

WCS EU response to the EC call for evidence on: ‘The European Oceans Pact’

This response has been submitted by the Wildlife Conservation Society EU Office (WCS EU), on behalf of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), a global NGO with which we are affiliated. WCS is a global organisation working to deliver wildlife conservation programmes in over 55 countries, mainly in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Latin America. With marine programmes across the waters of 26 countries, spanning tropical, temperate, and subpolar seas, we focus on areas that are biodiverse, functional, resilient, intact, and of high ecological integrity to drive lasting conservation impact. For more information: www.wcs.org/our-work/marine-program

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on ‘The European Oceans Pact’ and recognise its potential to drive meaningful change in ocean conservation and governance. Covering more than 70% of the planet’s surface, oceans support extraordinary biodiversity, regulate the global climate, and sustain the livelihoods of over a billion people. However, they are increasingly under threat from climate change, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and unsustainable fishing practices, among other pressures. The interlinked global crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and threats to human and wildlife health are continuing to accelerate, posing existential threats to biodiversity and human well-being and undermining efforts to implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF). Maintaining and improving [ecological integrity](#) – ecosystem structure, function, and composition – is central to addressing all these crises, and the importance of ecological integrity is recognised in the KM-GBF and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement. It is therefore critical to focus conservation efforts to preserve and restore the integrity of key ecosystems, including the oceans, and the services they provide to protect both biodiversity and benefit the people who depend on them, who in turn should then support conservation.

Although most of the world's biodiversity is found outside the European Union (EU), it is negatively impacted by EU trade and consumption patterns which often drive natural resources depletion and natural habitat destruction in biodiversity-rich countries. Fortunately, the EU can also have positive impacts by leveraging its financial resources and political weight to champion global conservation efforts and sustainable practices. Under target 19 of the KM-GBF, the EU committed to “*increasing total biodiversity related international financial resources from developed countries, including official development assistance*”. Given the high potential to contribute to economic growth, poverty alleviation and environmental protection, the EU should scale up blue economy investments in partner countries under the Global Gateway funding initiative. These should be targeted towards landscapes with the most potential to simultaneously achieve climate, biodiversity and development commitments, including for key coastal and marine landscapes under phase II of the NaturAfrica programme.

The ‘EU Oceans Pact’ can serve as a strong, unifying framework that ensures coherence and consistency across EU policies and programmes aimed at protecting and restoring oceans. It must foster ambitious, science-driven action, promote regional and international collaboration, and enhance the resilience of marine ecosystems. Below are our specific recommendations:

1. **Area-Based Conservation:** The EU can demonstrate leadership by advancing effective policy development and implementation while providing financial and technical support to other countries to protect and conserve their marine ecosystems and to help them achieve the commitments they made under the KM-GBF. The EU should promote the sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems globally, both within and outside of protected areas. Climate-smart planning, inclusive of integrated land-sea planning, should be used to identify priority locations where management can maintain and/or improve ecological integrity and promote social-ecological resilience. In particular, identifying, managing, monitoring, and restoring climate refuges for highly productive coastal ecosystems, such as coral reefs, mangroves/wetlands, and upwelling zones, will provide significant co-benefits for biodiversity, climate resilience, and human well-being. The EU can demonstrate leadership by: advancing effective policy development and implementation of inclusive, area-based management; providing financial and technical support for the identification and protection of climate-resilient coastal and marine ecosystems; ensuring inclusion of high integrity coastal and ocean spaces in national biodiversity and/or climate action plans; and promoting adoption of global data platforms, (e.g., [MERMAID](#)) for national monitoring efforts. The EU should also support governments, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities in establishing and effectively managing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), while strengthening the scientific, social, legal, political, and sustainable finance systems for effective, long-term management of both MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs).
2. **Sustainable livelihoods:** Area-based protections should be embedded within national marine spatial plans that balance development of sustainable blue economies with environmental protection. Adequate social and environmental safeguards should be put in place for all blue economy investments, while also ensuring adequate assessments of value and supply chains before markets are introduced.
3. **Fisheries:** People depend on coastal ecosystems for nutrition, livelihoods, refuge, protection, and climate resilience, and in the 21st century, coastal ecosystems depend on people to conserve, protect, and steward the plants, creatures and processes that together provide crucial ecosystem services. It is estimated that about 90 percent of all people directly dependent on capture fisheries work in the small-scale fisheries sector, which accounts for 40 percent of global catch. Ending overfishing and ensuring catch sustainability is critical to maintain or recover high-integrity, functional marine ecosystems globally and supporting the billions of people on the planet who depend upon ocean ecosystems for livelihoods and well-being. The EU should therefore ensure that fisheries agreements with third countries are negotiated and implemented through transparent processes to allow oversight of fisheries licenses, and are based on sound science and equity. In particular, the EU should ensure that such fisheries agreements: guarantee local community food security; adopt adaptive management approaches; avoid and work to end bycatch, particularly of priority species such as cetaceans, marine turtles, and sharks and rays; require landing of catches in national ports to improve revenue and jobs from processing locally; require onboard human and video monitors to ensure adequate oversight of catches; and set catches based on sound science which requires investment in local fisheries science. The EU should also support: small-scale fishers to secure rights to coastal fishing zones; programs that enhance women's leadership and ability to organize to engage in fisheries management decisions; and the development and implementation of co-management frameworks that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the authorities and fishers and engagement processes.

4. **Protection of highly vulnerable marine species:** Even if effective area-based and fisheries management measures are put in place, additional specific policy measures and actions are warranted to protect vulnerable marine species (e.g., whales, coastal dolphins, sharks and rays, turtles and dugong/manatee) from extinction. Human-caused threats, such as continued targeted take, bycatch (incidental entanglement in fishing gear); wildlife trafficking; ship strikes; increasing levels of noise from shipping and port construction; military and oil and gas industrial activities; coastal development in essential habitats; and the impacts of oil spills and other ocean pollutants are increasingly a problem for many recovering and threatened populations. The EU can demonstrate leadership by advancing effective policy development e.g., ocean noise mitigation, application of sound environmental impact assessment processes, species protections under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), and supporting their implementation, while providing financial and technical support for key techniques such as acoustic monitoring, satellite tracking, and conservation genetics. These tools are essential for improving our understanding of populations, identifying and safeguarding their most biologically important habitats, and mitigating the impacts of various threats.