renewable energy;
- The impact of global warming on certain activities, in particular fisheries with the migration of species, or even disappearance of some of them (for ex. in the Baltic sea due to desalinisation);
- Pollution of the coastal areas, and related health effects, and more generally the unsustainable pressure on biodiversity.

Several ways to address these challenges merged from the discussions, such as:

- Increased cooperation between sectors. For example, marine energy production and marine aquaculture are competing for the same grounds, but do not occupy space in the same way, and farms need energy, so there is room for complementarities and cooperation.
- Increased regional cooperation is a recurrent subject.
- More research and innovation (requiring increased dialogue between academia and industry) and more data to objectify the problems.
- From that point of view, effective Maritime Spatial Planning is essential. It can help for example to better target those activities that can be based more off-shore and thereby leave more space on coastal areas.
- In short, the richness and complexity of the blue economy sectors requires integration, vision and holistic perspectives, and of course a coherent governance.

For the longer-term:

- On the production of Fishing and Aquaculture Products (FAPs), there is generally a consensus that we have reached a certain limit in what the EU can produce. Fisheries is de facto capped by our conservation policy, and aquaculture will continue to grow, but in parallel to other Blue Economy sectors.
- So, except if it was decided to prioritise aquaculture at the expenses of other sectors (to ensure food security), the EU will continue to rely heavily on imports to supply its market.
- This is reinforced by the fact that, while there is a general agreement that fishing vessels must use more sustainable technologies to be less dependent on fossil fuel, the technology is not yet there at the right scale.
- And on top of those inherent limitations,
 - the EU is not an island, and we have seen that the rest of the world is increasingly consuming FAPs as well; plus
 - global climate change will continue to play a deleterious role on fishery resources.
- Several groups reached the same conclusion: we should aim at a more balanced or diversified supply of proteins, probably more plant-based (including on algae).
- It was acknowledged that this may inevitably lead to a decrease in the number of fishers, and to a transfer towards aquaculture to supply the market, aligning the EU with the rest of the world.
- On the other hand, this change of paradigm will require intensive research and engineering, will create other economic activities and job opportunities for coastal areas.
- This transition should be accompanied, especially because making consumers habits evolve – that is very cultural in this case - will take time.

- This is where public authorities can play a role, for example through educational campaigns, or through consumer information (on sustainability of products for example).
- It could also take the form of a stronger integration of negative externalities of protein production into the cost of food. For example, by making less sustainable seafood more expensive (like seafood that are produced far away or travel the world to be processed, or have a more negative impact on the seabed).
- The potential of overseas territories was also mentioned, such as the Outermost Regions, through their immense EEZ.

4.3 Society

Here too several challenges were identified, notably:

- Diversity of situations in coastal communities around Europe – small and big cities/communities and different parts of Europe.
- Demography changes and population changes – loss of local knowledge and livelihoods.
- At beach tourism areas there are very strong seasonal shifts in population – leading to problems with infrastructure.
- All are threatened by climate change with sea-level rise and erosion – to adapt, there is a need for re-allocation of population or building and maintaining seawalls or restore coastal ecosystems.
- Pollution can also be a challenge in some areas.
- Traditional fishers leaving their activity.
- Different views on how to use the coastal regions: land and marine spaces - leads to conflicts e.g. holidays vs living communities – inequality – conflicts of vision for this space.
- Houses are too expensive – resulting in local people being forced out.

As opportunities, those identified were:

- New businesses in different sectors: new offshore clean energy, sustainable aquacultures and tourism, training for new jobs, use the sea space to be more self-sustained in terms of food and energy.
- Ports as innovation hubs. Reviving smaller ports in connection with the energy transition.
- Businesses to restore and protect marine and coastal ecosystems.
- Digital Twin of the Ocean that increases knowledge and predictive power can be used to empower the communities to have better management and better use of their resources.
- Increase the knowledge and awareness of the benefits of the ocean to people– and the impacts of people in the ocean - and not only those from the coast - increase ocean literacy.
- Preserve cultural identity and heritage – valuing traditional and local knowledge.

With enablers considered to be the need to implement-well Integrated Coastal zone management and marine spatial planning, with participatory and inclusive governance, plus having in place the adequate funding instruments and education.

The vision arising from the discussions was to implement a co-created economic and socio-ecological model with a common vision of sustainable and inclusive livelihoods in a healthy environment and living well within planetary boundary limits.

4.4 Innovation

Innovation in the context of the blue economy is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond mere technological advancement. It encompasses institutional, social, and emotional innovation, as well as data integration and the adoption of a holistic, system-centred approach. Innovation in the blue economy sector is expected to evolve towards integrated solutions and cross-sectoral collaborations that address the complex challenges of sustainability, financing and engaging all stakeholders and creating positive emotional connections between people and the ocean.

Europe holds a leadership position in basic research and institutional innovation within the blue economy context. However, Europe lags behind in upscaling and technology transfer, often struggling to translate research findings into scalable and commercially viable solutions. Moreover, Europe has yet to develop adequate financial and innovation models to foster widespread adoption of emerging technologies.

To unlock the full potential of the blue economy, Europe should consider a comprehensive ocean and innovation approach that engages all stakeholders and sectors, in a framework of a more comprehensive Blue Economy Strategy. This requires a shift from a sector-centred vision to an integrated approach that promotes collaboration, knowledge exchange, and co-creation. Furthermore, targeted support mechanisms and funding instruments are necessary to facilitate technology transfer and commercialization, creating an enabling environment for entrepreneurs and startups. By promoting data integration, establishing common standards, and fostering collaboration, Europe can overcome the challenges associated with technology deployment and upscaling, driving the sustainable growth of its marine and maritime activities. The headline overall conclusion coming from the discussions in this theme was the need for a Blue Deal.

5. Audience Takeaways

At the very end, a Slido question was launched to ask the audience for their key takeaways of the event. The resulting WordCloud is given below.

What is/are your key takeaway(s) from today's event?

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