Maritime Spatial Planning in the EU

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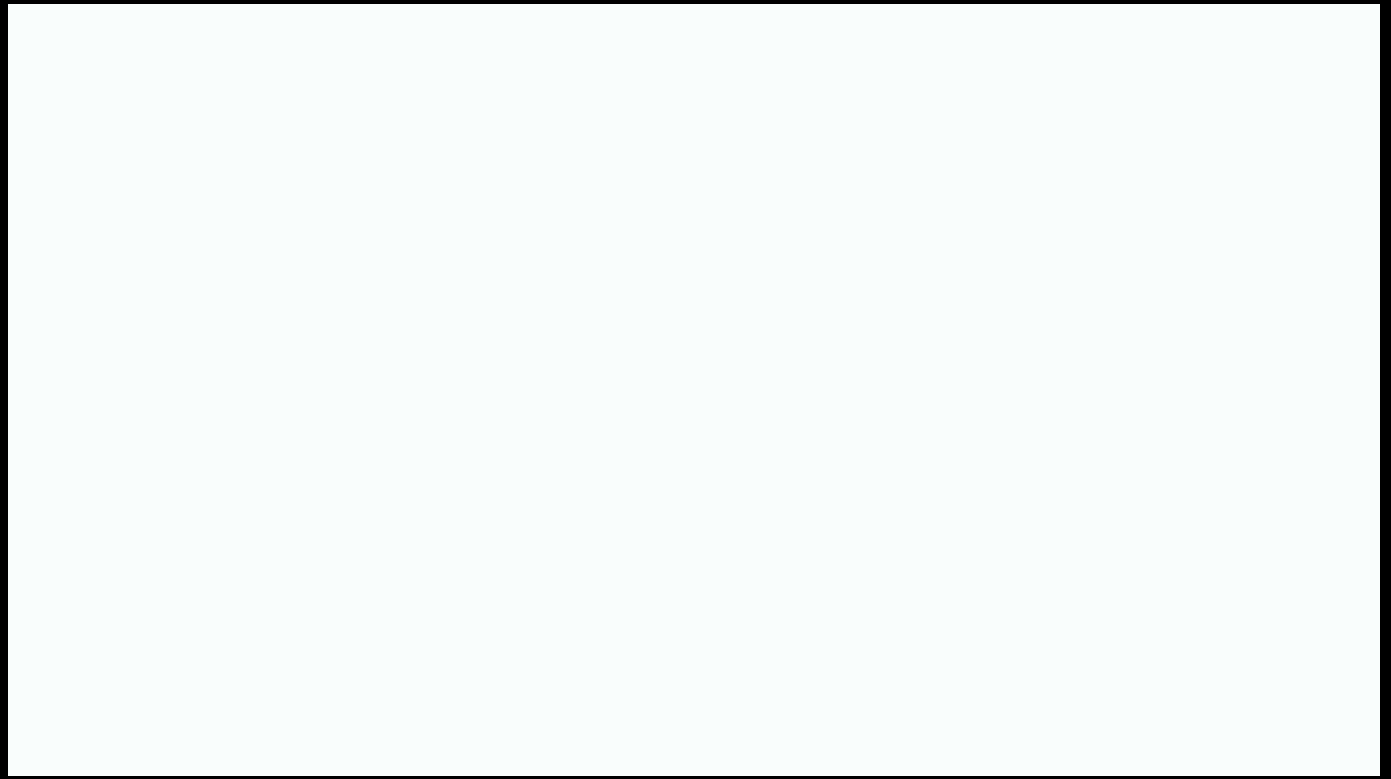
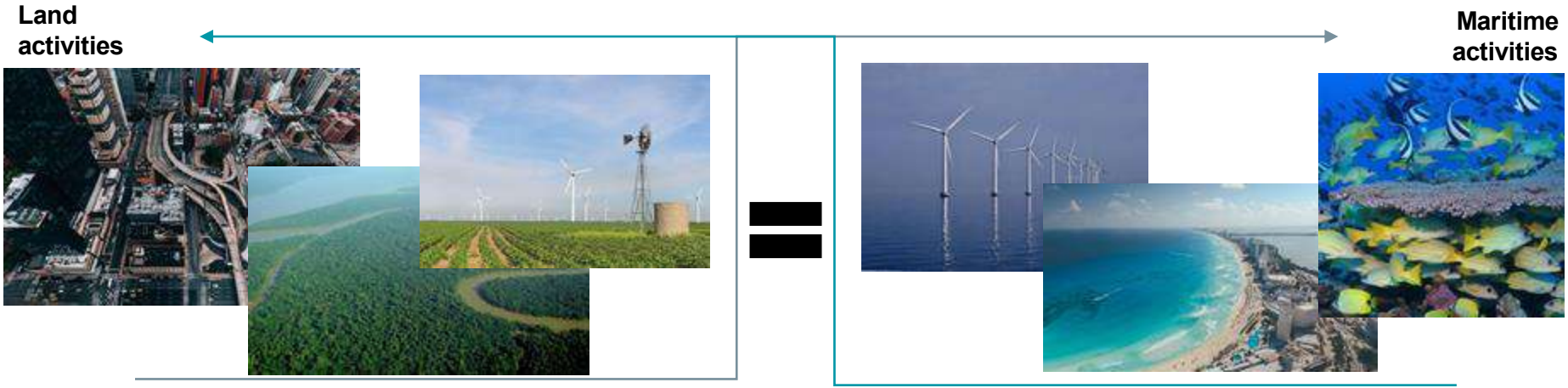
June 2025



We need our ocean to plan for a sustainable future is available in 9 languages on YouTube.

A land-sea planning parallel

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) analyses and organises existing and future human activities in marine and coastal areas and identifies the most suitable way of managing them considering ecological, economic and social objectives.



A successful MSP helps mitigate the impact of human activities on marine ecosystems and contributes to a thriving, sustainable blue economy. Today, over 47% of the world's EEZ is covered by a marine spatial plan and 82 more core countries have committed to develop and implement plans in their maritime jurisdictions.

Ecosystem-based approach to MSP

An **ecosystem-based approach (EBA) to MSP** takes into account the carrying capacity of marine ecosystems against human pressures, including climate change.

EBA-MSP:

- Based on science
- Knowledge of functioning marine ecosystems and their limited carrying capacity
- Integrated vision of a marine ecosystem and its variety of uses and services
- Understanding of the nature-society relationship
- Understanding of relationships between stakeholders benefiting from nature's resources and services
- Includes space for nature
- Mitigates human pressures on marine ecosystems

Ecosystem-based approach to MSP

WWF EBA-MSP: 33 indicators across 4 different categories

1. **Inclusion of nature:**

- Based on robust environmental assessments
- Adheres to the mitigation hierarchy and applies the precautionary principle
- Planned activities remain within environmentally sustainable limits
- Biodiversity-inclusive (includes representative, well-connected networks of marine protected areas, blue carbon sites, restoration sites and migration corridors)
- Land–sea interactions are identified and analysed

1. **Socioeconomic considerations:**

- Long-term blue economy objectives are clearly defined and measurable
- Risks of conflicts among users are addressed
- Sea use by mobile activities, such as fisheries, is assessed and integrated
- Offshore renewable energy targets included – CO_2 neutrality respects biodiversity objectives
- Results from cross-sectoral public consultation are incorporated

Ecosystem-based approach to MSP

WWF EBA-MSP: 33 indicators across 4 different categories

3. **Good ocean governance:**

- Temporal and spatial uncertainties in the era of climate change are addressed
- Aligned with environmental and sectoral policies, with coordinated reporting and planning timelines
- Legally binding plan with a competent authority responsible for its development and implementation
- Multiple scenarios for sustainable sea use are considered

4. **Comprehensiveness of the plan:**

- Based on the best available scientific evidence, including intersectional research
- Includes industrial, ecological, cultural and societal functions
- Cross-border cooperation for effective planning, monitoring and enforcement
- Adaptive management framework applied
- Monitoring tools and mechanisms for alignment with key policies included
- Entire sea area is covered

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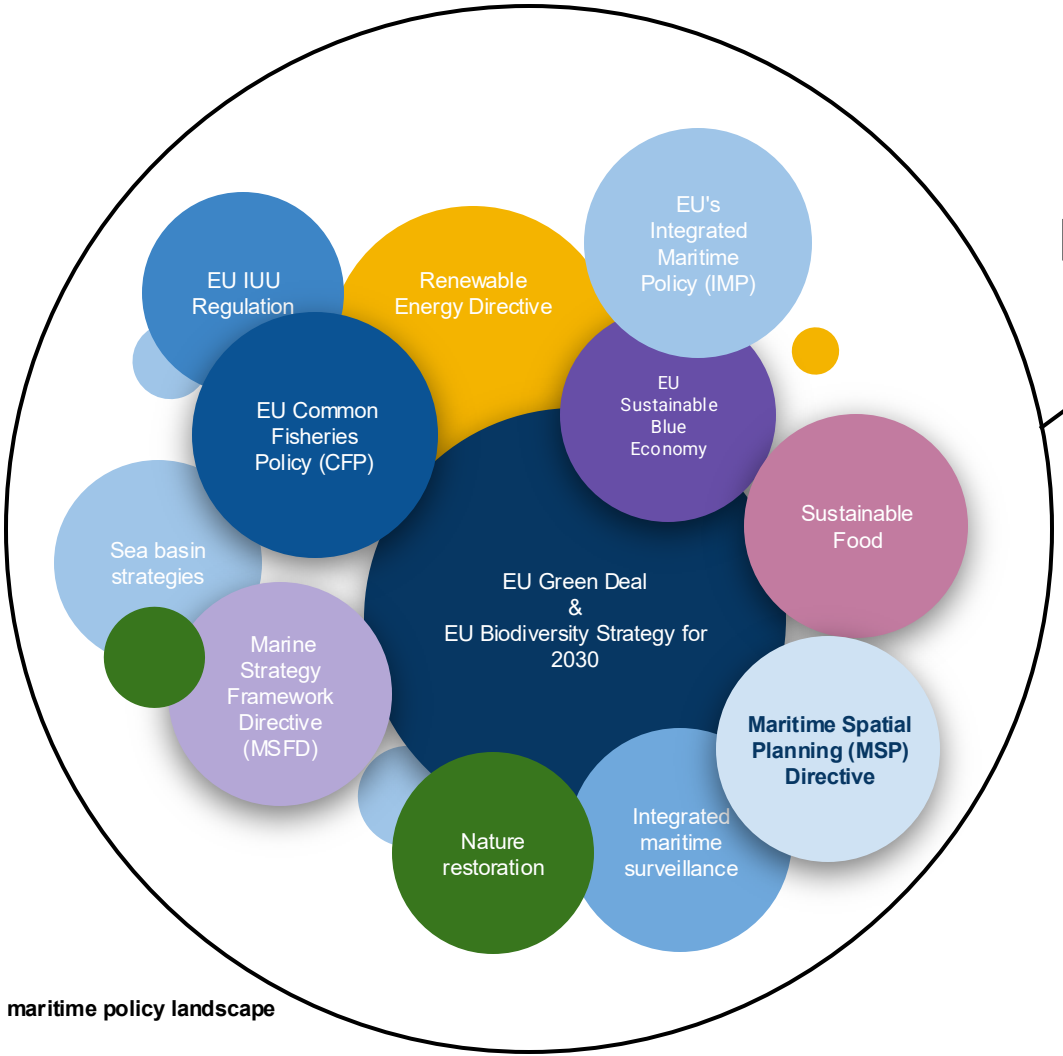
The area of sea under the jurisdiction of EU Member States is larger than the total land area of the EU. Including its outlying regions (territories and entities in the Atlantic, Pacific and Caribbean), **the EU has the world's largest maritime territory**.

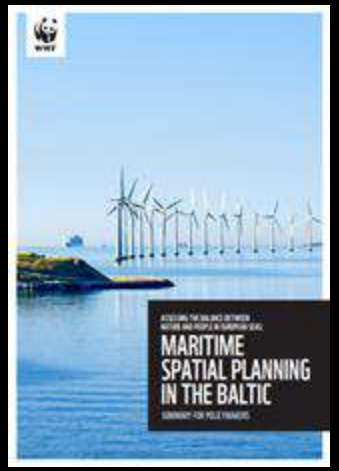


EU maritime policy landscape

Ecosystem-based approach to Maritime Spatial Planning

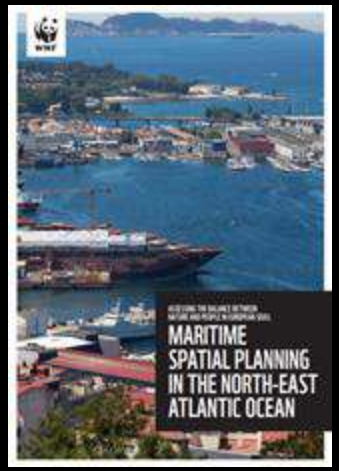
In 2014, the EU adopted the **Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) Directive**, which provides goals and requirements for a sustainable balance between nature and people in European sea basins.

Under the MSP Directive, coastal EU Member States were required to have MSP in place by 2021.



March 2022

October 2022



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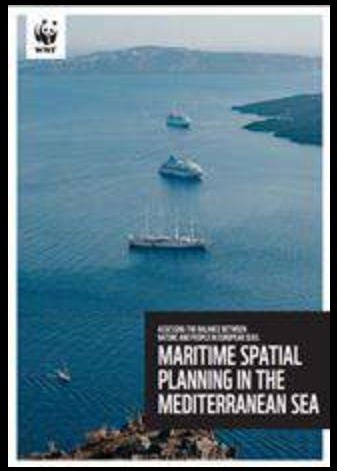
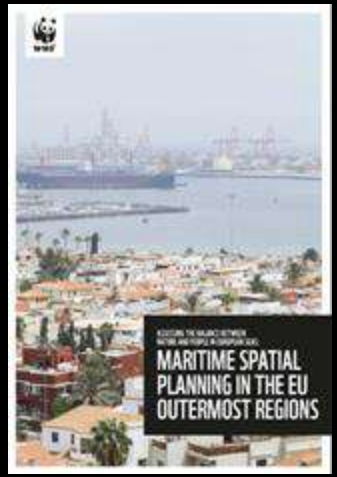


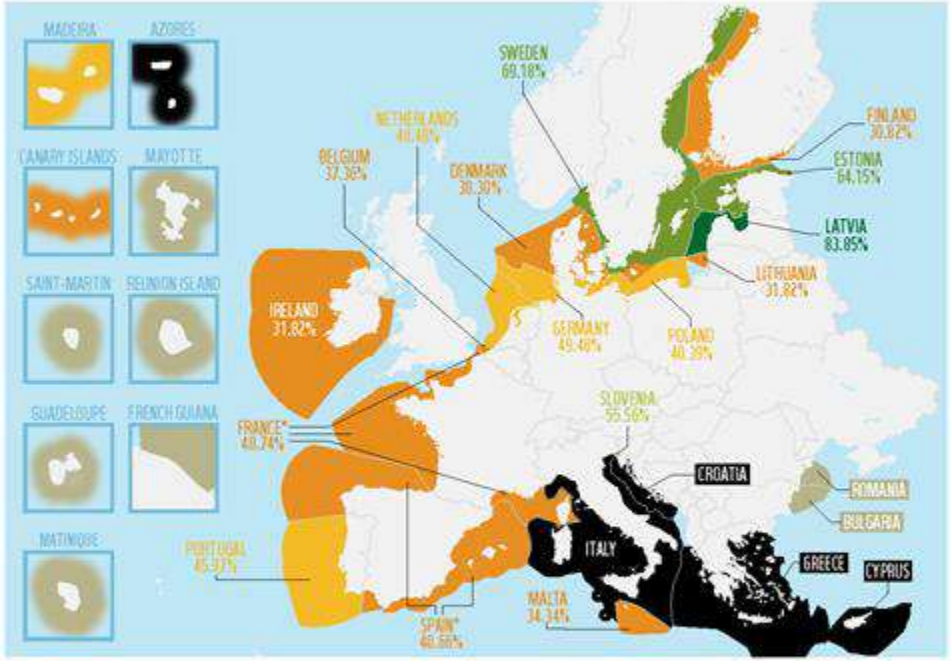
June 2023



May 2024

Our assessments of MSPD implementation across the EU

THE EU IS FAILING AT ECOSYSTEM-BASED MSP



To effectively restore and protect our ocean as per the EU Biodiversity Strategy, achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 with the European Green Deal, and put legal and sustainable seafood on our plates in line with the CFP, we need rigorous, ambitious and long-term strategies – and we need them now.

But no Member State is currently on track to meet the minimum 30% MPA and 10% strict-protection targets by 2030. Space for nature protection and restoration is also not well integrated in today's national maritime plans, but these are essential to sustain the EU blue economy and improve coastal resilience to climate change.

Ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning is the right tool to secure harmony between sectors and address the dual biodiversity and climate crises. With the world's largest maritime territory, the EU must lead by example.

KEY

SCORE IN %

A national maritime spatial plan is in place and has been assessed by WWF. 100% corresponds to the complete achievement of an ecosystem-based approach to MSP.

A national maritime spatial plan is in place but has not yet been assessed by WWF

No national maritime spatial plan in place and the country is under infringement procedures by the European Commission

No national maritime spatial plan is in place but there is no infringement procedure underway as the outermost regions have more time to comply with EU laws

*The score (in %) corresponds to an average of the scores from all sea basin plans. For further information on how the Member State scores in each region, please consult WWF's complete assessments by scanning the QR code.

WWF's assessments of MSP in the EU:

The EU is failing at EBA-MSP

49%

Baltic Sea regional average

Ecosystem-based MSP in the Baltic has been partly successful.

- Not enough MPAs, no space for restoration
- RSC delivers good stakeholder engagement and cross-boundary collaboration

45%

North Sea regional average

Ecosystem-based MSP in the North Sea has been partly successful

- Plans fail to address socio-economic considerations
- Space for offshore wind aligned with the EU Green Deal targets

38%

North-East Atlantic regional average

MSP in the North-East Atlantic has failed to deliver ecosystem-based national strategies.

- Plans fail to consider climate change
- Policy timelines for MSFD and MSPD aligned
- All Macaronesia Outermost Regions have a plan

45%

Mediterranean Sea regional average

WWF's assessment of MSP in the Mediterranean will be published in June 2023.

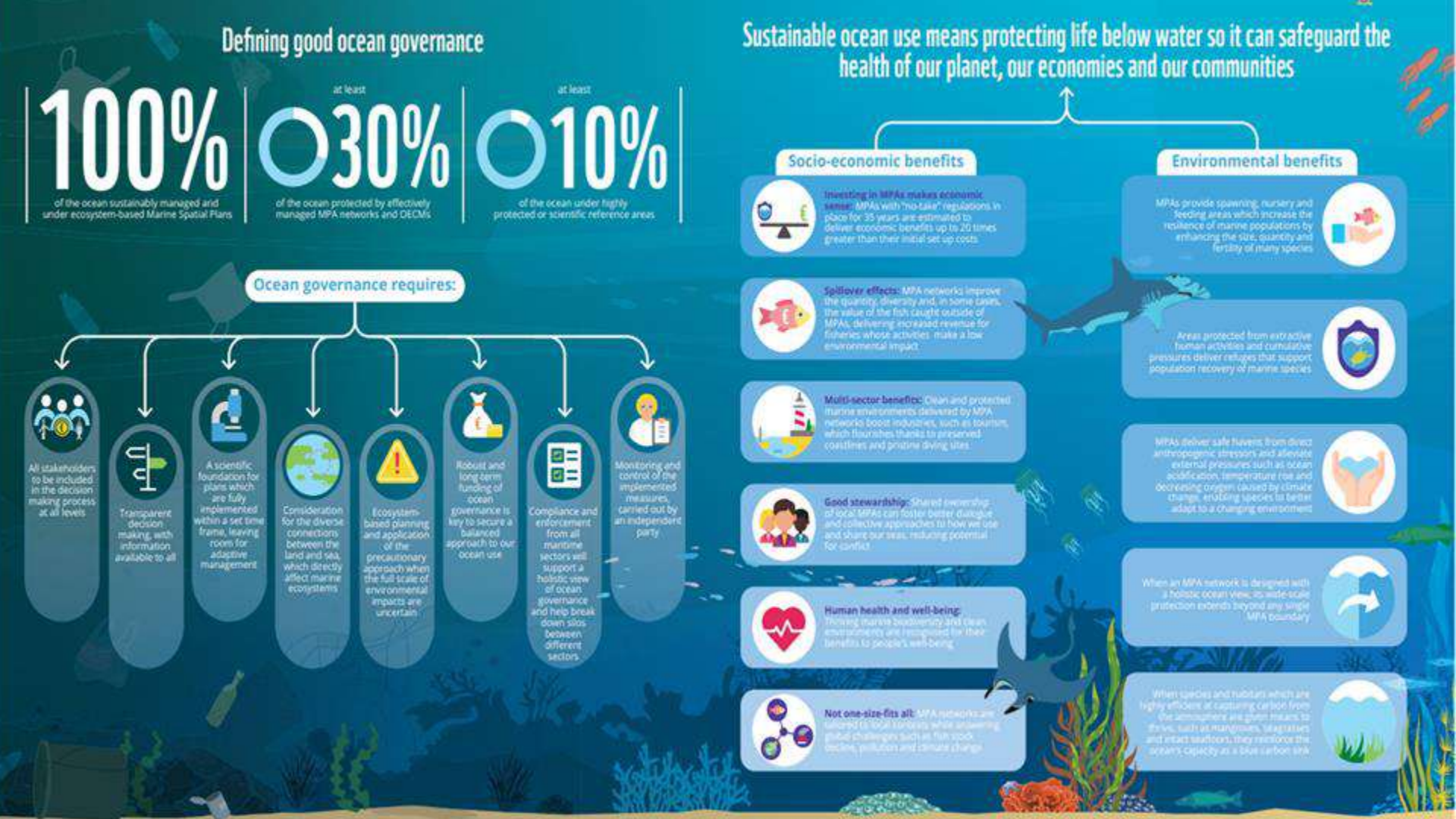
- 2 out of 8 Member States without MSP
- France and Spain designate 30% MPAs (<2% management plans)

MSP challenges and opportunities

The challenges of folding fisheries into MSP

Failing to meet 30x30
Overlooking the role of blue carbon to tackle climate change

The need to improve cross-border cooperation


Defining good ocean governance
100%
of the ocean sustainably managed and under ecosystem-based Marine Spatial Plans
at least
30%
of the ocean protected by effectively managed MPA networks and OECMs
at least
10%
of the ocean under highly protected or scientific reference areas
Ocean governance requires:
All stakeholders to be included in the decision making process at all levels
Transparent decision making, with information available to all
A scientific foundation for plans which are fully implemented within a set time frame, leaving room for adaptive management
Consideration for the diverse connections between the land and sea, which directly affect marine ecosystems
Ecosystem-based planning and application of the precautionary approach when the full scale of environmental impacts are uncertain
Robust and long-term funding of ocean governance is key to secure a balanced approach to our ocean use
Compliance and enforcement from all maritime sectors will support a holistic view of ocean governance and help break down silos between different sectors
Monitoring and control of the implemented measures, carried out by an independent party
Sustainable ocean use means protecting life below water so it can safeguard the health of our planet, our economies and our communities
Socio-economic benefits
Investing in MPAs makes economic sense: MPAs with "no-take" regulations in place for 35 years are estimated to deliver economic benefits up to 20 times greater than their initial set up costs
Spillover effects: MPA networks improve the quantity, diversity and, in some cases, the value of the fish caught outside of MPAs, delivering increased revenue for fisheries whose activities make a low environmental impact
Multi-sector benefits: Clean and protected marine environments delivered by MPA networks boost industries, such as tourism, which flourishes thanks to preserved coastlines and pristine diving sites
Good stewardship: Shared ownership of local MPAs can foster better dialogue and collective approaches to how we use and share our seas, reducing potential for conflict
Human health and well-being: Thriving marine biodiversity and clean environments are recognised for their benefits to people's well-being
Not one-size-fits all: MPA networks are tailored to local contexts while answering global challenges such as fish stock decline, pollution and climate change
Environmental benefits
MPAs provide spawning, nursery and feeding areas which increase the resilience of marine populations by enhancing the size, quantity and fertility of many species
Areas protected from extractive human activities and cumulative pressures deliver refuges that support population recovery of marine species
MPAs deliver safe havens from direct anthropogenic stressors and alleviate external pressures such as ocean acidification, temperature rise and decreasing oxygen caused by climate change, enabling species to better adapt to a changing environment
When an MPA network is designed with a holistic ocean view, its wide-scale protection extends beyond any single MPA boundary
When species and habitats which are highly efficient at capturing carbon from the atmosphere are given means to thrive, such as mangroves, seagrasses and intact seafloors, they reinforce the ocean's capacity as a blue carbon sink

WWF calls on countries to

1. Promote ongoing, meaningful engagement with stakeholders to raise awareness of MSP, address scepticism, and incorporate their knowledge and needs into planning.

2. Strengthen marine ecosystem and climate research, set clear monitoring goals, and support open data sharing.

3. Create a well-managed, connected MPA network in line with the 30x30 target.

4. Identify offshore renewable energy zones through participatory processes and end fossil fuel extraction in line with the Paris Agreement.

5. Map, monitor and protect blue carbon ecosystems, including seafloor habitats, to support nature-based climate solutions.

6. Work with the fishing sector to integrate them into MSP decisions, protect biodiversity, sustain socio-economic benefits, cut overfishing, and assess risks from restricted fishing grounds.

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