



Maritime Spatial  
Planning for the EU's  
seas and oceans:  
what's it all about?

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European Commission

# Maritime Spatial Planning for the EU's seas and oceans: what's it all about?



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# Foreword

**In a nutshell, maritime spatial planning is about creating new opportunities for economic growth and job creation in Europe, while safeguarding the marine biodiversity and cultural heritage that our seas provide.**

## Our relationship with the sea

Europeans have always depended on the sea for their livelihoods, well-being and economic success. As such, our relationship with the sea is deeply engrained in our culture and history.

Europe boasts an astonishingly vast array of seas and oceans. The European continent borders the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Channel, the North Sea and the Baltic; the EU also has outermost regions in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans. All of these seas and oceans, with the rich biodiversity of their marine life, have helped shape our proud maritime cultural heritage. Making the most of our maritime activities, while preserving the environment of Europe's seas and safeguarding our cultural heritage, is very important for our identity and for the legacy we hand down to future generations.

## Opportunities galore!

The close ties which all European countries enjoy with the sea are not merely a product of geography: they are also clearly reflected in our economic activities. The seas have been used for transport and fishing for centuries, but, more recently, new ways to use the seas have emerged. Communication cables, energy pipelines and renewable energy plants are a basic necessity and an economic boon, while coastal tourism and recreation are a major source of income for some countries and regions.

We now find ourselves with the dual risk of increased competition for space between these activities and of degradation of the marine environment. We must confront this risk head-on if we are to avoid leaving the seas prey to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century gold rush!

Europe's new Integrated Maritime Policy sets out how we can manage our seas and oceans sustainably and, in the process, create new jobs and economic opportunities, meet our targets for reducing our carbon footprint and keep our seas healthy for generations to come. Maritime spatial planning can help us do this in a coordinated and efficient way.

## The way forward

We are not starting from scratch here. Some EU Member States have considerable experience in planning and managing the use of maritime space, and much research has been carried out internationally in this area.

What the European Commission is doing is building on this experience and working with Member States and stakeholders towards the implementation of a coherent set of principles for maritime spatial planning across the EU. I strongly believe that the EU must show the rest of the world how the oceans and coastal seas can be used sustainably and how the marine environment and biodiversity can be preserved. Europe lives by the sea and off the sea, and therefore has a responsibility towards the sea. The European Commission is committed to pursuing its efforts to promote and facilitate the development and use of maritime spatial planning within the European Union as part of our new sustainable and integrated approach to managing our seas and oceans.



**Fokion Fotiadis**, *Director-General of the European Commission's  
Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries*

# 1. What is maritime spatial planning?

**Maritime spatial planning** (MSP) is a process for planning and regulating all human uses of the sea, which also sets out to protect the marine ecosystems in which these activities take place and safeguard marine biodiversity.

Maritime spatial planning is designed to promote the rational use of the sea and to improve decision-making. It seeks to balance sectoral interests and use space more efficiently, thereby contributing to the long-term sustainable use of marine resources. In addition, maritime spatial planning should provide enhanced legal certainty to those who are developing activities at sea, and will thus be an important element in harnessing the potential for growth in emerging and growing sectors.

Put simply, maritime spatial planning is all about providing jobs, economic benefits, legal certainty, equal opportunities for all maritime sectors and environmental sustainability.

In order to do this, maritime spatial planning:

- applies ecosystem-based management;
- involves all stakeholders;
- allocates space for multiple and potentially competing uses, as well as for marine nature protection;
- regulates sea use where necessary, and
- oversees the benefits to be gained from the sustainable use of our seas, resources and ecosystem services.



## 2. Why bother with spatial planning at sea?

Europe needs more maritime jobs and business opportunities to get its economy back on its feet. Furthermore, we need new renewable energy sources if we are to meet our new CO<sub>2</sub> targets and, in more general terms, we must come up with the means to hit the environmental targets we have set ourselves.

The closer we get to the mainland, the more crowded the sea becomes, and this heightens the risk of conflicts and environmental damage. Competition for space and ambiguities caused by poor planning are expensive to resolve after the fact and create a sense of uncertainty that inhibits entrepreneurs from investing in maritime activities. That is why it is so important that we attract investors by accommodating all competing sea uses, without destroying our marine environment in the process.

The best way to avoid conflicts is to prevent them from occurring in the first place. This is where maritime spatial planning

and its concern for the ecosystem can excel and bring the certainty we all desire. MSP combines the key ingredients of economic vibrancy and sustainability and wraps them in a well-oiled cooperation and planning framework. Its range of planning instruments provides stability and transparency, thereby generating a favourable climate for investment in maritime activities. In turn, that investment helps create growth and jobs in maritime sectors. So the use of maritime spatial planning will lead to a more competitive EU maritime economy and make Europe a more attractive prospect for foreign investment.

Maritime spatial planning has another crucial role to play – namely in climate change mitigation. The EU has set itself the target of increasing the share of renewables in energy use to 20 % by 2020 as part of its efforts to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> footprint. Most of this renewable energy is likely to be produced by wind



### *Offshore wind energy production*

or wave energy, with the majority of energy plants placed at sea. However, installing them haphazardly with no regard for other interests might impact negatively on marine life such as sea birds and sea mammals, and have knock-on effects for the maritime traffic upon which our export trade depends, fishing activities and aquaculture sites. As a result, poor planning may spoil the otherwise beneficial development of renewable energy.

As climate change starts to bite, Europe may well have to deal with rising sea levels, acidification and increasing water temperatures and with damage to coastal and low-lying regions. Maritime

spatial planning can provide cost-effective and sustainable solutions to the threats posed by climate change – for instance by finding the most suitable and environmentally friendly space for the sand extraction needed for beach nourishment.

Ecosystems stand to gain most when sea areas are managed across borders and in conjunction with areas of land. Maritime spatial planning allows EU Member States to carry out planning for a given site, sub-region, sea basins or large marine ecosystem in line with environmental legislation, impact assessments and integrated management plans.

### 3. What is the EU's interest in maritime spatial planning?

#### A growing number of EU Member

States have already launched maritime spatial planning measures or will soon be doing so. Although Member States are responsible for maritime spatial planning, action at EU level brings great extra benefits.

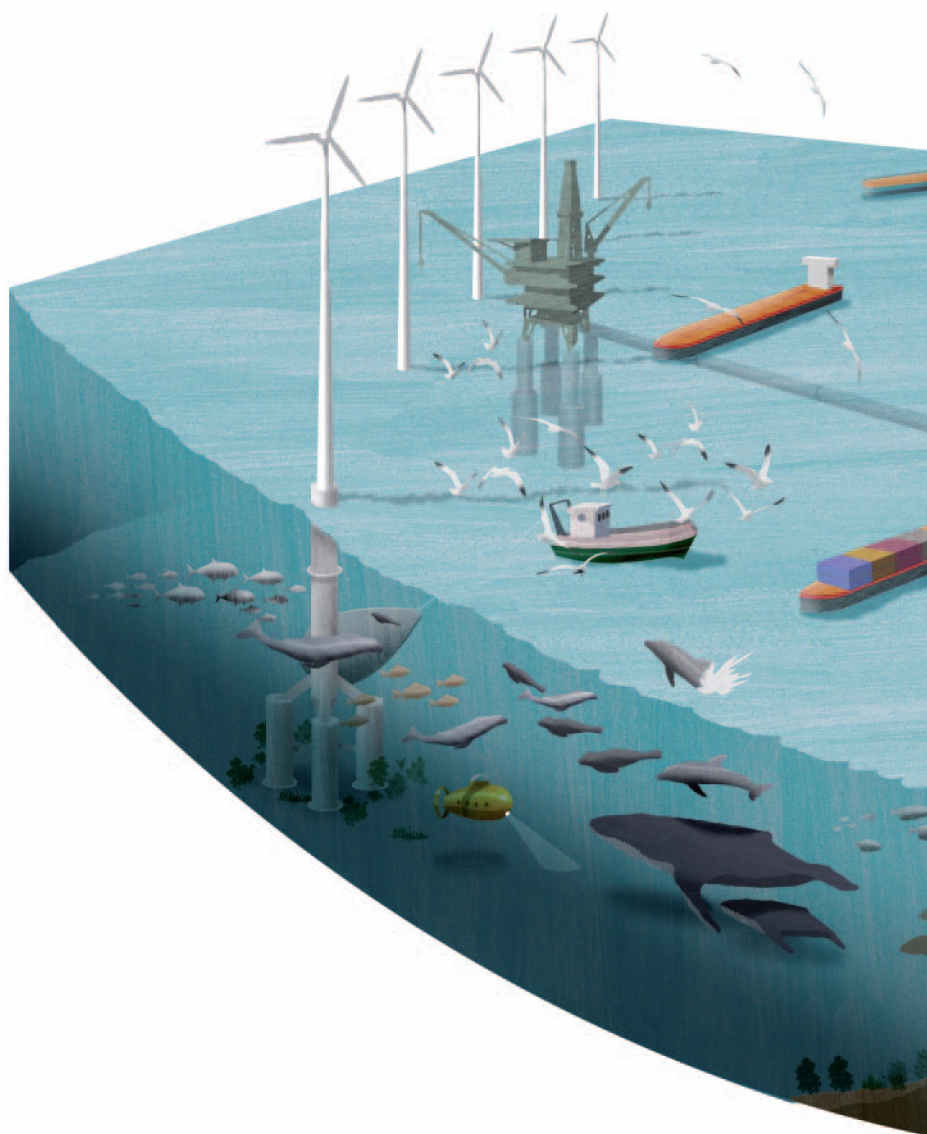
By developing a common approach, EU Member States can deal in a more effective way with maritime matters which are often interlinked and transcend national borders. Action at a European level can do much to boost work on common challenges such as climate change, the global competitiveness of the EU's maritime economy, cross-border issues and the management of maritime activities in line with ecosystem concerns.

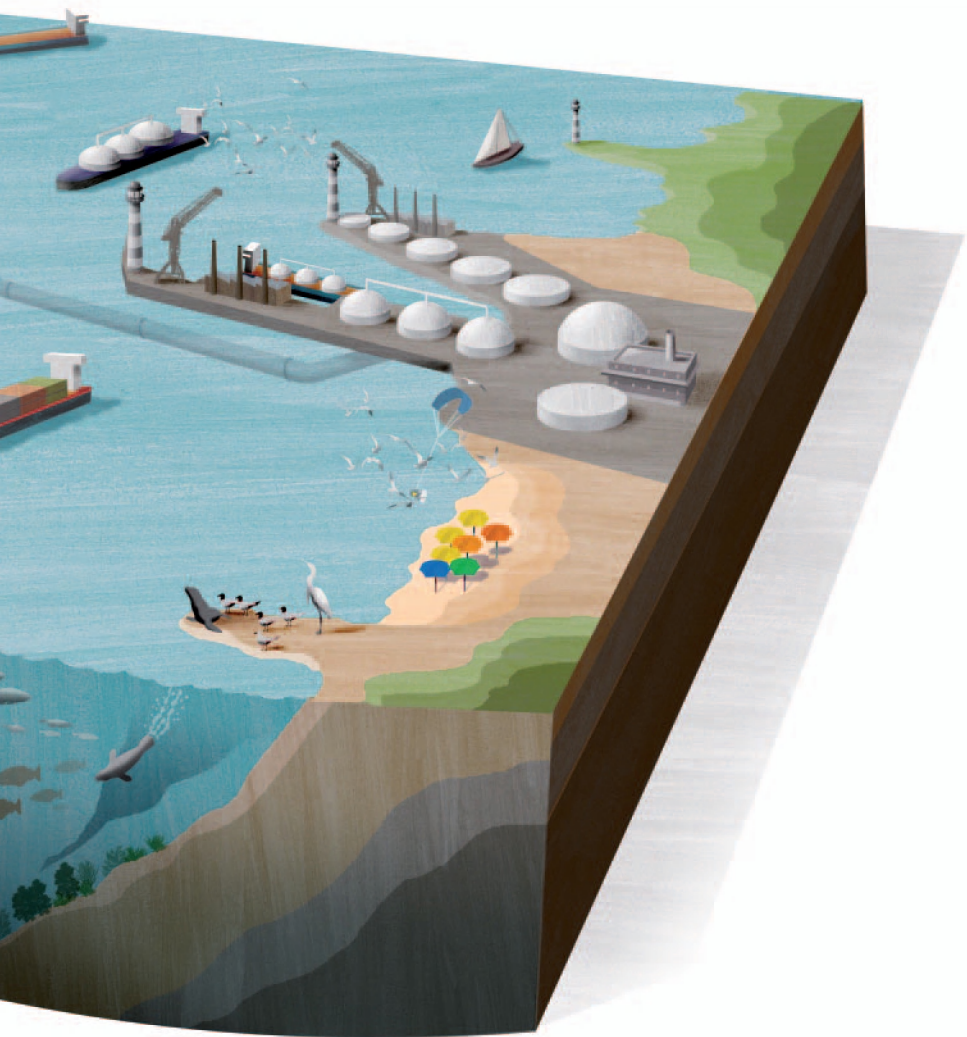
The EU's role here is to facilitate understanding and coordination between Member States in order to tackle these

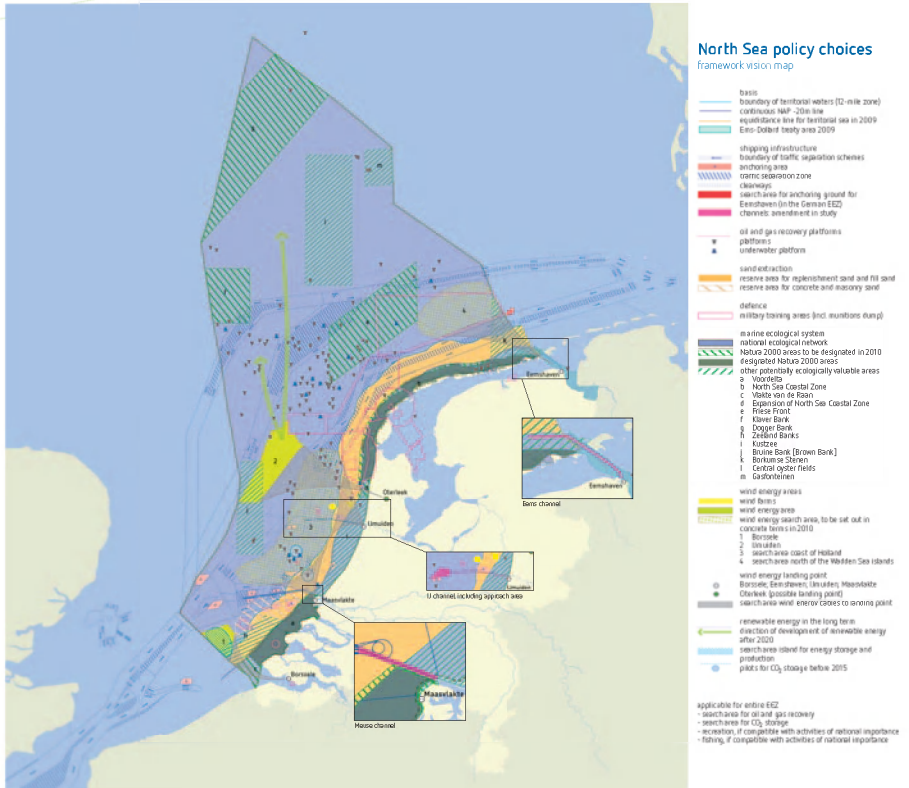
common challenges. Member States with the same approach to managing marine space in the same sea basin will find it easier to cooperate. The Commission is therefore looking to encourage Member States to take cross-border impacts into account in their national decision-making.

Imagine, for example that some businesses are looking to investment in an offshore wind farm straddling two or more Member States. In such cases cross-border cooperation is particularly important and the EU could have a role to play in facilitating and streamlining the process.

A common approach and improved coordination between Member States on maritime spatial planning would also make procedures less cumbersome, clearer for operators, lowering overall administrative costs. It would







*A map of the planned sea-use in The Netherlands' North Sea area*

facilitate the management of shared sea areas and contribute to improved availability and use of spatial data and

the development of common principles for data analysis.



## 4. What has the EU done so far?

In November 2008, the European Commission adopted a roadmap for maritime spatial planning entitled 'Achieving Common Principles in the EU'.<sup>1)</sup> The roadmap identifies 10 key principles for maritime spatial planning, all firmly based on the ecosystem approach. Through the publication of

this document, the European Commission encourages implementation of maritime spatial planning at national and European level and fuel the debate on a common approach to MSP in the EU.

Throughout 2009, the European Commission, working closely with



*The European Commission's Maritime Spatial Planning Workshop, Stockholm 2009*

1 Roadmap for Maritime Spatial Planning: Achieving Common Principles in the EU – COM[2008] 791 – <http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs>



*Recreational fishing in Cyprus*

local partners all over Europe, organised workshops to discuss these key principles for maritime spatial planning. These events saw academic experts, representatives from Member States, industry, environmental NGOs and the fisheries sector and other key stakeholders share experiences and discuss different aspects of MSP.

In order to explore maritime spatial planning further, the Commission has launched projects on cross-border cooperation. A study on the legal aspects of maritime spatial planning has been completed. Research is currently underway into its economic benefits and on maritime spatial planning in the Mediterranean Sea.



## 5. What have we learnt so far?

**First and foremost**, that we need maritime spatial planning! This was the overwhelming conclusion to emerge from the workshops. But this in itself raised a whole range of other questions. How should maritime spatial planning be applied with restricted legal powers in relation to the sea? How do we involve all stakeholders in the process? Where do we find good data? When should we bring our neighbours in on the act? Are there limits to the transparency of the process? These and many other questions were addressed at the workshops in 2009. The results can be found at our website: <http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs>

As regards the 10 key principles for maritime spatial planning, we have learnt that.

Maritime spatial planning will **differ according to the area and type of activity**. A densely used sea area will need a very detailed plan that seeks out synergies and best practice, while other areas might only need some general management

plans. It is therefore very important to know the needs of the different users and the scale and characteristics of the ecosystem – which is a no-go area and must underpin any maritime spatial planning initiative.

Maritime spatial planning is a process that depends on the **clear definition of objectives**. What – within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem – are we all striving towards? Objectives should be based on long-term perspectives and be forward-looking. Ultimately, they should stem from political priorities.

We need to be **transparent** about these objectives we set and make sure there is a clear, predictable and stable decision process. All parties have to know who is taking the decisions, on what basis, and why.

**Stakeholders** must be on board from the start. They need to understand each other's expectations and trust the process. Stakeholders themselves should take responsibility and participate actively.

Maritime issues transcend national borders and **cross-border cooperation** is therefore crucial. Member States must identify the partners which need to be brought into the process and ensure there is political willingness to cooperate and to share plans and ideas willingly at an early stage. The aim should be to look for common interests and work on a joint vision for the seas.

Coordination within the Member States is equally vital. **Decision-making processes** can be made simpler if all concerned have a clear idea of their responsibilities and if one authority takes charge of coordinating the work amongst relevant agencies.

**Maritime and terrestrial strategies and plans** should be complementary and implemented as such, the need to link maritime spatial planning to integrated coastal zone management is evident. While ownership and planning processes might differ for land and sea areas, a spatial strategy that allows for some joint management of the combined sea and land area will help resolve some tensions.

Maritime spatial planning as a process requires flexible management: in other words, it needs to be **monitored and**

**evaluated**. Key variables (indicators, baselines, etc.) should be defined from the outset.

MSP builds upon a **strong data and knowledge base**, with environmental and socio-economic data being especially relevant. EMODNET – the European marine research data project – will serve as a strong data platform for maritime spatial planning. It is also important to ensure that the right scales of data are available and that they are managed at the appropriate level (EU, sea-basin, national, etc.).

Discussing maritime spatial planning is all very well, but it must be introduced and enforced in the real world as well. **Legally binding tools, together with more indicative guidelines**, can and are being used for maritime spatial planning. Nonetheless, it is clear that permits and other legal means can make maritime spatial planning more effective. When engaging in maritime spatial planning it is important to bear in mind the local, regional, national and EU legislation in force – not to mention international law (UNCLOS).

## 6. Synergy is the key



*Aquaculture in Cyprus*

**The key to successful maritime spatial planning** lies in acknowledging that all existing EU legislation and initiatives related to marine activities are intertwined and should be treated as different branches of one same tree. The Marine Strategy Framework Directive, for example, aims at improving the environmental conditions of EU waters by 2020 and the Recommendation on Integrated Coastal Zone Management seeks to ensure coherent action on the management of coastal areas at European level. Nor can we forget the importance

of the EU Common Fisheries Policy in reconciling human activities and their impact on natural systems and coastal areas. For a complete overview of the links between spatial planning and existing or planned EU legislation, visit our website: <http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs>

Needless to say, sound spatial planning will also draw from the good practices established worldwide and from the many global conventions and organisations addressing the sea, such as (to name but a few) UNESCO (IOC),



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*Marine biodiversity: Blue mussels in the Baltic Sea*

OECD, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UNEP, HELCOM (for the Baltic Sea), OSPAR (for the North East Atlantic), the Barcelona Convention (for the Mediterranean), the Bucharest Convention (for the Black Sea) and the Cartagena Convention. For each region, these are vital components of the EU's Integrated Maritime Policy and spatial policy and provide a crucial link between the EU and the rest of the world.

Evidently maritime spatial planning is the way to go also for other areas of the world. There are examples of large-scale spatial planning initiatives in Australia, for instance the 2 000 km-long Great Barrier Reef area. Also Canada has an excellent record of advanced projects for oceans management and the US is looking into effective coastal and marine spatial planning.<sup>[2]</sup>

2 The difference between *maritime* spatial planning and *marine* spatial planning is explained in the Roadmap for Maritime Spatial Planning: Achieving Common Principles in the EU – COM[2008] 791 – <http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs>

## 7. The road ahead

**At the workshops** organised by the EU in 2009, the need for better cross-border cooperation was identified both as a key challenge and as crucial to successfully promoting the long-term sustainable development of maritime activities. Maritime activities do not stop at national borders, and neither do ecosystems. Nor, then, should Member States and stakeholders, who must work together to offer a stable investment climate for maritime industries across the EU, facilitate the building of transnational energy grids, apply ecosystem-based management, or to meet CO<sub>2</sub> targets in order to tackle climate change. All 27 Member States, including landlocked Member States and the EU's outermost regions, have a stake in marine activities or in spin-offs from these. By taking the cross-border aspect into account and by promoting a joint EU effort, maritime spatial planning can help unlock the potential of the maritime sectors and meet common challenges such as a sound and sustainable management of the marine environment.

At EU level, discussions on this new policy approach are well advanced and show that more and more Member States are applying maritime spatial planning in

some form. As said, non EU countries are also actively involved in maritime spatial planning and various international forums are taking it up.

Undeniably the policy is young and there are still lessons to learn and challenges to meet. But the European Commission will continue to work on a set of common principles underlying the maritime spatial planning policy of the EU. We are convinced that maritime spatial planning can boost Europe's maritime economy and is the key to a modern, state-of-the-art and sustainable management of oceans and seas. In time we will show that maritime spatial planning can be effectively.



*Maritime traffic*



European Commission

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