



Press Release

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EU protection of marine environment is shallow

EU action has not led to the recovery of significant marine ecosystems and habitats, according to a new special report published today by the European Court of Auditors (ECA). Its framework to protect the marine environment is not deep enough to restore seas to good environmental condition, while EU funds rarely support the conservation of marine species and habitats. The auditors found that marine protected areas (MPAs) provide limited real protection, while overfishing persists, particularly in the Mediterranean.

The EU is committed to protecting the marine environment through its environmental and fisheries policies. Its main environmental policies are set out in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the Birds and Habitats Directives, and include establishing a network of MPAs. The EU's common fisheries policy aims to ensure that fishing activities are environmentally sustainable and to minimise their negative impacts on the marine ecosystem, as well as providing funding. However, the EU has not succeeded in halting marine biodiversity loss in Europe's seas.

“Due to their economic, social and environmental importance, seas are a real treasure. However, EU action has so far been unable to restore European seas to good environmental status, nor fishing to sustainable levels”, said João Figueiredo, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. “Our audit clearly raises the red flag over the EU’s sea protection.”

The EU framework provides only limited protection of marine biodiversity in practice. The more than 3000 MPAs are probably the most emblematic marine conservation measures. However, although MPAs cast a wide protective net, the auditors point out that it does not run deep. This is in line with a recent assessment by the European environment agency (EEA), which found that less than 1 % of European MPAs could be considered marine reserves with full protection. To be effective, MPAs would need to sufficiently cover the EU's most vulnerable marine species and their habitats, include fishing restrictions where needed, and be well managed. This is far from being the case.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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Similarly, regulatory tools linking the EU's marine biodiversity policy with its fisheries policy do not work well in practice. In the sea areas the auditors examined, such tools have yet to be used successfully. EU law includes provisions on endangered species and habitats. These provisions are more than 25 years old and do not take into account recent scientific knowledge.

Fishing has a considerable impact on the marine environment. Although the common fisheries policy had begun to improve fish stocks in the Atlantic, there were no meaningful signs of progress in the Mediterranean. Fishing there is at more than twice sustainable levels. The EEA recently reported that only 6 % of assessed stocks in the Mediterranean met the 'maximum sustainable yield' criteria.

While EU policies state that EU funding should support marine environment protection, only a small share is used for that purpose. About €6 billion was allocated to the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) for the 2014-2020 period. However, the auditors estimate that the four Member States they visited (Spain, France, Italy and Portugal), had used only 6 % for measures directly related to conservation measures and a further 8 % for measures with a less direct impact on conservation. Of this, they had used less than €2 million (0.2 %) to limit the impact of fishing on the marine environment. Yet EU funding can make a difference, as seen in good examples of projects funded through the EU's LIFE and Interreg programmes.

Background information

The term "seas" is used in this press release to refer to both the Atlantic Ocean and other seas in Europe.

The audit covered the period from 2008 – the year in which the Marine Strategy Framework Directive was adopted – up until March 2020. It focused on the Bay of Biscay and the Iberian Coast, Macaronesia and the Western Mediterranean Sea. The auditors visited the Member States with coastlines on these sea areas: Spain, France, Italy and Portugal.

2020 was a key year for the EU in terms of meeting objectives for the marine environment, and 2021 will see a meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biodiversity. This audit report will certainly feed into discussion on future options.

Special report 26/2020: "Marine environment: EU protection is wide but not deep" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.

The ECA recently published a [report on biodiversity loss on farmland](#).

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice.

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