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# Policy memo

Input to the preparation of a new European Ocean Pact.

Baltic Sea Centre | Stockholm University

# An Ocean Pact must prioritise the environmental dimension

**Early March 2025, the EU Commission organises European Ocean Days in order to gather contributions from stakeholders, experts, and citizens on a new European Oceans Pact, that is to be presented in time for the 3rd UN Ocean Conference in June 2025. Stockholm University Baltic Sea Centre highlights the need for a source-to-sea approach, and that the environmental interest should be guaranteed a seat at the table when the pact is negotiated.**

The primary objective of an Ocean Pact should be to restore and maintain ocean good environmental status; the short term goal should be improvement, while avoiding damage. The environmental dimension should be prioritised in short-term decision-making, not put off until the long run.

Even an objective of ”sustainability”, if understood as three equal dimension of ”environmental, social and economic” is too broad and vague. As was pointed out already by Larkin (1977), in fisheries management all these dimensions tend to be subordinated to an unnamed but overriding dimension of ”political sustainability”.

## Parties to the pact

The notion of a ”pact” suggests a negotiated deal between parties. This brings to mind the old adage ”if you aren’t at the table, you end up on the plate”. The environmental interest should be guaranteed a seat at the table.

## Source to sea

As what happens on land has a major impact on the marine environment the focus of an Ocean Pact should not be limited to sectors that impact directly on the sea. That is, a source-to-sea approach is needed. Greater consideration of the impacts on the marine environment should be integrated into all relevant policy sectors. While some blame the poor state of some fish stocks on hypoxia and eutrophication, this is ignored when it comes to decision-making on agriculture policy.

## Scientific uncertainty

As irreversible and substantial damage can have occured before scientific certainty has been reached, there is broad support for a precautionary principle. Decision-makers should be aware that this can be undermined when decision-making relies too heavily on scientific consensus in bodies like IPCC or ICES.

## Blue economy

An ambition in discussions of ”Blue Economy” is to expand or develop new markets built on marine-based resources. When there are expectations of good profitability there is a tendency for overinvestment; then, when restrictions are needed to conserve resources these are opposed as ”costs”. When developing new markets, effective mechanisms to prevent overinvestment and overexploitation must also be in place. Increased aquaculture is no replacement for decimated fish stocks.

## Financing

For market based solutions to be efficient, negative environmental impacts need to be internalised, e.g. by taxes, fees, emission trading rights etc. As a corollary is the principle that ”the pollutor shall pay” (the costs of reducing negative environmental impacts), subsidies should be avoided. For example, to promote decarbonisation of the fishing fleet it is more efficient to put a price on emissions rather than subsidize new engines. Possible subsidies for good behaviour might be subsidized by fees for bad behaviour (”bonus-malus”).

## Competitiveness

Markets distortions such as the existence of negative externalities in some trading partners should not be allowed to facilitate destruction of the marine environment, with all its social, economic, cultural and political consequences. To the extent that European producers are feared to be at a competitive disadvantage when producers in trading partners are permitted to have more negative environmental externalities, this should primarily be rectified by high minimum standards in trade agreements or compensatory tariffs in line with the thinking behind the CBAM.

## Security/Food security

During periods of conflict or trade disruptions locally accessible food resources can increase in importance. Risk for trade disruptions or conflicts gives added importance of restoring and maintaining fish stocks in European seas, and maintaining and restoring the marine environments that support these fish stocks.



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