

Marine biodiversity and SMEs

The role of marine biodiversity-related SMEs

By **Róisín Nash**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for some 99% of all EU enterprises and two-thirds of all employment. Thus their potential contribution to the EU target of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 is very large. There are many SMEs using biodiversity directly or indirectly, but we know little about the sector in terms of its size, the difficulties and opportunities faced by companies or the business strategies they adopt.

What role do SMEs have?

SMEs form a very heterogeneous group as participants in biodiversity research and applications and as users of various kinds of biodiversity and biodiversity information, and they form an important bridge between fundamental research and major end-users such as the energy industry, fisheries as well as policymakers at regional, national and EU, and international level.

Marine SMEs (MarBEF)

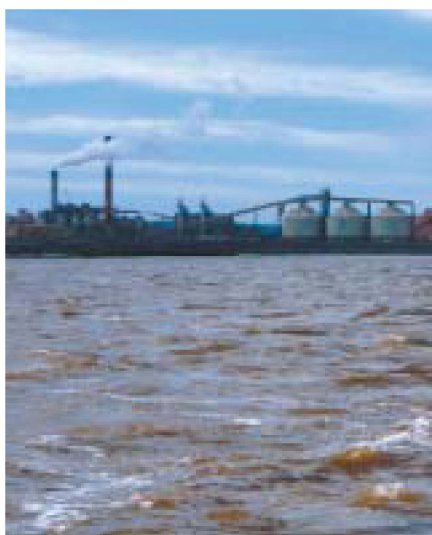
MarBEF's 'think tank' has identified three main groups of SMEs within the marine biodiversity sector:

- Producers, exploiters and marketers of biodiversity (mariculture, fisheries, tourism, bioprospecting, etc).
- Manufacturers and developers of equipment and products (commercial equipment and gear for the group above, research equipment, etc).
- Research and consultancy companies providing a service to industry and governments.

This latter group of SMEs provides a key strategic communication link between research and industry. However, progress in science and technology is, in fact, so rapid and in so many fields that, in general, consultants find it difficult to keep updated. In fact, scientists themselves are only able to keep themselves updated in a highly specialized niche area of knowledge. Similar to consultants, scientists are, if the truth be told, not unlike the general public when something outside of their field is being discussed. Direct involvement in a network such as MarBEF allows consultants (for example, the MarBEF partners EcoServe (in Ireland) and Akvaplan-niva (in Norway)) to stay up-to-date and involved with the latest research. Knowledge gained here is in turn applied in areas such as environmental impact assessments (EIAs) which have become an increasingly important tool – not

only to assess the environmental effects of a proposal but to aid the design with the objective of eliminating or minimising any associated environmental problems.

The clear message appears to be that the aims and objectives of all SMEs are primarily commercial and any activities that SMEs become involved in need to, in the long or short term, generate income. While MarBEF has been successful in attracting further SMEs as associated partners during its lifetime, the future challenge remains: how to retain and increase the number of SMEs within the European Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning Virtual Institute (EMBEF). It will be an essential task of the MarBEF think tank in the coming months to identify and overcome any potential barriers to SME participation.



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Case study (Ireland)

The main direct market for biodiversity in Ireland is aquaculture and fisheries and to a lesser extent the oil and gas industry. The driving force behind marine biodiversity-based consultancies is national and European legislation. This has required developers and industry to take account of environmental issues.

The implementation of the Water Framework Directive has provided a significant momentum to the ecological consultancy market. Prior to this the incorporation of both the Habitats Directive and the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive into Irish law initiated a momentum for marine biodiversity-related consultancy work. The Convention for Biodiversity highlighted the need for local and national biodiversity plans throughout Ireland. Public pressure and visibility has driven the need for consultation and for issues to be addressed prior to legislative requirements.

The marine sector is relatively undeveloped in comparison to the terrestrial or freshwater sector. There are no SME consultancy companies dealing exclusively with the marine environment in Ireland. All the SMEs involved in marine work in Ireland also provide services for freshwater and/or terrestrial consultation. In comparison to the marine sector, where it is not feasible to work exclusively as a sole trader, there are numerous consultancies and sole traders who are exclusively terrestrial-orientated.

General awareness of marine issues is still maturing in Ireland and is now becoming a contributory force towards the growth of marine biodiversity-related SMEs. Changes to regulations (EIA Directive, Habitats Directive, Wildlife Act, Birds Directive and the Water framework Directive), have increased the obligations and responsibilities of both the developer and the regulator, resulting in biodiversity research at a national level becoming a business.

An Irish example of a marine biodiversity-related SME is Ecological Consultancy Services (EcoServe), an ecological consultancy specialising in freshwater and marine systems. While EcoServe carries out both marine biodiversity consultancy and research, you could say that in fact it is all consultancy, but some of it is commercial. Other emerging sectors are marine tourism and leisure and, interestingly, some are taking advantage of offshore developments such as wind farms to base their business on. As such, the marine biodiversity SME market in Ireland is still maturing.