

The EU is committed to protecting the marine environment by implementing its environmental and fisheries policies, but the EU's environmental framework addresses certain issues too superficially to allow the restoration of good environmental status in the seas, and EU funding is rarely used to support conservation of marine species and habitats. The auditors found that marine protected areas are in fact given limited protection and that overfishing continues, especially in the Mediterranean.

The EU's main environmental policies are set out in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive and include the establishment of a network of marine protected areas. The purpose of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy is to ensure that fishing activities are environmentally sustainable and to minimize their adverse effects on the marine ecosystem, as well as to make appropriate financial resources available. However, the EU has failed to halt the loss of biodiversity in Europe's seas. In practice, the EU framework provides only limited protection for marine biodiversity. Marine protected areas, of which there are more than 3,000, are probably the most prominent measure for the preservation of the sea. Although such a measure has established a broad safety net, the auditors point out that it does not go into depth. This is in line with a recent assessment by the European Environment Agency (EEA), which found that less than 1% of Europe's marine protected areas can be considered fully protected marine reserves. For marine protected areas to be effective, they should sufficiently cover the EU's most vulnerable marine species and their habitats, including, where appropriate, the introduction of fishing restrictions, and these areas should be well managed. That is not even close to the case. Similarly, regulatory instruments linking EU marine biodiversity policy to EU fisheries policy do not work well in practice. In the marine areas covered by this study, such instruments have not yet been used successfully. EU legislation includes provisions on endangered species and habitats, but they are older than 25 years and do not take into account the latest scientific knowledge.

Fishing has a significant impact on the marine environment. Although the implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy has begun to improve the situation of fish stocks in the Atlantic Ocean, no significant signs of progress have been recorded in the Mediterranean. Fishing rates in the Mediterranean are twice as high as the sustainable level. The European Environment Agency stated in a recent report that only 6% of the stocks in the Mediterranean covered by its assessment met the criteria of the highest sustainable yield. Although EU policies provide for EU funding to support the protection of the marine environment, only a small part of the available resources is used for this purpose. For the period 2014-2020, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund has been allocated 6 billion

euros. However, the auditors estimate that the four Member States visited (Spain, France, Italy and Portugal) used only 6% of these funds for measures directly related to conservation and an additional 8% for measures with a less direct impact on conservation. Of this, they used less than EUR 2 million (0.2%) to limit the impact of fishing on the marine environment. Nevertheless, a positive change can be achieved with EU funding, as shown by good examples of projects funded by the EU's LIFE and Interreg programs.

Source: [h-alter.org](http://h-alter.org)