

TOO LARGE TO IGNORE

Making up more than 65% of European territory and 70% of the planet's surface, the ocean sustains us.¹ It is one of the greatest sources of biodiversity and food, produces up to 50% of the oxygen we breathe, regulates the climate and it is the largest carbon sink on the planet.² Yet we have overlooked the ocean's role, and have instead overexploited and degraded it, putting its life-supporting functions under severe pressure. We now know the true importance of the ocean to life on Earth, and no longer have the excuse of ignorance. But despite this, the unrelenting overfishing and destruction continues.³ In Europe, our marine ecosystems continue to be overexploited, while we overlook their potential to mitigate the effects of climate change. Ignoring the ocean's capacity to respond to the environment crisis is not just bad management, it is nonsensical. Ocean-based solutions are an extraordinary opportunity to enlist a powerful ally to tackle climate change.

WHERE ARE WE AT RIGHT NOW?

The EU has agreed mechanisms to restore marine ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss, but it has failed to implement them in full, and so realise their benefits.¹ One of these was its commitment to end overfishing by 2015, or 2020 at the latest, and for 10% of EU waters to be protected, also by 2020. Neither of these has been achieved; instead overfishing continues, endangering marine ecosystems and the millions of people who rely on them.

The latest assessments indicate that despite a reduction in fishing pressure for some EU fish populations, the majority remain overfished or outside safe biological limits.⁴ Moreover, the condition of fish populations in the Mediterranean and Black Sea remains critical.¹ By rubber-stamping overfishing and destructive fishing practices, the EU is undermining its own Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which commits to "put Europe's biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030, for the benefit of people, climate and the planet".⁵ This destructive fishing is underwritten by public subsidies, including for fuel.

OVERFISHING, BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The ocean is on the front line of what UN Secretary General, António Guterres, has called "humanity's war on nature".⁴ Both anthropogenic climate change and overfishing are destroying marine ecosystems and limiting the delivery of the ocean's vital planetary functions.³ **European waters have the highest fishing intensity in the world; they also contain one of the largest carbon sinks.**⁶

Recent evidence suggests fishing activities remove significant amounts of blue carbon from the ocean, releasing it into the atmosphere.⁷ Climate change is further accelerated through fuel consumption by EU fishing fleets, which account for nearly **7.3 million tons of CO₂ emissions per year.**⁸

The fishing sector's carbon footprint is further magnified when bottom trawling disturbs carbon retained in seafloor sediment.² **Dragging heavy nets along the seafloor re-releases CO₂, which may have been sequestered for millennia - equivalent to annual emissions from the aviation industry.**² It also disturbs ecosystems by affecting seabed integrity and 'accidentally' killing countless marine species.¹ **European seas are the most heavily trawled in the world.**⁴

Scientists now assert that changes to the ocean, ice sheets and sea level from greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible for hundreds to thousands of years, even if we decarbonise immediately.⁹ It's now clear that every ton of CO₂ counts, and every person, business and government must act.

While crises of climate, biodiversity loss and resource overexploitation are the greatest challenge the EU, and humanity has ever faced, there are solutions at hand. Ocean-based climate solutions and improved fisheries management constitute an important, but critically overlooked pathway to overcoming these challenges.

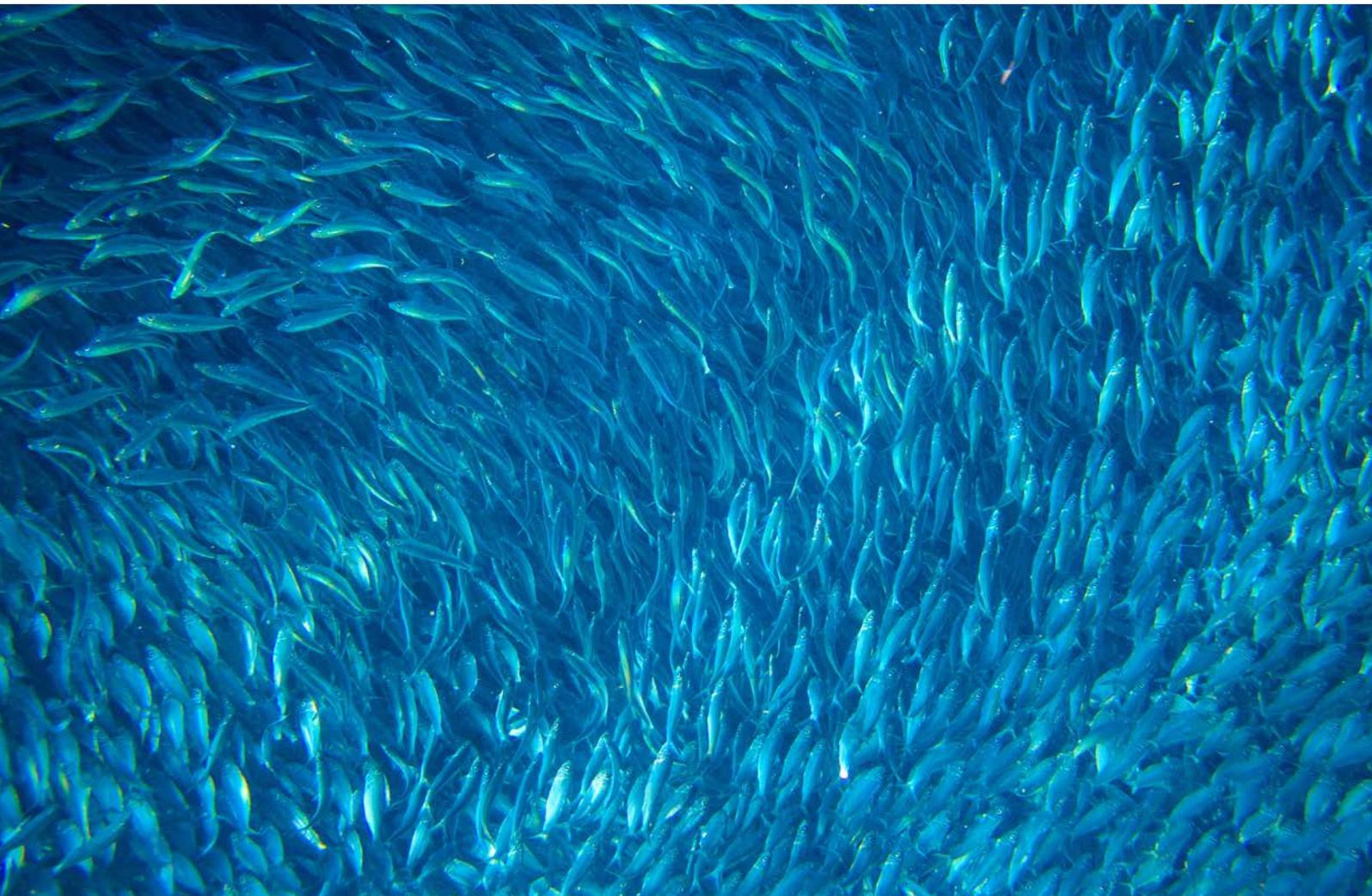
Although the ocean is commonly portrayed as a passive victim of climate change rather than a solution, it in fact holds immense potential as an active provider of solutions. **Marine sediments form the largest pool of organic carbon on Earth,**² which is estimated to store about 38 trillion metric tons of carbon.³ **The carbon stored by the top layer of marine sediments is nearly double the amount contained in all terrestrial surface soils.**¹⁰ Every day, the ocean absorbs excess heat generated by humans and captures emitted carbon, which would otherwise have entered the atmosphere.⁴ Without the influence of the ocean, it is estimated the **Earth would be 35 degrees hotter** since the industrial revolution.¹¹

Marine species, as part of the ocean's carbon pump, have an indispensable role in mitigating climate change.⁸ An ocean teeming with life allows for carbon sequestration¹²; specifically, it has been estimated that fish contribute to 16% of total ocean carbon flux.¹³ Small pelagic fish, such as mackerel, herring and anchovy, which dominate European waters, are especially important carbon sinkers.⁸

Only effective management of European fisheries can help in both climate change mitigation and adaptation.¹⁴ The maintenance of healthy fish populations and marine ecosystems contributes to offsetting global warming and to ensuring the ocean can withstand the climate emergency.³ Ending overfishing in Europe and better management of the impacts of fisheries is key to rebuilding fish stocks and the improvement of marine biodiversity, in order to bolster such resiliences.⁴ Other important ocean-based solutions include designating and managing highly protected areas (MPAs) in which extractive and destructive activities are prohibited.² It has been demonstrated that countries with both large Exclusive Economic Zones and large industrial bottom trawl fisheries have the highest potential to significantly contribute to the mitigation of climate change through protection of carbon rich seabeds from trawlers.²

The EU can therefore harness ocean-based solutions by minimising industrial trawling and improving its fisheries management, and thereby significantly and specifically mitigate the climate emergency.

Implementing Ocean solutions at a global level could potentially account for up to one fifth of the emissions reductions needed to limit global warming to 1.5°C, thereby meeting the goal of the Paris Agreement.⁴ However, to use the ocean as a source of sustainable climate solutions, the EU must revolutionise its approach - and this means resetting its priorities.



1 Remove subsidies that fuel overfishing and climate breakdown

Each year, the EU subsidises its fleets to the sum of approximately €1.5 billion, which fuels overcapacity and overfishing.¹⁵ Harmful subsidies like fuel tax exemptions, which artificially increase the profits of large-scale industrial fisheries, only benefit the largest fuel consumers. This flawed policy increases CO₂ emissions, further aggravating the climate crisis.¹⁶

Revoking fuel tax exemptions through the revision of the **Energy Taxation Directive**, particularly in the fisheries sector, would be consistent with the ‘user pays’ and ‘polluter pays’ principles enshrined in EU law and in the Biodiversity Strategy.¹⁷ This €1.5 billion could be redirected to support the most vulnerable low-impact fishers and help EU fisheries achieve greater environmental sustainability.¹⁸ Not only would this bring the EU closer to achieving its climate objectives, it would also add substance and credibility to EU arguments against harmful subsidies during WTO negotiations.

2 Set an Action Plan to eliminate the climate and ecosystem impacts of destructive fishing

To fulfil the ocean’s potential, the EU can no longer see protection-versus-extraction as a zero-sum game.² Increased protection of the ocean brings with it proven benefits such as healthier biodiversity, greater fisheries productivity and better-secured marine carbon stocks.² In adopting its new *Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems*¹⁹ the European Commission must ensure that it describes clear and ambitious actions to reduce all bottom-trawling by 2025 and implement a Climate and Ecosystem Impact Assessment process for all EU fisheries by 2023 in order to end the devastation wrought by overfishing and destructive fishing.²⁰

3 Initiate a just transition to low-impact, low-carbon fishing

Developing and promoting the application of transparent environmental, social and economic criteria for the allocation of fishing quotas among Member States would incentivise true sustainability and initiate a just transition to low-carbon, low-impact fishing in the EU fleet (as described in Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy²¹ (CFP)). This process can be initiated in the *Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems*.

4 Name and deliver on sustainable fisheries as a significant climate action in UN fora

The EU has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to “lead the way on international ocean governance” before the end of 2021.²² By taking decisive action to end overfishing in Europe and recognizing sustainable fisheries management as a significant climate solution, the EU would demonstrate leadership in fora such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Submissions to UNFCCC’s Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue widely recognised that ocean-health and ocean-based solutions must be integrated into all levels of decision-making around climate change.¹¹

5 Blue the Green Deal

Restoring the European marine environment is a prerequisite for fulfilling the EU’s internal and international commitments, such as the Green Deal and Sustainable Development Goal 14. If the EU intends to meet its updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% until 2030²³ and become climate-neutral by 2050,²⁴ it should recognize the ocean as a vital ally in tackling climate change. Ending overfishing would strengthen the ocean’s resilience to climate change while simultaneously contributing to its mitigation.⁴ To allow the ocean to achieve its potential, EU leaders must take decisions which end marine destruction and enable ocean solutions. We have just over eight years to achieve this, what are you waiting for?

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