

From Commitments to Action

A vision for the European Ocean Pact

Ocean Image Bank/Liam McGuire

Our oceans are crucial for food, livelihoods, and Europe's prosperity and security. As the world's largest carbon sink, the ocean plays an indispensable role in regulating the climate, supporting biodiversity, and sustaining life on Earth. Yet, this irreplaceable ecosystem is increasingly under threat from destructive and illegal practices, both within and beyond Europe.

The EU has the necessary tools to protect the ocean from these threats, but they are not fully implemented or enforced. The European Ocean Pact must outline actions to ensure the effective implementation of EU laws aimed at combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and protecting marine biodiversity, while preventing emerging threats such as deep-sea mining. By adopting a comprehensive approach, the Pact can amplify Europe's ambition to lead by example, ensuring a clean, healthy, and resilient ocean for generations to come.

Cross-cutting priorities for the comprehensive approach of the Pact

- **Strong implementation of EU laws:** Strengthen the implementation and enforcement of existing EU laws and policies on the ocean and fisheries. This includes implementing strict measures on fisheries control, combating illegal fishing, and protecting marine biodiversity. The Pact should commit to swift action against any breaches of EU law.
- **Ensure high EU standards for ocean protection:** Commit to ensuring that any evaluations of environmental policies (including the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)¹ and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive²) do not weaken the EU's ocean protection framework. Instead, these processes should serve as opportunities to strengthen the implementation of existing laws.

1. Combating IUU fishing and associated human rights abuses with transparency measures

The Pact must maintain EU policy to combat IUU fishing a top priority, recognising its devastating impact on marine ecosystems and its threat to fair competition for legal operators. IUU fishing depletes fish populations, destroys marine habitats, disrupts food chains, and fuels human rights abuses, including forced, bonded, and slave labour. It also distorts competition, allowing illegal operators to bypass regulations and putting honest fishers at a disadvantage. As the world's largest importer of fisheries products, the EU bears responsibility and has committed to ensuring that only legally caught fisheries products enter its market.³

To achieve the EU's "zero-tolerance ambition" on IUU fishing⁴ and its commitment to a level playing field for EU operators,⁵ the Pact must focus on strengthening the implementation and enforcement of the EU's IUU legal framework and advancing global fisheries transparency. Although the existing framework is comprehensive in its aim of preventing IUU-derived products and profits from entering the EU market,⁶ gaps in implementation - such as inconsistent import controls and weak sanctions across Member States - undermine its effectiveness.^{7,8} Additionally, many Member States lack measures to identify the beneficial owners of their fleet, and to identify their nationals who own or profit from foreign vessels at high-risk of engaging in IUU fishing. Closing these gaps is essential to protecting marine ecosystems and ensuring fair competition for legal operators.

Transparency is key to breaking the vicious cycle of environmental destruction and human rights abuses, which thrive in the opaque and poorly regulated global fishing industry.⁹ It also helps prevent corruption, which is one of the root causes of IUU fishing activities and other associated crimes at sea, such as drug and human trafficking, tax evasion, and money laundering. Low- to no-cost, readily available measures, as outlined in the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency,¹⁰ directly address this issue by ensuring access to essential information about fishing operations – including where and when fishing occurs, the methods used, and who is profiting and working on board. By fostering greater fisheries transparency globally, the EU will support its competitiveness agenda, protecting legal operators from being undercut by IUU fishing and associated criminal activities.



What the Ocean Pact must deliver:

- **Stronger import controls:** Include commitments to ensure significant improvements in Member States' import controls to prevent seafood linked to environmental destruction and associated human rights abuses from entering the EU market, including increasing seafood import verifications from China. To achieve this, import control measures must be robust and uniformly applied across the EU. Several reports in recent years have highlighted the alarming lack of verifications, inspections, and rejections of high-risk imports by Member States.^{11,12,13} A 2024 analysis - presented to the LDAC and soon to be published as an advice - shows that the situation has not improved and that non-compliance cannot be addressed solely through Member States' mandatory use of the new digital catch certification system (IT CATCH).¹⁴ Through the Pact, the European Commission should also prioritise initiating infringement actions against non-compliant Member States.
- **Transparency in vessel ownership:** Outline steps to be taken at the EU and Member State levels to ensure verified information on who ultimately owns or controls EU-flagged or EU-owned fishing vessels (i.e. the ultimate beneficial owners) is collected in centralised and publicly accessible databases, enabling Member States' authorities to hold accountable those who profit from illegal fishing and other illegal activities. Member States currently fail to effectively implement the provisions relevant to identifying beneficial owners and holding them accountable,¹⁵ thereby allowing profits from potential IUU fishing activities to flow back to the EU.
- **Implementation of Fisheries Control Systems:** Ensure the full and timely implementation of the upgraded fisheries control system¹⁶, particularly the use of remote electronic monitoring (REM) to improve catch reporting accuracy and reduce bycatch and unwanted catch discarding. Addressing unreported discarding—a major issue in EU fisheries¹⁷—will help mitigate the risk of hidden overfishing and bolster the resilience of commercial fisheries. The Pact should also push for the creation, alignment, and expansion of mandatory REM regimes at the international level - which will create a more level playing field, enhancing the competitiveness of EU fleet segments required to install this technology.¹⁸
- **Strengthened IUU fishing dialogues:** Commit to adopting a strategic approach to IUU fishing dialogues, targeting as a priority third countries, such as China, where increased transparency and improved anti-IUU fishing systems can have a ripple effect throughout the entire supply chain and the highest environmental impact. As part of this strategic approach, the Pact must also commit to taking decisive action, including systematically closing EU markets and ports to pressure flags of convenience to abandon their detrimental practices and align with global sustainability efforts.
- **Equitable Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs):** Ensure truly equitable SFPAs that drive value localisation in partner countries while ensuring transparency and meaningful CSO engagement throughout their lifecycle. New transparency measures should include an obligation for partner countries to collect information on the beneficial owners of all vessels operating in their waters. This would represent a strong deterrent for illegal operators and unsustainable practices and help level the playing field for law-abiding fishers, including the EU external fleet.



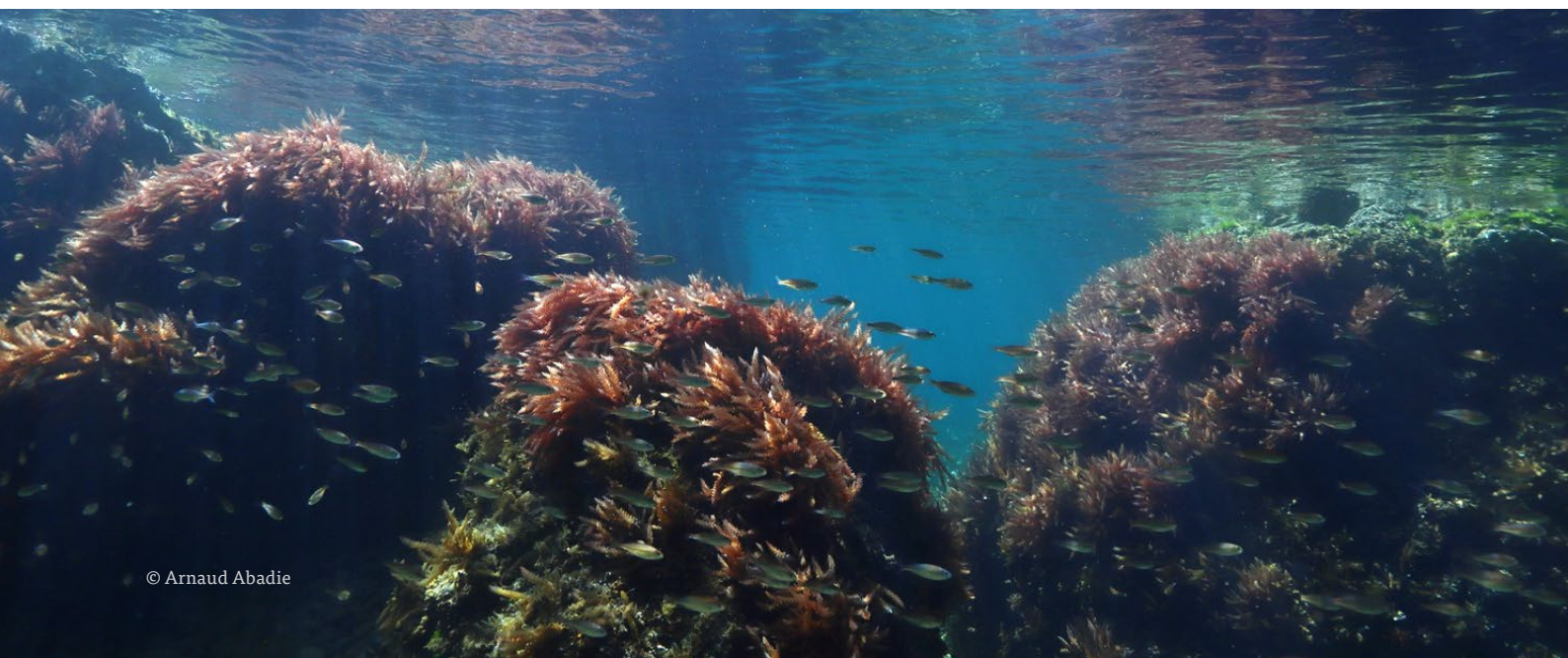
2. Ensuring true protection of EU marine protected areas (MPAs)

The Pact must drive efforts to ensure the effective protection of marine Natura 2000 sites, especially against destructive fishing like bottom trawling. Our ocean is under extreme pressure from unsustainable human activities, and these areas, created to safeguard Europe's most precious habitats and species, are paradoxically more exposed to bottom trawling than unprotected waters,¹⁹ causing severe harm to critical ecosystems and biodiversity. This undermines the EU's own biodiversity and climate goals, destroying seabed habitats, depleting fish populations, and releasing stored carbon.²⁰

While recognising the major role played by Natura 2000 in protecting essential biodiversity, the European Court of Auditors has concluded that the EU Birds and Habitats Directives are not being implemented to their full potential.²¹ As the guardian of the Treaties, the Commission must ensure compliance with existing laws to protect Europe's most vulnerable marine ecosystems. When properly designed and enforced, MPAs can be powerful tools for restoring biodiversity, strengthening ocean resilience, and supporting fishing communities.²² The Pact must turn legal commitments into real action, ensuring that marine Natura 2000 sites are not just lines on a map but fully protected areas that uphold EU environmental laws and set a global standard for ocean conservation.

What the Ocean Pact must deliver:

- **Implement and enforce existing laws:** Prioritise the full implementation and enforcement of the EU Birds²³ and Habitats Directives²⁴, the Nature Restoration Law²⁵, the Mediterranean Regulation,²⁶ and the CFP Regulation, banning harmful practices like bottom trawling in Natura 2000 sites, including by committing to initiating infringement procedures against non-compliant Member States.
- **Provide clear legal guidance and enforcement support:** The Pact must ensure the Commission actively supports and guides Member States in strengthening the national enforcement of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive (HD) in the marine environment, particularly regarding undertaking appropriate assessment of human activities, implementing conservation measures, and prohibiting destructive fishing practices in Natura 2000 sites. Additionally, the Commission should promote the full use of Article 11 CFP, demonstrating how it supports Member States in meeting their obligations under Article 6 HD.
- **Strengthen the Article 11 CFP Joint Recommendation procedure:** For better implementation, the Commission should commit to, where necessary, invoking its power to accelerate the Joint Recommendation procedure and adopt measures, in accordance with Article 11 CFP.
- **Deliver on the Marine Action Plan²⁷:** The Pact must reaffirm the Commission's commitment to the concrete proposals outlined in the Marine Action Plan, in particular, the call to ban mobile bottom fishing in all MPAs that are Natura 2000 sites designated under the Habitats Directive by 2024, and all MPAs by 2030.



3. Achieving a global moratorium on deep-sea mining

The Pact must reaffirm the Commission's stance against deep-sea mining (DSM) and actively advocate with Member States and third countries for a de facto global moratorium on commercial DSM through the International Seabed Authority, as well as raise it in other relevant international fora. The deep sea, one of the planet's last untouched ecosystems, plays a crucial role in climate regulation and marine food webs.²⁸ However, this vital pillar of life is threatened by the introduction of DSM – a destructive practice that could become the largest mining operation in history. Over 900 marine scientists and policy experts warn that DSM will lead to biodiversity loss, irreversible ecosystem damage, and threaten the oceanic carbon cycle and marine food webs.²⁹

Alongside the European Parliament³⁰ and 11 Member States³¹, the Commission has already committed to advocating in international negotiations that DSM should be prohibited until scientific gaps are properly filled, and it can be demonstrated that no harmful effects arise from mining.³² The Pact must reaffirm this commitment, and take concrete steps to increase EU Member States and international support for a moratorium on DSM.

The EU must also reject the false narrative that deep-sea minerals are essential for the energy transition. Instead, as recommended by the EASAC, it should focus on circular economy strategies, recycling, and battery innovations³³ – solutions that could reduce raw material demand by 58%, cut emissions by 39%, and create 700,000 EU jobs.³⁴ It should be recognised that beyond its environmental harm and lack of necessity, DSM is also a poor investment. Its future financial viability is highly uncertain due to unpredictable demand for seafloor metals, significant litigation risks, and the fact that the technology is largely unproven at operational commercial scale.³⁵

What the Ocean Pact must deliver:

- **A firm EU stance against deep-sea mining:** The Pact must reaffirm the Commission's position against DSM and commit the Commission to working towards EU Member States securing a global moratorium on commercial DSM.
- **Stronger advocacy in international negotiations:** The Pact must commit to diplomatic efforts to push a global moratorium on DSM at international fora.



Endnotes

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The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) exists to protect the natural world and defend our basic human right to a secure environment.

EJF works internationally to inform policy and drive systemic, durable reforms to protect our environment and defend human rights.

We investigate and expose abuses and support environmental defenders, Indigenous peoples, communities and independent journalists on the frontlines of environmental injustice.

Our campaigns aim to secure peaceful, equitable and sustainable futures.

EJF is committed to combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing as well as associated human rights abuses in the fishing sector.

Our investigators, researchers, filmmakers and campaigners work with grassroots partners and environmental defenders across the globe.

Our work to secure environmental justice aims to protect our global climate, ocean, forests, wetlands, wildlife and defend the fundamental human right to a secure natural environment, recognising that all other rights are contingent on this.

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