



EUROPEAN UNION



# EU MISSIONS

RESTORE OUR OCEAN AND WATERS



January 2025

## EU Blue Parks Initiative:

*Report of the Third EU Blue Parks Community Workshop (12 November 2024, online)*

### Strengthening the EU Blue Parks Community

#### 1. Summary

The third EU Blue Parks Community workshop, which took place as online event on 12 November 2024, brought together marine conservation experts, researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss and develop strategies for strengthening the EU Blue Parks Community and advancing marine conservation efforts across Europe. The workshop provided a platform for stakeholders to exchange knowledge, collaborate on innovative solutions, and network effectively to **strengthen the EU Blue Parks Community as a catalyst to advance marine conservation strategies across Europe**. This report presents the key takeaways and recommendations that emerged throughout the workshop.

Participants highlighted the need to strengthen the EU Blue Parks Community by **setting clear community goals to focus efforts and achieve measurable outcomes**. They advocated for increased networking through themed workshops, regional working groups, and more interactive tools to foster knowledge exchange among MPA managers, local communities, and authorities. This approach aims to align methodologies, encourage joint projects through collaborative proposals, and promote consistent practices. Enhanced communication strategies, such as sharing positive narratives and best practices that highlight the socio-economic and ecological benefits of MPAs, are vital for building public support for marine conservation.

**Adopting systematic, science-based approaches and promoting synergies between projects** were highlighted as crucial to enhancing marine conservation efforts. Leveraging extensive marine data, utilizing advanced tools for conservation planning, and fostering collaboration among initiatives can accelerate the implementation of effective conservation measures. Active sharing of data, insights, protocols, and guidelines is essential for breaking down silos and developing resilient MPA networks capable of addressing challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss while aligning with European and international targets.

Participants emphasized the importance of **fostering regional and cross-sectoral collaboration to enhance conservation measures**. Building partnerships beyond traditional conservation sectors, such as engaging with the fishing and tourism industries, helps integrate conservation into broader socio-economic activities and strengthens overall impact.

Discussions underscored the significance of **enhancing stakeholder engagement through co-design and co-management**. Involving local communities and stakeholders in planning and governance ensures that conservation strategies align with their needs and values. This approach fosters diverse perspectives, strengthens the overall effectiveness of MPAs, and builds a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members.

## 2. Introduction

On 12 November 2024, the EU Blue Parks Community hosted its third workshop online, themed "**Strengthening the Community**." This engaging virtual event attracted over 100 participants, including MPA managers, local community representatives, environmental authorities, NGOs, and other key stakeholders. The workshop provided a platform for stakeholders to exchange knowledge, collaborate on innovative solutions, and network effectively to **strengthen the EU Blue Parks Community as a catalyst to advance marine conservation strategies across Europe**.

Featuring 9 speakers from EU-funded projects, EC, European and regional agencies, NGOs, and conservation professionals, the event explored processes within the Community and across highly relevant projects and initiatives to advance the protection and restoration of European marine ecosystems in line with Objective 1 of the Mission Ocean and Waters. Great emphasis was placed on collaborative efforts to align methodologies, share best practices, data and foster synergies for greater impact in particular via EC research infrastructures.

All presentations from the third EU BPC workshop can be accessed [online](#). The workshop agenda can be found in the Annex of this report.

This report summarizes the talks and discussion from the third EU BPC workshop, highlighting key takeaways as identified by the speakers and participants. The workshop will be followed by further workshops of the EU BPC in 2025 and the following years.

### *What is the EU Blue Parks Community?*

The EU Blue Parks is an initiative under the Mission Ocean and Waters dedicated to science-based solutions to support the establishment and effective management of marine protected areas in the EU. The EU Blue Parks Community, as part of the Blue Parks Initiative, is a platform that brings together EU Member States national and regional authorities, European marine networks, stakeholders, and research and innovation projects. It aims to help identify and address challenges, share tools, solutions and good practices, and promote innovative approaches to push forward progress in marine protection and restoration in the EU sea-basins. The Community gathers bi-annually at in-person and virtual workshops.

**We invite you to [become an active member](#) of this Community.**

## 3. Strengthening the EU Blue Parks Community

Since its inception in December 2023, the EU Blue Parks Community has experienced substantial growth. The network now encompasses nearly 100 members from approximately 90 distinct organizations, alongside a broader audience engaging through workshops, webinars, and

discussions. Additionally, over 1,500 individuals follow the community's progress via its newsletter, reflecting increasing interest and commitment to its mission.

The community's expansion is not only quantitative but also qualitative, with members representing diverse sectors. The largest subgroup, comprising 38% of the community, consists of scientific research organizations, including major universities, public and private research institutes, and laboratories conducting significant marine-related studies. Private companies constitute 26% of the membership, bringing expertise in ecological restoration, marine renewable energy, aquaculture, tourism, eDNA technologies, and ocean clean-up solutions. Public authorities account for 20%, including national bodies overseeing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), local authorities, and international organizations. NGOs represent the remaining 16%, comprising conservation foundations, research networks, MPA networks, and environmental advocacy groups. A publicly accessible list of member organizations is available online for those who have consented to share their information.

The community's value lies in its breadth of skills and expertise. Over 70% of members are engaged in marine conservation, and 60% focus on biology. Policymaking expertise is represented by more than 50%, complemented by significant involvement in stakeholder engagement, spanning education, governance, and outreach. Additionally, a notable subset of members contributes expertise in Blue Economy sectors, fostering innovative solutions and expanding collaborative opportunities.

Members also bring extensive geographical expertise, with nearly 40% having worked across all European sea basins. Nearly half the community has experience in the Mediterranean, while 40% have worked in the Atlantic. Expertise in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea is held by 26% and 17% of members, respectively, with representation in the Black Sea and Arctic Ocean standing at 11% and 9%. Additionally, 15% of members have experience in EU outer sea regions, and 10% have worked outside the European Union. This diverse coverage enhances the community's capacity to address challenges and opportunities in marine conservation across various contexts.

During the workshop, an interactive session allowed participants to formulate opinions and recommendations for the EU Blue Parks Community and the Mission Ocean & Waters Implementation Platform. These are detailed below:

#### *a. Defining Clear Objectives and Focus*

- Establish clear and measurable aims for the community to achieve over the next two years.
- Simplify, streamline, and harmonize diverse methodologies and outcomes across projects to create a cohesive European framework of MPAs.

#### *b. Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement*

- Increase efforts to involve additional stakeholders such as MPA managers, civil society and representatives of local communities, land-based stakeholders, and recreational users.
- Integrate specialized expertise in areas such as environmental impact assessment, strategic planning, climate change modelling and mitigation, connectivity and invasive species management, conflict resolution and GEDSI (Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion).
- Further engage public authorities responsible for protection, restoration, and enforcement, as well as municipal representatives and policymakers.
- Involve legal entities and lawyers to enhance regulatory and implementation frameworks.
- Foster the involvement of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) experts, authorities, and spatial planners to bridge marine and land-based initiatives and address land-sea interactions.

### *c. Expanding Outreach and Communication*

- Enhance communication efforts to build stronger narratives around the value of MPAs: increase the visibility of economic benefits and quality-of-life improvements linked to marine protection to build public support.
- Share examples of best practices, positive narratives, and good experiences in public engagement to inspire hope and demonstrate success.
- Promote initiatives that engage younger audiences, such as school programs to raise awareness about the ocean, biodiversity, and marine ecosystems.
- Incorporate educators and curriculum planners to integrate ocean literacy into school programs, addressing the current gap in education related to marine protection.

### *d. Strengthening Networking and Synergies*

- Build stronger connections between ongoing projects, working groups and Mission Ocean Lighthouses.
- Support the creation of synergies and knowledge exchange ecosystems, potentially through funded Coordination and Support Actions (CSA).
- Establish connections with international bodies such as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) to ensure global impact and alignment with international standards.
- Link national MPA designation processes to other European and international initiatives to foster integration and synergies.
- Strengthen strategic planning to avoid siloed projects, ensuring coordinated approaches at regional, national, and EU scales.

### *e. Facilitating Practical Collaboration*

- Develop a platform or forum for discussion and interaction among community members, including online forums, regional working groups, and themed focus groups.
- Organize in-person meetings to facilitate relationship building and direct exchange of experiences.
- Provide access to topics of focus and contact information for projects to encourage targeted partnerships.
- Organize thematic workshops, sharing and discussion sessions, and matchmaking opportunities for proposals to enhance collaboration.
- Initiate joint projects and regional collaborations to address shared challenges and opportunities.

Along with these recommendations, participants identified areas where they could specifically support the EU Blue Parks Community:

- Facilitating Connections and Networking:** acting as a bridge between diverse stakeholders and connecting expertise across disciplines, supporting regional discussions and exchanges through regional networks, providing opportunities for collaboration through personal and project-driven contributions, supporting networking opportunities by organizing specific events and discussions.
- Science Communication and Public Engagement:** acting as disseminators of information to raise awareness and support for marine protection and restoration projects.

Participants expressed a strong need for fostering collaboration opportunities in between community-members, both through dedicated sessions during the next workshops and via an online community platform with thematic groups and subgroups.

## 4. Good practices from Community Members

This third workshop of the EU Blue Parks Community offered a platform to explore the latest developments and good practices from community members, many of which are European projects focused on marine protection, including EU Blue Parks projects funded under the Mission Ocean and Waters initiative.

The shared conclusions were clear: effectively protecting and restoring European marine ecosystems requires clear goals, alignment across initiatives and projects, strengthened synergies, active knowledge sharing, and the engagement of diverse actors in conservation efforts. To achieve this, the workshop highlighted key transversal recommendations:

### a) Fostering Regional and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

The workshop underscored the vital role of fostering regional and cross-sectoral collaboration to enhance conservation measures. Building partnerships across sectors can amplify conservation efforts and integrate environmental considerations into broader socio-economic activities. Participants emphasized that promoting regional dialogue, strengthening partnerships with regional bodies, and encouraging international cooperation and knowledge exchange are fundamental to building cohesive and effective MPA networks. Reaching an EU-wide consensus on strict protection criteria was identified as a key need to ensure consistent and effective marine protection measures across Member States. Such alignment is crucial for achieving the EU's biodiversity targets, including the protection of 30% of marine areas by 2030, with 10% under strict protection.

The [BLUE CONNECT](#) project exemplifies this approach by employing collaborative methods to protect and restore marine habitats while enhancing connectivity across European seas. Focused on the Baltic Sea yet linking initiatives across regions, BLUE CONNECT promotes a unified approach to marine protection. By partnering with regional bodies like the Black Sea Commission, the Barcelona Convention, and OSPAR, and addressing co-management challenges through strategic communication, the project develops innovative practices that strengthen MPA networks.

### b) Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement through Co-Design and Co-Management

Engaging stakeholders and local communities through co-design, co-governance, and co-management is essential for strengthening conservation efforts and ensuring alignment with local needs. The workshop underscored the importance of creating an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives enhance conservation strategies. Encouraging stakeholders to participate in ways that suit their capacities and interests reduces barriers and fosters meaningful contributions.

The [MedPan network](#) actively involves Mediterranean stakeholders in developing the MPA 2030 Roadmap, a strategic framework to enhance MPAs across the region. By fostering inclusivity and spotlighting lesser-known projects and initiatives, MedPan encourages broader participation and innovation in conservation.

Similarly, the French Mediterranean [MPA Côte Agathoise](#), member of MedPan Network and managed by a municipality, illustrates effective local governance and stakeholder collaboration. Integrating the MPA into its broader management strategy, the municipality employs adaptive management, innovative monitoring technology, and cross-sectoral integration. This example highlights the importance of flexible and adaptive engagement strategies tailored to the MPA's scale and community structures in particular concerning engagement with fisheries.

### **c) Scaling Up Successful Marine Conservation Models and Promoting Synergies**

Scaling up successful marine conservation models from pilot projects to broader implementation is critical for achieving significant impact. This requires robust biodiversity and ecosystem monitoring to enhance the effectiveness of MPAs in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

The [MPAEurope](#) and BLUE CONNECT projects exemplify this by leveraging data and science for effective conservation planning. Using extensive marine datasets from sources like EMODnet and OBIS and tools such as Zonation software, MPAEurope supports systematic conservation planning at both national and transboundary levels. By sharing data and collaborating with sectors like offshore wind, MPAEurope significantly contributes to resilient MPA networks, adaptive to climate change.

Promoting collaboration and synergies between projects is essential to accelerating marine conservation progress. BLUE CONNECT builds on existing knowledge and bridges gaps to ensure sustainable conservation efforts beyond individual projects. Leveraging established initiatives and networks, such as the EU Blue Parks Community, enhances impact by streamlining resources, sharing best practices, and fostering innovation.

### **d) Advancing Marine Conservation through Advocacy and Community Empowerment**

Advocacy and community empowerment are pivotal in advancing marine conservation efforts. The [FairSeas initiative](#) illustrates this by supporting the Government of Ireland in designating and implementing new MPAs to achieve the 30x30 goal. Through advocacy, political engagement, and stakeholder collaboration, FairSeas provides expertise and promotes robust conservation measures.

By engaging stakeholders and fostering community guardianship, FairSeas creates an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives shape conservation strategies. This initiative underscores the importance of political advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and active knowledge exchange in safeguarding marine environments. It demonstrates how synergy among projects and initiatives can lead to substantial advancements in marine conservation.

## **5. European Research Infrastructures in marine domains and access to marine data for marine protection**

Further efforts on marine protection should be supported by more and better coordinated environmental and socioeconomic data. EU Blue Parks Community members are encouraged to use services of key European marine research infrastructures to improve and connect the knowledge generated in different projects and initiatives.

During the workshop, key European marine research infrastructures were showcased, highlighting their roles in supporting marine observation and integrating and connecting data across regions and across different data portals and databases. Most of these platforms offer functionalities for users to submit their own data and to connect and analyse it alongside extensive existing datasets, promoting collaborative research and informed decision-making.

The services presented during the workshop included various [ESFRI Research Infrastructures](#) in the marine domain. Participants had a more detailed look at one of these infrastructures, the LifeWatch Marine Hub of [LifeWatch ERIC](#), which serves as a hub for marine biodiversity and ecosystem data, supporting projects like BlueConnect. Further, [EMODnet](#), the European Marine Observation and Data Network, was presented as a key platform harmonizing marine data from numerous providers, complementing Copernicus data. Participants were encouraged to make contributions to the EmodNet

platform to further strengthen it as a critical knowledge resource. The [Digital Twin Ocean](#) was also highlighted as a comprehensive tool still in preparation for global marine research, integrating data, models, and artificial intelligence for broad, science-based insights and new applications. Finally, [WISE Marine](#), the information system for Europe's seas, was presented which provides access to data reported by European countries under the MSFD and aims to show progress and distance from reaching good environmental status in the marine environment. Key resources include the [WISE Marine map viewer](#) and a dedicated [Marine Protected Areas page](#) linked to EEA indicators, supporting Natura 2000 annual reporting.

## 6. Looking Forward

Looking ahead, the next major opportunity for exchange will be the **4th EU Blue Parks Community Workshop, set to take place on 6 March 2025 in Brussels**, as part of the European Ocean Days 2025, providing an in-person platform for further collaboration and discussion.

Be sure to sign up for the [Mission Ocean and Waters newsletter](#) to be the first to register for the workshop – more details will be announced soon. To stay informed about the latest news, upcoming events and funding opportunities, visit the [Mission Ocean and Waters service portal](#). If you haven't already, join the [EU Blue Parks Community](#) today and play a key role in shaping the future of marine protection in the EU and beyond.

## 7. Appendix: Workshop Agenda

### ‘Strengthening the EU Blue Parks Community’

The EU Blue Parks Community under the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030" brings together EU Member States national and regional authorities, European marine networks, stakeholders, and research and innovation projects to collaborate on marine protection and restoration in EU sea-basins. The Community aims to help identify and address challenges, share tools, solutions and good practices for marine protected areas (MPAs), contributing to the protection of 30% and strict protection of 10% of EU sea areas by 2030.

This online event is the 3rd workshop in the series of EU Blue Parks Community workshops. More than 80 organisations active on marine protection are already members in this growing Community. This third workshop, themed 'Strengthening the Community,' aims to enhance our collaborative capabilities, share good practices and tools, and explore synergies both within the Community and across the EU.

#### Why attend?

- Engage in interactive discussions with the Community on challenges and means to meet the European and International marine protection targets.
- Learn from expert presentations on good practices for marine protection and get updated on the most recent results from leading European projects and on other tools/services for MPA design and monitoring.
- Exchange on opportunities to enhance cooperation.

**12 November 2024, 10:00 – 12:30 CET**

**(online via MS Teams)**

#### **10:00 Welcome & introduction to event**

- Opening remarks  
*Andreea Strachinescu, DG MARE HEAD of Unit A1*
- Workshop aims and agenda  
*Moderator: Sergio Rossi, Ocean Citizen project coordinator, University of Salento*

#### **10:10 State-of-Play of EU Blue Parks Community & Mission Implementation Platform services**

*Clément Dupont, SML / MIP Ocean*

#### **10:20 Interactive exchange with audience**

#### **10:40 Good practices from Community Members**

- Stakeholder engagement for MPA optimal locations  
*Belinda Bramley, MPA Europe*
- BLUE CONNECT: a collaborative approach to protecting and restoring marine habitats and enhancing connectivity  
*Ivana Stojanovic, Submariner Network*
- Engaging Mediterranean stakeholders towards the MPA 2030 roadmap  
*Carole Martinez, MedPan*
- Governance and stakeholder engagement in a French mediterranean MPA  
*Renaud Dupuy de la Grandrive, "Côte Agathoise" MPA*
- FairSeas: supporting the Government of Ireland to designate and implement new MPAs  
*Donal Griffin, FairSeas*

**Q&A**

**11:35 Services provided by European Research Infrastructures in marine domains and access to marine data**

- Overview of European Research Infrastructures in the marine domain  
*Agnès Robin, Head of Sector Research Infrastructures Policy, DG RTD*
  - Marine hub of LifeWatch  
*Lennert Schepers, Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ)*
  - Emodnet and Digital Twin Ocean  
*Nicolas Segebarth, DG RTD*
  - WISE Marine  
*Joana Costa, EEA*
- Q&A**

**12:20 Preliminary workshop conclusions**

*Moderator: Sergio Rossi, Ocean Citizen project coordinator, University of Salento*

**12:25 Closing remarks**

*Eduardo CARQUEIJEIRO, DG RTD Policy officer, on behalf of Elisabetta Balzi, HEAD of Unit Ocean and Waters, DG RTD*



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