



**Coherent & Cross-compliant Ocean Governance for
Delivering the EU Green Deal for European Seas**



Policy Brief 4

Integrating marine biodiversity and ecosystem protection in sector policy implementation: How to do better

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Mainstreaming biodiversity in sector policies and decisions: a must

The **European Green Deal** (EGD), adopted in 2020, calls for deeply transformative policies across all sectors to create a fair and prosperous society where economic growth is decoupled from resource use, natural ecosystems are protected and restored, and human health improved. Delivering the ambitions of the EGD requires: (1) **strengthening policy coherence and integration** based on intense coordination to exploit the available synergies across all policy areas; (2) putting **sustainability at the centre** of economic policy, with the sustainable development goals [of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development] at the heart of the EU's policymaking and action; and (3) **mainstreaming sustainability** in all policies.

Strengthening policy coherence and integrating environmental considerations into sectoral policies have been part of EU policy conversations since the emergence of the EU environmental policy framework and the concept of sustainability (dating back to the publication of the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report) in 1987). Still, **integrating environmental, ecosystem and biodiversity considerations into sectoral policy has proven challenging**.

This is illustrated, for instance, by the successive reforms and revisions of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) since 1992, which for the first time introduced new obligations for farmers to protect the environment. Yet, biodiversity goals remain difficult to fully embed. In the marine domain, integration receives particular attention in the framework of the EU Common Fisheries Policies (CFP). More recently, mainstreaming biodiversity and marine ecosystem protection into the development of the blue economy (e.g. renewable energy, tourism, transport) has gained attention in policy and political debates, as a result of the significant developments of blue economy sectors and the increasing public policy support they receive.



Opportunities for marine biodiversity to sit at “sectors’ tables”

Integrating biodiversity goals, targets, principles and considerations into sector policies can take place at different stages of the policy development process:

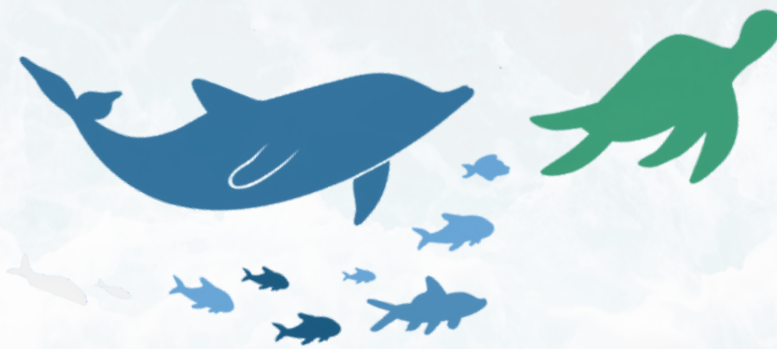
- ➔ **Designing policy at the EU scale**, within political processes of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission require mechanisms (e.g. public consultations, inter-service consultation, ex-ante impact assessments, trilogues) which allows for synergies and possible contradictions between policies to be considered and conditions for enhancing biodiversity in sector policies^[1] established; These processes can and should be used to embed biodiversity considerations from the outset of EU policy design. The integration of biodiversity into sector policy implementation or a better application of biodiversity policy provisions can also be the focus of infringement procedures by the European Commission when an EU country fails implementing EU law fully or in part following complaints from citizens, businesses or other stakeholders or the Commission's own investigation.
- ➔ **Transposing EU regulation into the national regulatory framework**. This stage offers an opportunity to ensure national policies uphold the biodiversity objectives set at the EU level design.
- ➔ **Implementing policies and setting conditions** for their (effective) translation into operational (private and public) decisions, by: developing (strategic) plans scrutinised through Strategic Environmental Assessments; setting dedicated governance mechanisms (e.g. institutional procedures, dialogue platforms...); establishing adequate financing conditionalities; or, strengthening knowledge systems and capacity required for implementing policy requirements and delivering set targets and objectives.
- ➔ **Translating policy requirements into action** at the operational level with changes in practices and investments (guided by Environmental Impact Assessments) by public bodies and private operators. This could mean new requirements for businesses and public authorities to adopt nature-friendly practices and invest in biodiversity-friendly technologies.

As highlighted by CrossGov research, by design and on paper, EU policies need to account for other policies thereby contributing to policy coherence and integration, although with potentially different levels of (legal) obligations across policies. When implemented, however, challenges and misalignment arise with policies that can sometimes work against each other, with opportunities for integration foreseen in regulations remaining largely unexploited. This applies among environmental directives (aligning the Water Framework Directive (WFD), Habitat Directive (HD), Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD)), but even more to the integration between sector policies (e.g. energy, agriculture, fisheries) and those focused on nature and biodiversity (e.g. Birds & Habitats directives, WFD, MSFD). Strengthening coordination and cross-compliance between those policy domains is essential to avoid sector policies undermine the objectives of biodiversity policies.

Facilitating the integration of marine biodiversity (protection) in sector policy implementation

Options to strengthen (marine) biodiversity and ecosystem protection in sector policy implementation include:

- Establish **transversal governance mechanisms** that promote integrated ecosystem management and reduce siloed operations among organizations responsible for different policies. Integrated management bodies could ensure different sectors work together towards the achievement of shared ecosystem restoration objectives.
- Allocate (sector policy-related) targeted **financial resources** to prioritize the reduction or removal of unsustainable practices. This could involve conditioning subsidies on biodiversity-friendly outcomes or dedicating a portion of budgets to restoration and conservation projects in each sector.
- Support **multi-use and nature-positive approaches** (including by setting conditionalities in financing instruments to support such practices) that can e.g. propose optimal integration between renewable energy developments and ecosystem restoration.
- **Strengthen legal requirements** to integrate biodiversity conservation into **sectoral practices**, moving beyond voluntary measures practiced, that rely on the goodwill of professionals or authorities; enforceable standards ensure that biodiversity integration is not optional.
- Set ecological standards in permitting and make marine ecological aspects more explicit in (integrated) **permitting systems**, establishing standardised approaches to account for minimum (marine) ecological standards in permits (e.g., habitat disturbance thresholds, biodiversity offsetting obligations) in sectors like offshore energy, aquaculture or coastal development. This will make ecosystem considerations part and parcel of decision-making for every project.
- Set (marine) biodiversity protection-related obligations or targets in (competing) public **tender procedures**.
- Enhance **data and knowledge transparency**, sharing and accessibility, including by: strengthening data-sharing mechanisms between government agencies, developers, and researchers from the biodiversity and sector communities; developing a single ocean knowledge system co-managed by institutions representing different policies and sectors (e.g. environment, fisheries, transport, energy); harmonizing data, reporting and assessments among different policies and policy domains.
- Elevate (marine) biodiversity as a **political priority**, including by strengthening biodiversity literacy and biodiversity policy literacy (in terms of ambitions, priorities, actions, conditionalities, governance) of sectors' policy makers and stakeholders. This involves training and awareness programs about the value of marine ecosystems and the goals of biodiversity policy
- Develop and strengthen public and stakeholders' **deliberation, deliberative governance** and collective processes across **policies**, e.g. stakeholder forums, cross-sector roundtables and citizen assemblies that will bring diverse perspectives to the table. Such participatory processes build trust and mutual understanding, making it easier to find integrated solutions and increasing buy-in for acceptable trade-offs.
- Strengthen the application of Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) so that insights gained influence plans or project approval ensuring SEAs do not remain exercise on paper, by: carrying out early and meaningful public engagement; improving transparency of how decisions are made; ensuring that long-term, ecosystem-wide and cumulative effects are thoroughly evaluated and duly considered; integrating SEA outcomes into planning and decision-making processes.



Box 1 – Setting incentives at the EU-level to strengthen integration

Efforts made at implementation by Member States and key responsible bodies can be facilitated by EU-level actions besides formal infringement procedures, as presented in CrossGov Policy Brief #2. These include, for example: (1) stronger steering from the EC towards more effective and coherent implementation of fragmented legislation on marine biodiversity protection ; (2) continued enforcement action to mitigate agricultural nutrient pollution, combined with a stricter application of the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) through a result-based approach in CAP financing; (3) EU support to the establishment and management of protected areas; or (4) strengthening the application of MSPD provisions to account for MSFD objectives in offshore wind power development (e.g. to establish 'go to' and 'no go' areas for the development of wind power platforms/schemes).



For **agriculture**, while national plans for implementing the CAP take account of environmental requirements, it is unlikely supported voluntary environmentally friendly practices will be sufficient to achieve healthy marine ecosystems and comply with the WFD and MSFD requirements. Strengthening legal requirements on the integration of biodiversity conservation into farm practices is an option that requires further scrutiny and consideration.

In relation to **fisheries policies**, options that can complement existing measures aimed at better integrating biodiversity protection in fisheries practice (e.g. setting science-informed quotas, regulating fishing gears, establishing no-take zones, implementing temporal and spatial fishing restrictions or combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing) include:

- **Extending the ban on trawling from 3 to 4 or 6 nautical miles** (potentially on a seasonal basis);
- **Fostering the support for small-scale fishing operating with sustainable methods**, enhancing the definition of co-management schemes for protected areas;
- **Improving the discussion on biodiversity-related topics** in already-existing (fisheries) coordination fora;
- **Raising interest of fishers in biodiversity** by involving them into biodiversity monitoring schemes;
- **Supporting the development of regenerating aquaculture and multi-use platforms** that can offer new opportunities for fishers.

More transversally, the participation of sectoral stakeholders (including private operators) in the WFD, MSFD and MSPD processes could be strengthened to enhance awareness and ownership of solutions proposed for the implementation of these directives. Also, governance and knowledge-sharing mechanisms bringing together the fisheries and biodiversity communities at all scales need to be set or strengthened.



Investigations on **offshore wind energy** highlight the current integration gap with a lack of comprehensive and coordinated data regarding the long-term ecological impacts of large-scale offshore wind farms throughout the entire project lifetime.

Overall, there is **limited empirical evidence** about long-term effects on **migratory birds and mammals**, changes to **benthic habitats** and alterations in **overall ecosystem functioning**. Moreover, cumulative effects are rarely well-understood or adequately considered in environmental assessments. Thus, authorisations are often granted on the basis of limited scientific knowledge and partial assessments. As a result, the **ecosystem-based approach required by the MSFD** remains challenging to implement.

There is potential for strengthening the **alignment between offshore wind planning and integrated management frameworks provided by the MSFD and MSPD** by developing clear ecological guidelines for offshore wind energy planning NOT to be considered in valuable and vulnerable marine areas. For example, if certain areas are crucial for biodiversity (due to reef structures, spawning grounds, migration routes), planners should designate these as off-limits or require stricter mitigation measures.

Also, **multi-use and nature-positive approaches presents opportunities for integrating renewable energy and ecosystem restoration at the operational scale**. Developing unified regional sea roadmaps and visions to deliver healthy and sustainable outcomes would also facilitate dialogue among stakeholders with different interests and deliver high-level integration ensuring climate and biodiversity goals are treated as joint, non-negotiable obligations.

Furthermore, **transboundary coordination mechanisms should be strengthened to harmonize ecological standards**, cumulative impact assessments, and planning methodologies across national borders.

Finally, **integrating biodiversity conditionalities into economic instruments is expected to support more positive environmental outcomes and favour integration**: for instance, including biodiversity criteria in offshore wind farm auctions (e.g. allocating extra points for turbine designs or locations that minimize ecological impact) would reward innovation and care for nature by the industry.





Way forward: seizing opportunities set by the European Ocean Pact

Since the start of CrossGov, the EU marine policy scene has evolved with the adoption of the **European Ocean Pact by the European Commission** in 2025. Similar to the EGD, the **European Ocean Pact** emphasizes policy integration as key to the delivery of its ambitions, offering a strategy for implementing existing legislation and achieving policy goals more coherently across sectors. Policy integration and consideration of (marine) biodiversity and ecosystem protection in sector policies is referred to at many places in the European Ocean Pact (see box below). While this new high-level commitment offers a chance to address many of the integration challenges identified above, it will require concrete steps to turn broad principles into concrete action.

Box 2. Strengthening the attention to marine biodiversity and ecosystem health in sector policies: how can the European Ocean Pact help

In addition to the reference to policy coherence in its ambitions, the integration and consideration of marine biodiversity and ecosystem protection in sector policies can be found in many sections of the European Ocean Pact. In particular, the European Ocean Pact:

- Calls for strengthening and modernising maritime spatial planning as a strategic tool, notably through increased **cross-sectoral coordination** at the national level and through a better organised sea basin approach; This underlines that planning for maritime activities (offshore energy, fishing, shipping, etc.) must involve all relevant sectors and consider ecological objectives together, not in isolation.
- Stresses the need for a **source-to-sea** approach for tackling pollution, strengthened by the recently adopted Water Resilience Strategy. Moreover, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will continue to incentivise sustainable agriculture, including measures to help reduce excess nutrients. This integrated view ensures actions upstream (on land or in rivers) support marine biodiversity goals downstream.
- Highlights the importance of an **ecosystems-based approach** that will ensure adequate balance between development and protection;

The European Ocean Pact also proposes **sector-focused measures and actions** aimed at reducing pressures on marine ecosystems, including: (i) promoting fishing techniques compatible with the conservation of targeted species and habitats within the MPAs concerned; (ii) supporting future-proved fishing activities that are more sustainable by improving gear selectivity, reducing negative impacts on the marine ecosystem and eliminating incidental catches of sensitive marine species; and (iii) fostering a transformative change in maritime transport towards climate neutrality and zero pollution.

The European Ocean Pact also makes many references to **sustainability**, implicitly referring to the need for an adequate balance and integration between ecological, social and economic dimensions. Examples include: the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy; initiatives on healthy and **sustainable food, clean** and affordable marine renewable energy; support to the development and deployment of new **sustainable business models** for coastal communities, for instance by incentivising the inclusion of regenerative and restoration activities; or the promotion of a new generation of **Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs)** to contribute to a coherent EU approach for sustainable fisheries and ocean governance. However, the Pact does not specify how marine biodiversity and ecosystem health and protection will be explicitly accounted for in relation to sustainability, a balance that will need to be clarified within the framework of the different initiatives mentioned.

Beyond EU borders, marine biodiversity is a central component of the international ocean governance pillar of the European Ocean Pact. **The Pact expresses strong support for:** (i) the BBNJ agreement with its swift ratification, entry into force and implementation within a sound governance framework for the High Seas areas; (ii) an ambitious Global Plastics Treaty to curb ocean pollution; (iii) the designation of three vast marine protected areas in the Southern Ocean as the best way to conserve Antarctica's unique and pristine marine ecosystems and biodiversity; (iv) the protection of 30% of the High Seas by 2030; (v) a precautionary stance on deep-sea mining, emphasising the need for more research into its potential environmental, biodiversity, and socio-economic impacts; and (vi) the establishment of the International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS) to enable more effective protection and sustainable management of the ocean.

Overall, the European Ocean Pact offers a new opportunity to strengthen the integration of marine biodiversity and ecosystem health and protection into sector policies. In the short term, the **revision of the MSFD alongside the review of the MSPD** offers the possibility to enhance the coherence and synergies between these two EU (marine/maritime) policy frameworks, while strengthening the mechanisms for the effective application of Ecosystem-Based Approaches (EBA) and fostering cross-sectoral cooperation. In the longer term, however, more **fundamental shifts will be needed in the overarching EU policy and societal paradigm**. These include: (i) fully accounting for ecological boundaries (e.g. the ecological ceiling) and social foundations (e.g. equity, justice) in the development of the blue economy; (ii) strengthening the application of socio-ecological approaches to the protection and sustainable use of the ocean; and, (iii) placing regeneration, rather than exploitation, at the core of actions and decisions, alongside a fair and equitable distribution of wealth and prosperity.

As more efforts to enhance policy coherence are considered and implemented, novel research and policy questions have emerged. In particular:

- 1** “How coherent is coherent enough?” To what extent should biodiversity, ecosystem health and protection be integrated into the design and implementation of sectoral policies? Are there limits or trade-offs to consider?
- 2** What are the **practical implications, impacts** (costs and benefits, short to long-terms) and **added-value** (and for whom) of different levels of integration of biodiversity and ecosystem protection in sector policies? What costs or benefits, short-term or long-term, come with fully aligning sector policies with biodiversity goals, and who stands to gain or lose from these changes?
- 3** What can we learn from past and on-going **politics and political processes** related to marine ecosystem protection and management, in order to design political pathways that enable “better policy integration”? By examining how marine protection measures have fared in real-world decision-making (successes and failures), we can design better strategies and **political pathways** to advance policy integration in the future.
- 4** Which narrative on the **synergies between biodiversity and sectoral policies** can raise political attention if we want the policy integration opportunities offered by the Ocean Pact to be fully seized? Since biodiversity is currently not high on many political agendas, we need compelling stories and evidence of how biodiversity and sector interests can align (for example, how a healthy ocean underpins long-term economic prosperity and community well-being), so that leaders and the public see integration not as a necessary but as a desirable condition.



This policy brief has been developed in the context of the EU-funded [CrossGov project](#) that aims at enhancing knowledge on how coherence and cross-compliance of marine-related policies of the European Union (EU) affect the ability to realize the European Green Deal (EGD) and Sustainable Blue Economy. It builds on the outcome of research activities carried out in its **Work Package (WP) 3 entitled Case studies of cross-compliance**. WP3 has focused on: (1) challenges and mechanisms for strengthening the integration between framework directives: the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive – with policy implications are presented in CrossGov Policy Brief N°. 3; and (2) **how EU biodiversity and healthy marine ecosystem policy requirements are taken into account in (agriculture, fisheries and renewable energy) sector policies implementation** - which is the focus of the present policy brief.

Research on the integration of ecosystem health and biodiversity into sector policies has addressed **three questions**:

- Do policy instruments [delivery mechanisms] set for the implementation of sectoral policies adequately internalize key-requirements of EU policies (e.g. MSFD, WFD, MSPD) established to deliver healthy marine ecosystems?
- Do policy instruments set for the implementation of sectoral policies adequately internalize the three EGD objectives of focus in CrossGov?
- What can be learned from impediments and best practices to facilitate the internalization of the key EGD objectives into sectoral policies?

It builds on extensive research carried out in 8 case studies covering different implementation scales and policy integration challenges as illustrated in the map presented below.

Suggested citation style:

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Interested by **more information on research activities and results**? Contact : s.loudin@acteon-environment.eu & p.strosser@acteon-environment.eu

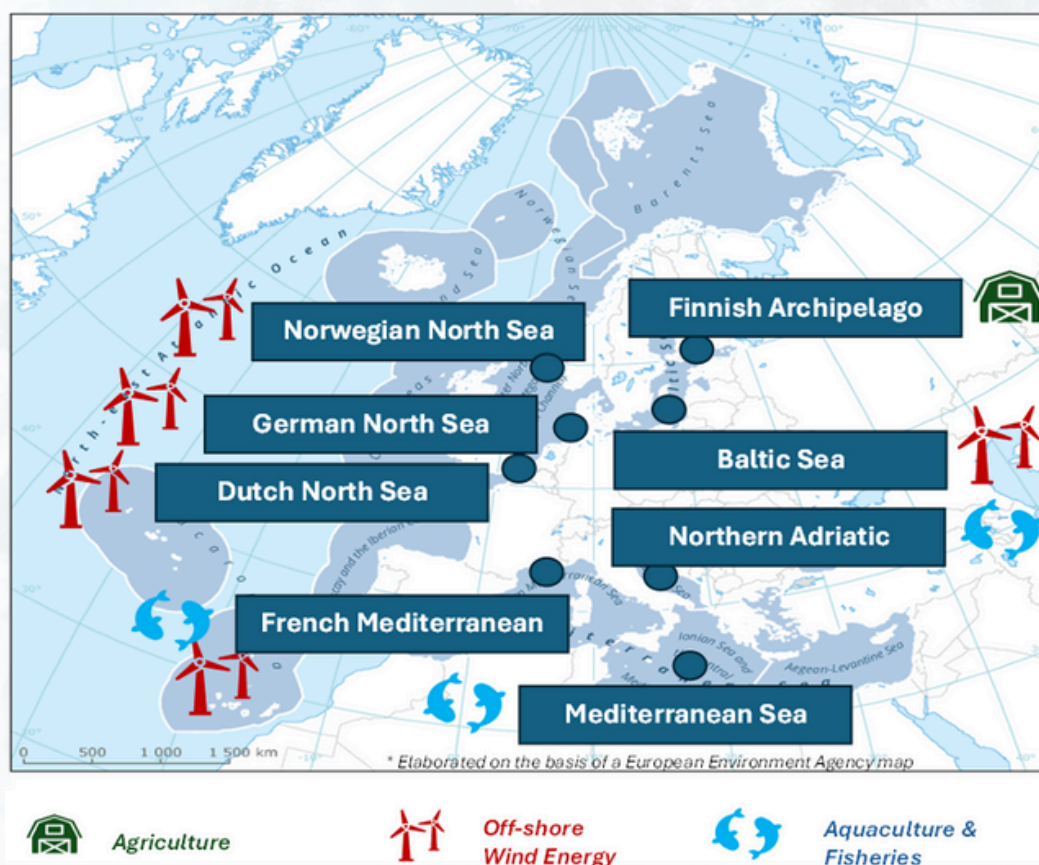


Figure 1: the case study areas in the Horizon Europe CrossGov project.

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