



EUROPEAN UNION



# EU MISSIONS

RESTORE OUR OCEAN AND WATERS



March 2025

## EU Blue Parks Initiative:

*Report of the Fourth EU Blue Parks Community Workshop (06 March 2025)*

### Strict protection in European seas: how it helps people and nature

#### 1. Summary

The fourth EU Blue Parks Community workshop, held as part of the European Ocean Days in Brussels in March 2025, gathered marine conservation experts, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to discuss and advance marine conservation efforts across Europe. The workshop focused on **the transition to achieving 10% strict marine protection, emphasizing its ecological and socio-economic benefits, particularly for biodiversity, fisheries, and coastal communities**. It provided a platform for knowledge exchange, collaboration on innovative solutions, and networking to support more effective and inclusive marine conservation strategies. This report presents the key insights and recommendations that emerged from the discussions.

Participants acknowledged the **well-documented benefits of strict protection**, including enhanced fish stocks, habitat restoration, and increased climate resilience. However, they also highlighted the slow progress toward the EU's 10% target, citing political resistance, enforcement challenges, and sectoral conflicts as major barriers. Scientific evidence alone was considered insufficient to drive implementation - strong political commitment, clear governance frameworks, and sustainable financial and technical support are essential.

A key theme was the need for **adaptive and context-sensitive approaches** to strict protection, recognizing that ecological, economic, and social conditions vary across Europe's marine regions. Participants underscored the importance of **proactive and inclusive stakeholder engagement**, particularly with fisheries, tourism, offshore industries, and local communities. Early involvement and clear communication on how strict MPAs contribute to fisheries sustainability, eco-tourism, and local economies were seen as critical for building trust and securing long-term compliance. Cross-sectoral collaboration was also recognized as a strategic opportunity, with strict protection potentially creating economic synergies and reducing conflicts through well-managed networks.

**Monitoring, enforcement, and adaptive management** were identified as crucial to ensuring that strict protection delivers tangible conservation outcomes. Without strengthened compliance mechanisms and

systematic monitoring, designated MPAs risk becoming ineffective. Participants also highlighted the necessity of integrating climate adaptation into MPA design, given shifting species distributions and habitat changes driven by climate change. Improving connectivity between protected areas and conducting regular ecological assessments were considered essential for building resilience.

The workshop concluded that achieving the EU's 2030 strict protection targets will require **science-driven approaches, stronger political leadership, and economic justifications** to support implementation. Scaling best practices, such as participatory mapping, community-driven enforcement, and evidence-based site selection, was seen as key to overcoming current challenges and accelerating progress toward meaningful marine protection in Europe.

## 2. Introduction

On 06 March 2025, the EU Blue Parks Community hosted its fourth workshop, themed "**Strict protection in European seas: how it helps people and nature.**" This engaging event attracted over 300 stakeholders both on-site and online from a wide range of fields, including marine conservation experts and researchers, practitioners, policymakers, managers of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), industry representatives and NGOs to exchange insights on the role and benefits of strict protection in European seas.

The workshop focused on the **transition to 10% strict protection in European seas**, in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. Discussions explored the **ecological and socio-economic benefits of strict MPAs, challenges to implementation, and pathways to accelerate progress while ensuring effective management**. A central theme was the need to align political ambition, governance frameworks, and enforcement capacity with the realities of marine ecosystems and stakeholder interests.

With 9 speakers from EU-funded projects, the European Commission, national and regional agencies, NGOs, and conservation professionals, the workshop featured expert contributions on **best practices, emerging tools for MPA management, and case studies from across European seas**. Emphasis was placed on improving monitoring and enforcement, fostering stakeholder engagement, and ensuring strict MPAs deliver real conservation outcomes beyond paper protections.

In addition to expert presentations, an **interactive roundtable discussion** provided a platform for MPA managers, scientists, and stakeholders to compare approaches across different regions and governance structures. The discussions highlighted key lessons, barriers, and innovative strategies to strengthen strict protection across Europe's marine networks.

The workshop also underscored the importance of linking strict protection efforts to broader EU initiatives, including the upcoming European Ocean Pact, EMODnet, and the Digital Twin of the Ocean, ensuring that strict MPAs are supported by high-quality data, strategic planning, and long-term policy commitments.

All presentations from the fourth 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. Strict protection state-of-play and case-studies

#### a) Advancing marine protection across Europe: Expanding networks and strict sites

Strict protection has proven highly effective in restoring marine ecosystems, leading to significant increases in species biomass and overall ecological resilience. However, despite the overwhelming evidence of its benefits, the EU remains far from achieving its 10% strict protection target. Currently, only 0.03% of EU seas are strictly protected, and political reluctance, governance challenges, and stakeholder concerns continue to slow progress. While the concept of strict protection is now widely understood across Member States, there are still uncertainties around its practical implementation. However, without stronger political will and broader stakeholder buy-in, scaling up strict protection will remain a challenge. Scientific evidence alone is not enough to drive action; clear communication of socio-economic benefits and sustained engagement with affected sectors are critical.

The Azores stands as a notable example of how political ambition, stakeholder inclusion, and financial investment can expand marine protection. By increasing its MPA network from 15% to 30%, the region now hosts Europe's largest network of protected marine areas. This expansion was accompanied by a structured fisheries restructuring plan, backed by a €10 million fund over five years to mitigate socio-economic impacts. Extensive engagement efforts were instrumental in securing local support, with community-led initiatives, such as the voluntary reserve in Corvo, demonstrating how bottom-up conservation can reinforce compliance and effectiveness. However, the success of these initiatives also highlights the need for sustained financial support, as €3 million was invested in 2024 alone to ensure proper scientific monitoring, enforcement, and engagement.

Ireland is similarly working to expand and strengthen its MPA network, with an ongoing policy and legislative framework shaping its approach. While 10% of Irish waters are under area-based protection through the Natura 2000 network, the proportion under strict protection remains unclear. A key challenge is the high level of non-Irish activity in its waters, with 55% of marine uses originating from external actors, making regulation more complex. Ireland has established an MPA Advisory Group, incorporating diverse sectoral representatives to guide the network's development and ensure legitimacy. A structured, science-driven approach has been taken to identify priority sites, with sensitivity analyses conducted to balance conservation goals with socio-economic realities. The country is now exploring an MPA network approach

to enhance connectivity and support adaptation to climate-driven shifts in species distribution. With over €15 million in funding secured through MPA-LIFE-IRELAND, Ireland aims to meet the EU's 30% MPA target while ensuring that strict protection remains a key component of its conservation strategy.

### **b) Case Studies on the benefits of strictly protected marine areas**

Despite progress in expanding MPA networks, significant gaps remain in both protection levels and management effectiveness. The Baltic Sea illustrates this challenge, with 16.6% of its waters designated as MPAs, yet none classified under strict protection. Many of these sites lack effective management measures, and some only safeguard terrestrial features while leaving marine ecosystems unregulated. The Protect Baltic project is working to address these issues by systematically collecting data on existing MPAs, management plans, and enforcement structures. A key component of this effort is the development of the Baltic Sea MPA Portal, which will centralize data and provide a clearer picture of conservation effectiveness in the region. Cost assessments have also been integrated to evaluate financial requirements for enforcement and monitoring, as securing dedicated funding remains a major hurdle. Engaging MPA managers has proven crucial in understanding the real-world challenges of implementation, with political landscapes often determining the feasibility of strict protection.

Drawing on international best practices, the LIFE Marha project has analysed 27 MPA case studies across Europe, identifying key success factors for effective strict protection. A recurring theme across these cases is the importance of a science-based, participatory approach to site designation. Habitat mapping, ecological assessments, and early stakeholder engagement have been central to ensuring long-term viability. Case studies highlight that effective communication tools, dedicated dialogue platforms, and making scientific findings accessible are essential for securing broad support. However, management challenges persist, particularly regarding enforcement capacity, staffing constraints, and the ability to adapt to climate change.

Scientific research from Lyme Bay MPA in the UK underscores the ecological value of strict protection. Studies demonstrate that fully protected marine areas are more resilient to climate-driven disturbances, with reefs in Lyme Bay recovering from storm impacts significantly faster than areas exposed to bottom trawling. Whole-site protection was found to be considerably more effective than feature-based management, reinforcing the argument for ecosystem-scale conservation. Additionally, the presence of strictly protected areas may provide climate refuges for vulnerable species, further enhancing ecosystem resilience in the face of accelerating environmental change.

The discussion also raised broader questions about measuring conservation impact beyond surface coverage figures. Ensuring that MPAs remain effective requires adaptive planning that considers climate-driven species shifts, ecosystem connectivity, and long-term socio-economic dynamics. Participants emphasized the need for better decision-support tools that can translate scientific data into actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. The role of structured, science-based advice, such as ICES recommendations, was highlighted as crucial for ensuring that MPA expansion aligns with fisheries management and broader restoration efforts.

### **c) Building local stakeholder engagement as a key success-factor**

Achieving 10% strict protection requires not just strong governance but also local buy-in and long-term stakeholder engagement. Evidence suggests that well-managed MPAs can deliver substantial economic benefits, particularly through tourism and sustainable fisheries. Research from Nord University (Norway) highlights that in areas where strict MPAs have been implemented, local economies have thrived, with

increased fish stocks leading to higher catches along MPA boundaries. Strict protection can also attract eco-tourism and recreational fishing, generating jobs and stimulating regional development. Importantly, studies have found no recorded cases of fisheries losing revenue due to the establishment of strict MPAs, countering one of the most common concerns among stakeholders.

However, ensuring that strict protection is embraced by local communities requires continuous trust-building and engagement. The BioProtect project has demonstrated how participatory mapping can be an effective tool for understanding conservation priorities and potential conflicts. By incorporating input from diverse stakeholders, including those who might not typically engage in environmental decision-making, the project provides a more inclusive and democratic approach to MPA planning. Findings show that people tend to prioritize protection for areas close to where they live or frequently visit, underscoring the importance of aligning conservation efforts with public values. Additionally, mapping has helped visualize conflicts between fisheries and marine wildlife, offering a structured way to navigate competing interests and build consensus on protection measures.

The Blue Connect project further emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in enhancing MPA effectiveness. By fostering collaborative MSP across all five European sea basins, the initiative seeks to bridge gaps in the implementation of EU and global conservation policies. The project prioritizes interactive, dialogue-based approaches over rigid governance frameworks, ensuring that MPA managers, industry representatives, and local communities play an active role in shaping conservation strategies. Developing ecosystem-based management blueprints and co-designing conservation solutions with affected stakeholders are seen as crucial steps in achieving both ecological and socio-economic sustainability. The project also aims to create long-term ownership of MPAs, ensuring that conservation efforts remain resilient beyond individual project timelines.

Ultimately, the session reinforced that while strict protection presents challenges, it also offers undeniable opportunities. By aligning conservation goals with economic incentives, improving communication around benefits, and integrating scientific research with local knowledge, strict MPAs can become not only viable but widely supported. Scaling up successful approaches, such as community-led enforcement, participatory governance, and science-driven site selection, will be key in overcoming the current barriers to implementation.

#### **4. Roundtable panel – Towards strict marine protection: operational insights and collaborative actions**

The EU Blue Parks Community workshop introduced a roundtable panel discussion to foster an interactive dialogue on the operational challenges and collaborative pathways for advancing strict marine protection in Europe. The discussion brought together experts from marine conservation organizations, policymakers, and MPA managers to reflect on practical solutions, highlight key barriers, and outline priority actions for achieving the 10% strict protection target.

The shared conclusions were clear: strict protection is essential for marine ecosystem recovery, but its expansion remains hindered by governance bottlenecks, lack of investment, and insufficient stakeholder engagement, leading to potential overall failure of the 2030 conservation and restoration targets. Progress will depend on leveraging community networks, aligning top-down and bottom-up efforts, securing long-term financial support, and ensuring political commitment to drive meaningful change.

#### **Key operational priorities for advancing strict protection**

Participants emphasized that achieving strict protection at scale requires a structured, multi-faceted approach integrating ecological, economic, and governance perspectives. Carole Martinez (MedPAN) stressed the importance of leveraging networks and communities of practice to accelerate implementation, highlighting their potential role within the proposed European Ocean Pact. A centralized platform or one-stop shop for MPA managers, policymakers, and conservation practitioners could improve knowledge exchange, align conservation standards, and support the practical implementation of strict protection across Europe. Additionally, the need for localized climate adaptation strategies was underscored, particularly in the face of shifting species distributions and ecosystem changes.

Despite growing awareness and commitments under the 30x30 target, Emmanuel Gonçalves (Oceano Azul Foundation) pointed out that there is still no concrete roadmap for reaching this goal. Establishing clear, enforceable standards for strict protection is critical to ensure consistency and prevent dilution of conservation efforts. This must be supported by a well-defined strategy that includes inclusive decision-making, proper investment allocation, and fair compensation mechanisms for affected stakeholders.

Nicolas Fournier (Oceana) advocated for stronger communication efforts to convey the urgency and benefits of strict protection beyond conservation circles. The concept of "Super MPAs", where strict protection is maximized to deliver significant ecological and socio-economic gains, should be promoted more effectively. Ensuring strategic investment, avoiding the proliferation of paper parks, and embedding strict MPAs into the EU Ocean Pact framework were highlighted as key policy priorities.

### **Three steps to promote the development of strictly protected MPAs**

Several speakers outlined concrete steps to scale up strict protection. Emma Sheehan (UK MPA Lyme Bay) emphasized that improved public engagement and education, including targeted outreach for younger audiences, could build broader societal support.

Italian MPA representatives from Isole Egadi (Salvatore Livreri Console) and Torre Guaceto (Francesco de Franco) emphasized that despite the country's ambitious goals to double its MPA coverage and increase strictly protected marine areas threefold, a lack of political will to implement, unclear regulatory frameworks, and staff capacity remain major barriers. Without sufficient human and financial resources, conservation goals will remain unattainable. Clear use-rights, compensation mechanisms, and better integration of fisheries and agriculture policies to direct EU funding toward MPAs was also seen as a necessary steps.

Sylvain Blouet (French MPA Côte Agathoise ) reinforced the importance of building trust over time. In their case, full support from local fishers was secured through persistent, daily engagement. Simply designating MPAs is insufficient; on-the-ground presence and active participation from MPA managers are essential for ensuring compliance and long-term success. Moreover, sustainable funding models, such as the LIFE Marha project, which provided an 8-year funding framework, were recognized as crucial for continuity and effectiveness.

Steven Degraer (BLUE4ALL project) emphasised a broader governance perspective, cautioning against purely top-down conservation approaches. Many MPAs remain politically stalled due to misalignment between scientific recommendations, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making processes. Establishing an MPA Managers' Network was proposed to streamline knowledge-sharing, ensure that best practices are accessible, and consolidate practical tools, such as spatial planning software and engagement mechanisms, into a shared platform for conservation practitioners.



## Key takeaways and next steps

The discussion underscored that **strict protection cannot be achieved without clear governance, strategic funding, and deep stakeholder engagement**. Several immediate actions were identified:

- **Bridging communication gaps:** Ensuring that strict MPAs are presented as beneficial, not restrictive, by highlighting their role in boosting fisheries, tourism, and local economies.
- **Addressing financial gaps:** CINEA was urged to prioritize funding for **transitional support and stakeholder compensation**, rather than just monitoring.
- **Strengthening political accountability:** Encouraging national governments to commit to **clear roadmaps for strict protection**, backed by enforceable policies and dedicated investments.
- **Empowering MPA managers:** Involving local conservation practitioners in EU funding and evaluation processes to ensure practical implementation strategies are realistic and effective, and building a European network of MPA managers to facilitate exchange and training on state-of-the-art management tools.

By fostering collaboration between governments, conservation organizations, and MPA practitioners, strict protection can become a widely accepted, well-supported, and effectively enforced marine conservation strategy in Europe. However, time is running out and without significant acceleration, the EU risks missing its 2030 strict protection target.

## 5. Looking Forward

Looking ahead, the next major opportunity for exchange will be the **5th EU Blue Parks Community Workshop, set to take place as a virtual event in late 2025**.

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.

## Appendix: Workshop Agenda

### 4th EU Blue Parks Community Workshop

#### **‘Strict protection in European seas: how it helps people and nature’**

Place: **European Commission, Charlemagne building (CHAR), Brussels. Room: JENK**

Format: In-person; streaming available

*The EU Blue Parks Community under the **EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030"** brings together EU Member States national, regional and local authorities, European marine networks, businesses, and research and innovation researchers and their projects to collaborate on marine protection and restoration in EU sea-basins.*

*With **107 member** organisations in January 2025, 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.*

*The **4th European Blue Parks Community workshop, themed 'Strict protection in European seas: how it helps people and nature'**, will explore the transition to 10% strict protection, emphasizing evidence-based benefits for biodiversity and ecosystems, fisheries and coastal communities, offering actionable insights into how strict protection can strengthen conservation while supporting well-being and sustainable livelihoods.*

*Regularly highlighted by the community members, strict protection at sea appears as a crucial opportunity to meet the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the EU Biodiversity 2030 and the Mission Ocean and Waters targets, with a reinforced need for sharing of efficient tools, strategies, and governance models.*

#### **Why attend?**

- *Learn from expert presentations and a roundtable discussion with MPA managers and other experts on good practices for marine protection and get updated on tools/services for MPA design, implementation and monitoring across different sea basins.*
- *Engage in interactive discussions with the community on challenges and means to meet the European and international marine protection and restoration targets.*
- *Exchange on opportunities to enhance cooperation.*

13:45 *Welcome coffee*

#### **14:30 Introduction and opening statements**

*Magdalena Andreea Strachinescu Olteanu, DG MARE  
Andrea Vettori, DG ENV*

#### **14:45 Session 1 – Strict protection state-of-play and case-studies**

Moderators: Roberta Zobbi (DG MARE) and Eduardo Carqueijeiro (DG RTD)



- **State of play with EU Biodiversity strategy target for strict protection in marine areas**  
*Vedran Nikolic, DG-ENV D.3*
- **Establishing Europe's largest MPA network**  
*Rui Martins, Blue Azores, Azores Regional Government (PT)*
- **Expanding and strengthening marine protection in Ireland**  
*Richard Cronin, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (IE)*

#### Q&A

- **Ensuring sufficient protection and restoration in the Baltic Sea's marine environment**  
*Jannica Haldin, EU project PROTECT BALTIC, HELCOM & Estefania Cortez, Coalition Clean Baltic*
- **Highlighting international best practices for strict protection**  
*Emilie Riclet, SML, EU LIFE project Marha (FR)*
- **Ecological benefits, resilience to climatic nexus**  
*Emma V. Sheehan, Lyme Bay MPA (UK)*

#### Q&A

- **Boosting local economies through strict protection**  
*Mark John Costello, Nord University (NO), EU project MPA-Europe*
- **Identification of conservation areas and conflicts through participatory mapping**  
*Vera Helene Hausner, UiT Arctic University of Norway, EU project BioProtect*
- **Engaging stakeholders for successful implementation**  
*Margarita Stancheva, Center for Coastal and Marine Studies (CCMS), EU project Blue Connect*

#### Q&A

16:45 Coffee break

### 17:15 Session 2 Roundtable panel – Towards strict marine protection: operational insights and collaborative actions

Moderator: Alberto Zocchi (CINEA)

- *Carole Martinez, MedPAN*
- *Emanuel Gonçalves, Oceano Azul Foundation (PT)*
- *Emma V. Sheehan, Lyme Bay MPA (UK)*
- *Francesco de Franco, Torre Guaceto Marine Protected Area (IT)*
- *Nicolas Fournier, Oceana*
- *Salvatore Livreri Console, Isole Egadi Marine Protected Area (IT)*
- *Steven Degraer, EU project BLUE4ALL*
- *Sylvain Blouet, Côte Agathoise MPA (FR)*

#### 18.20 Closing remarks

*Elisabetta Balzi, DG RTD*

18:30 End



© European Union, 2024

Reuse is authorised provided the source is acknowledged and the original meaning or message of the document are not distorted. The European Commission shall not be liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse. The reuse policy of the European Commission documents is implemented by Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39).

All images © European Union, unless otherwise stated.

PDF