EUROPE COUNTS MARINE LIFE

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Over 500 marine scientists are working together within the framework of MarBEF – a European network of excellence, which started in March 2004. Of all the seas, the European seas are among the most studied in the world. By bringing this expertise and knowledge together, MarBEF aims at a better understanding of long-term and large-scale distribution patterns and functionalities of biodiversity across marine ecosystems. To inventory this wealth of marine life, the European Register of Marine Species (ERMS), at this moment containing nearly 30,000 species names, is adopted and will serve as the reference list and taxonomic backbone within MarBEF. ERMS has been put into a relational database and will be maintained and regularly updated online by a consortium of taxonomic experts. The taxonomic register will be supplemented with biogeographic, ecological and socio-economic information, together with species illustrations, original descriptions and vernacular names. When available, links will be provided with other online species information systems. EurOBIS, the European node of the Ocean biogeographic Information System, is a distributed system that integrates individual datasets on biogeographic information into one large consolidated database and provides the end-user with a fully searchable geographic interface. EurOBIS already captures and freely communicates over 350,000 distribution data from 14,000 species, online. When combining these data with biological, physical, chemical and geologic data, our understanding of the ecosystem will greatly improve, resulting in better ecosystem-based management plans. The Flanders Marine Institute is taking a leading role in these major European data integrating projects within MarBEF and has recently developed online tools for ERMS and EurOBIS (http://www.marbef.org/data).