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Making a splash: bringing ocean learning into every classroom

Europeans care about the ocean, but few understand how their daily choices affect it. EU-funded researchers are working with teachers to bring “blue” education into classrooms across Europe.

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Around 40% of the EU’s population lives within 50 kilometres of the coast, and large parts of the continent’s economy, climate resilience and wellbeing depend on healthy oceans and seas. Yet despite this close connection, understanding of how the ocean works – and how human activity impacts it – remains limited.

“You have people living right by the sea, relying on it every day, but they still don’t know much about it,” said Melita Mokos, a marine biologist at the University of Zadar in Croatia.

Her work focuses on ocean literacy – helping people understand how the ocean functions, why it matters, and how everyday choices affect its health.

Although awareness campaigns have increased in recent decades, many people still underestimate both the pressure human activity puts on the ocean and the benefits society gains from healthy marine ecosystems.

A recent survey of 3 500 young peopleillustrates the challenge. While three-quarters said a healthy ocean matters, almost half believed the ocean is still in good condition.

To help close that gap, Mokos has joined a group of researchers from across Europe involved in BlueLightS, an EU-funded initiative launched in 2024 as part of the EU’s mission to restore our ocean and waters. The project aims to strengthen blue education – a key pillar of ocean literacy – by helping learners of all ages understand their connection to the ocean and role in protecting it.

BlueLightS is one of several EU-funded initiatives tackling the ocean literacy challenge. Sister projects such as ProBleu and SHORE are also experimenting with new ways to connect people to the ocean, from education and community engagement to hands-on learning. While each project has its own focus, they share a common goal: helping people see how closely their lives are linked to the health of the sea.

Connecting the blue dots

Despite growing awareness of ocean issues, researchers say a fundamental disconnect remains between knowledge and action.

“We see a clear gap between what people know about the ocean and what they understand about how their own actions affect it,” said Pierre Strosser, a consultant at ACTeon, an environmental consultancyspecialising in thesustainable management of oceans, coasts and natural resources based in Colmar, in the centre of France’s Rhine valley.

With a PhD in water management and economics, Strosser has the advantage of nearly a decade of experience working on ocean literacy initiatives across Europe. He coordinates the work of the BlueLightS team, which focuses primarily on blue education.

Their approach places the ocean within a broader human–nature ecosystem, including not only seas, but also the rivers and lakes that flow into them.

“The ocean starts in every city – even in Strasbourg, where I live – through the river, through what we consume and even through the air we breathe,” said Strosser.

Their objective is to highlight how people affect the ocean – and how the ocean, in turn, affects them. Plastic litter left on a beach, for example, can be carried into the sea, break down into extremely small particles of plastic, and be swallowed by marine life. Those particles can eventually return to humans through the seafood we eat.

Making education bluer

To put this idea into practice, the BlueLightS team is developing learning resources, training teachers and proposing adaptations to school curricula. They have also built a multilingual knowledge hub. Anyone with a useful resource can access it and upload new material, making it easy for educators across Europe to find and use.

One contributor is Team Malizia, an international offshore sailing team that produces marine learning materials in Dutch, Portuguese, German, and many other languages.

Their My Ocean Challenge programme uses the drama of round-the-world racing to engage children with ocean science and climate solutions.

The other two focus areas – school curricula and teacher training – present a bigger challenge. Strosser and Mokos recognise this, but they believe change here could have the greatest long-term impact.

“We need a systemic approach,” Strosser said. “We cannot work with schools one by one. We need to bring a bit of blue into the whole education system.”

The BlueLightS researchers are testing this approach in France, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Ireland, Finland and Sweden.

In France, Strosser and his team are reviewing school curricula to identify opportunities to integrate blue education themes. Their aim is not to add new content to an already crowded syllabus, but to highlight connections that already exist between people, society and the ocean.

Another way to drive change at scale is by working directly with teachers. The researchers are supporting teacher-led projects across Europe and running training sessions to help educators bring blue topics into their

classrooms.

Teaching the teachers

Last October, Mokos and her team in Croatia welcomed 15 teachers to her Adriatic hometown of Zadar for a two-day training workshop. The session focused on practical ways teachers could incorporate blue education into their classrooms.

The participants came from across Croatia, including inland regions far from the coast, and taught a wide range of subjects, from geography and languages to culture and mathematics.

“The main goal was to show them that, whatever subject they teach, there is always a way to include blue education,” Mokos said. “It’s not just biology.”

Croatian language teachers, for example, were encouraged to explore literature from a new perspective. Many works in the national literary canon reflect marine themes and the country’s long relationship with the sea, offering natural entry points for blue topics.

Mokos said the teachers showed strong interest and enthusiasm. Still, she emphasised that a single training session can only go so far, reinforcing the need for a broader, more systematic approach.

Towards a “blue” curriculum

That is why she is also working with Croatia’s national education and teacher training agency to develop a formal, accredited training programme.

In Croatia, as in many European countries, teachers earn certified professional development credits by attending approved courses. These credits support career progression and can lead to salary increases.

If BlueLightS training becomes a recognised option, more teachers will be able to access it and pass that knowledge on to their students.

“This first training was a pilot,” Mokos said. “Now we want to formalise it and add it to the agency’s catalogue, so teachers can choose it and receive proper certification.”

BlueLightS will run until 2027, but the team wants its impact to last well beyond that.

Their work supports the EU’s goal of restoring the health of oceans, seas and inland waters by 2030 – a mission that depends not only on policy and innovation, but on informed citizens who understand their connection to the ocean.

By weaving ocean literacy into school curricula, teacher training and everyday learning, Strosser, Mokos and their colleagues aim to ensure that future generations grow up seeing the ocean not as something distant or abstract, but as a living system shaped by daily choices.

In doing so, they hope to bring a bit of blue into every classroom – whatever the subject, and wherever that classroom may be.

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More info

- BlueLightS (CORDIS)
- BlueLightS project website

- SHORE
- ProBleu
- EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters