

Presentation from Matthew Gianni

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Joint NGO Press Briefing: Saving Europe's Biodiversity Starts in the Ocean - Report launch & response to EU Parliament Draft Report

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Effective biodiversity conservation cannot be achieved without doing so in the ocean as well as on land. The oceans cover 70% of the planet. The deep-sea, the area of the ocean below 200 meters depth represents 90% of the inhabitable biosphere. The diversity of species in the ocean may rival that of tropical forests but scientists estimate that most of the species in the deep-sea have yet to be discovered.

Deep sea ecosystems are characterized by long-lived, low fecundity species (they reproduce slowly and in low numbers) and thus particularly vulnerable to human impacts. Already the deep-sea is under threat from climate change impacts, pollution and plastics and deep-sea fishing. Deep-sea mining is a up and coming threat.

I'll speak about the latter two issues - deep-sea fishing and mining - which are directly related to the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and the developing action plan for its implementation.

First the good news. In regard to deep-sea fisheries, legislation is already in place to manage deep-sea fisheries to prevent damage to so-called vulnerable marine ecosystems in the deep-sea both within EU waters and by EU fleets operating on the high seas. These are areas such as deepwater coral reefs which are recognized as biodiversity hotspots. The deepwater fishery with the highest potential for damage is bottom trawling which involves dragging heavy nets and fishing gear along the seabed.

Deep sea bottom trawling has been prohibited in Portuguese and Spanish waters around the Azores, Madeira and Canary Islands since 2005 and in 2016 the EU adopted a deep sea fisheries [regulation](#) to prohibit bottom trawling below 800 meters in EU waters off mainland Portugal, Spain as well as France, Ireland and the UK at the time. However, at shallower depths there are deep-sea habitats comprised of corals – sometimes referred to as the old growth forests of the sea as they can be thousands of years old – as well habitats formed by deep-sea sponges and other species all along the European continental margin in the Atlantic that are still vulnerable to bottom fishing which the 2016 deep-sea fisheries regulation also requires be protected. Unfortunately, the protection measures for ecosystems at these depths, due in 2018, have not yet been put into place and we are calling on Parliament, as well as the Commission and Member states to do so as a matter of urgency both to protect those areas which have not been damaged as well as to allow for restoration of areas which have been impacted.

On deep-sea mining the nations of the world, as members of a UN body – the [International Seabed Authority](#) - set up under the UN law of the sea will make a decision in the next few years on whether to open vast tracks of the international area of the deep ocean to seabed mining. Scientists have warned that biodiversity loss will be inevitable if deep seabed mining is permitted to occur and the loss will be permanent, including the likelihood that species may be driven extinct before they have been discovered.

The EU will play a critical role in the decisions taken by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). All EU member states are members of the Authority and seven EU member states – Italy, France,

Germany, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland and Spain are members of the 36-member Council of the ISA, the main decision-making body. At the same time France, Germany, Belgium, and Poland hold six of the licenses for exploring for mineral resources in the deep-sea issued by the ISA to date. A seventh license has been sponsored by a consortium of countries including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Altogether the ISA has issued 30 licenses to date to explore for minerals covering over 1.3 million square kilometres of seamounts, hydrothermal vents and deep abyssal plains in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans with more on the way.

We are calling for a [moratorium](#) on the adoption regulations by the ISA to allow commercial mining until scientists have a much better understanding of deep-sea species, biodiversity and ecosystems and the role they play in planetary processes such as the sequestration of carbon as well as the risks posed by mining. The [European Parliament in 2018](#) called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining as have the [Fisheries Advisory Councils](#) of the EU and numerous NGOs and others, including the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition. You may have heard one of the MEPs this afternoon state that It is critical that we need don't destroy one ecosystem in an effort to rescue another and this applies to the deep sea in our view.

The biodiversity commitments made by the President of the European Commission, the Heads of State of EU Member States, the UK Prime Minister and others through the Leaders [Pledge for Nature](#) to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 at the UN Biodiversity Summit in September 2020 need to be turned into effective action and again, the European Parliament can, should and has played a major, constructive role on this issue and needs to continue to do so.

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