ASSessing the balance between nature and people in European seas:

Maritime spatial planning in the EU outermost regions
 Written by the WWF European Policy Office in partnership with WWF-France, WWF-Portugal and WWF-Spain.

The WWF European Policy Office wishes to thank colleagues from across the WWF EU network for their contributions to this report.

**WWF**

WWF is an independent conservation organisation, with more than 38 million followers and a global network active through local leadership in over 100 countries. Our mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world’s biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

The European Policy Office contributes to the achievement of WWF’s global mission by leading the WWF network to shape EU policies impacting on the European and global environment.

**Design:** Catherine Perry, www.swim2birds.co.uk

**Cover image:** © Daria Nepriakhina / Unsplash

Published in March 2024 by WWF – World Wide Fund For Nature (formerly World Wildlife Fund), Brussels, Belgium. Any reproduction in full or in part must mention the title and credit the above-mentioned publisher as the copyright owner.

© Text 2024 WWF. All rights reserved

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or CINEA. Neither the European Union nor CINEA can be held responsible for them.

---

**CONTENTS**

BALANCING NATURE AND HUMAN ACTIVITIES IN THE EU OUTERMOST REGIONS 3

THE EU OUTERMOST REGIONS CONTEXT 6

THE NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC: MSP IN MACARONESIA 8

WORLDS APART: MSP IN FRANCE’S OUTERMOST REGIONS 12

WAY FORWARD 14

REFERENCES 16
Europe’s marine waters are some of the busiest and most intensively exploited on Earth. The European Union (EU) is the sixth-largest producer of fishery and aquaculture products, and nearly 80% of global shipping (by volume) and over 90% of installed offshore wind capacity occur in EU seas. These and other maritime sectors, such as coastal tourism, oil and gas, and shipbuilding, to name a few, have enormous impacts on EU economies and marine species. Striking the balance between sustainable human activities and healthy ecosystems is vital to alleviate the impacts of climate change via carbon storage and renewable energy. By leaving space for nature to recover, the EU can be a global champion to fight biodiversity loss and support food security for the billions of people whose seafood is connected to European waters.

Among numerous European policies that aim to secure a sustainable balance for marine spaces and resources is the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD, 2014/89/EU). The MSPD was developed to provide an integrated planning and adaptive approach to how the EU and its Member States (MS) manage human-led activities in their waters. Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) is a future-oriented process that considers all economic sectors and ecological factors related to a marine area and allocates space, both geographically and temporally, to different activities and people whose livelihoods are tied to our seas for the purpose of ensuring a long-term sustainable balance between people and nature.

The MSPD set 31 March 2021 as the deadline for MS to present their maritime spatial plans to the European Commission. In the EU outermost regions (OR), this deadline only applies to the Canary Islands (Spain), the Azores (Portugal) and Madeira (Portugal), as the French OR are not within the marine subregions to which the MSPD is applicable. Portugal and Spain each decided to implement a single national plan to establish a strategic vision and guidelines for planning human activities in all their waters, including those of the OR. WWF-Portugal and WWF-Spain assessed these national strategies in the Maritime Spatial Planning in the North-East Atlantic Ocean and Maritime Spatial Planning in the Mediterranean Sea reports, respectively. At the time of preparing this assessment, Spain has a plan in place for all its waters. Portugal, however, chose a step-by-step approach that first prioritised the continental, extended continental shelf and Madeira subregions. This has resulted in delayed implementation of the MSPD in the Azores and the start of an infringement procedure by the European Commission against Portugal.

Currently, the draft plan for the Azores is under public consultation and is expected to be finalised in 2024. As defined in Article 3(3) of the MSPD, the French overseas departments (Martinique, Mayotte, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion) and community (Saint-Martin), are exempt from the requirements of the Directive, including the implementation and subsequent revision of maritime spatial plans. Despite this non-obligation, the French government has developed maritime strategies for each of its overseas basins. As MSP is a valuable tool for delivering a sustainable blue economy, and the marine industries of the French OR contribute to the EU economy overall, these strategies are the final pieces to the puzzle for implementing MSP in all the OR.

WWF advocates for an ecosystem-based approach to MSP, which views maritime spaces as integrated systems that provide various resources and services to both people and the planet, and acknowledges that ecosystems have a limited carrying capacity to remain healthy against human pressures. An EBA to MSP can transform how sea spaces are accessed and managed. It does so by increasing national and regional abilities to integrate and adapt to multi-sectorial changes, thus supporting sustainable economic benefits within oceanic boundaries. Just as societal needs shift, so too does our relationship to the spaces we interact with to fulfil those needs.

For example, the effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) safeguards particularly sensitive habitats, species and/or ecological processes, reduces or eliminates human pressures on marine ecosystems, and supports wider sea and ocean health; this, in turn, delivers direct benefits to industries like fisheries and tourism, while boosting sequestration of carbon in marine life and in the seafloor. Unfortunately, this effective management is often absent in how MS manage their MPAs: many lack implemented management and restoration plans, or remain without action for conservation and/or active nature restoration to deliver actual protection while continuing to allow environmentally-harmful activities to take place. As a planning tool to support these objectives, an EBA to MSP helps MS better balance the MSPD’s ecological and socio-economic objectives, thus delivering on EU policies that put nature at the forefront of economic recovery and a carbon-neutral future.

Furthermore, an EBA to MSP helps achieve the sustainable management of ecosystem goods and services, and maintains ecosystem integrity in the face of growing maritime sectors, such as offshore renewable energy. Delivering on the EU’s renewable energy targets at sea depends on finding suitable space and compatibility with multi-sector usage in waters that are already crowded with other maritime activities. One solution lies in reappropriating sea areas currently designated for fossil fuels – including gas – as these activities must be completely phased out and replaced by renewable energy to comply with the 2040 climate neutrality targets. Moreover, any infrastructure development must be considered within the broader context of degrading marine health due to overexploitation of resources, pollution, acidification and habitat destruction, to name only a few points of concern. Failure to adopt an EBA would put offshore renewable energy developments at risk of further damaging marine ecosystems and thus exacerbating the climate crisis, despite being intended as a solution to help tackle this issue.
THE EU OUTERMOST REGIONS CONTEXT

Today, 1% of the EU population lives in the EU’s nine outermost regions spread across the globe. Despite their remote location and unique contexts, these regions are key to the EU’s global influence in political and environmental spheres, as their exclusive economic zones constitute the majority of European waters. Yet, they lag behind the rest of the EU when it comes to the implementation of maritime and environmental policies that protect biodiversity and vulnerable communities against human-caused climate change.

The EU has nine OR: Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion, Martinique, Mayotte and Saint Martin (France), the Azores and Madeira (Portugal), and the Canary Islands (Spain). Home to close to 5 million citizens, these regions are distinguished by their remoteness from the mainland, insularity, generally small size, complex topography and climate, and economic reliance on few products.

Even within the Macaronesia region, which is made up of volcanic islands in the North-East Atlantic Ocean, the Azores are remote enough to not have any neighbouring influences. Meanwhile, the Canary Islands exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is still contested between Spain, Morocco and Portugal (including the Savage Islands, located between the Madeira archipelago and the Canary Islands), and an international agreement on these borders is still pending.

Despite the great distances separating these territories from the European continent and their inherent differences, the OR are integral parts of the EU and, as such, are subject to common rights and obligations that are legally binding for all MS, including the implementation of the MSPD in appropriate areas. France, Portugal and Spain have taken different approaches to the implementation of MSP in their respective OR.

Spain decided to publish a single MSP decree covering all its waters, with one annex for each of the five maritime subdivisions, including the marine waters of the Canary Islands. All five annexes share similar high-level objectives, which are crucial to account for the cumulative impacts of human activities at a regional level and support the connectivity of important ecological structures such as marine corridors.

Portugal divided its MSP across four subdivisions (mainland Portugal, Madeira, the Extended Continental Shelf and the Azores). While Portugal’s MSP follows similar underlying assumptions across all four subdivisions (e.g. which activities are considered, use of an ecosystem-based approach), each subdivision applies different economic, social and environmental considerations; this not only jeopardises the efficacy of national MSP as a whole, but increases the complexity of monitoring and improvement over time.

In France, the 2017 National Strategy for the Sea and the Coast (SNML) provides the framework for MSP. Under the SNML, four separate sea basin strategies have been adopted (East Channel-North Sea, North Atlantic-West Channel, South Atlantic and Mediterranean). While the French OR are not within the marine subregions to which the MSPD is applicable, the SNML and the Environment Code (the register of France’s environmental legislation covering nature protection and the sustainable use of natural resources) recommend that spatial planning should apply to both France’s mainland and overseas basins. It is within this complex legal context that two types of MSP documents currently exist in France: Documents Stratégiques de Façade (DSF), which apply to the mainland, and Documents Stratégiques de Bassin Maritime (DSBM), which adapt the economic, social and environmental orientations of the national strategy for the sea and coast to each OR. As of April 2024, five maritime basins (Antilles, South Indian Ocean, French Guiana, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon) have strategies in place. These were developed by a specialised DSBM commission and an overseas maritime council (made up of State representatives, and local and regional stakeholders), and were adopted by the authorities designated for each maritime basin following public consultations. Further details on why the MSPD is not legally binding in the French OR and on French Guiana’s national plan are available starting on page 12.

Implementing ocean planning strategies that harmonise human development with the need to protect marine and coastal ecosystems from increasingly intense and frequent climate disasters is of critical importance in the EU’s most remote areas. This is particularly important for French islands in the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean, where warming is causing more frequent and severe natural disasters such as tropical storms and floods, and contributing to the erosion of coastal areas. In turn, climate migration and the forced displacement of Caribbean households during storms negatively impact the well-being of vulnerable European citizens and other nationals in these regions, particularly children who lose access to essential services including education, safety and health care – all of which are human rights enshrined in EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

More broadly, implementing MSP in the OR represents a critical opportunity for the EU – with the largest maritime territory in the world – to lead good ocean governance by example, through cooperation across sea basins and collaboration with neighbouring countries. As the ocean has no borders and faces increasing challenges from the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and unsustainable exploitation of resources, among others, a wide geopolitical influence is now critical to help secure the long-term sustainable planning of human activities on our blue planet.
THE NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC: MSP IN MACARONESIA

The Macaronesia biogeographical region is comprised of volcanic islands in the North-East Atlantic Ocean and includes the archipelagos of the Azores, Madeira (Madeira, Porto Santo, Deserta and the Salvage Island) and the Canary Islands. The latter represents 75% of the region. Together, the islands host over a quarter of the plant species listed in the EU Habitats Directive despite only making up 0.2% of the EU’s full territory.

The landscapes and biodiversity in these three archipelagos are not only substantially different from each other, they are subject to distinctive impacts from human activities. For example, the Azores are most known for their fisheries and agricultural sectors, while tourism is the most significant economic sector in Madeira and the Canary Islands. For this reason, it is neither possible nor desirable to have a homogenised approach to planning in the bioregion. Nevertheless, the importance of ensuring a coherent and coordinated MSP process that takes transnational issues into account is key to delivering the EU’s biodiversity and climate goals in all waters. To support Portuguese and Spanish authorities in the process of developing maritime spatial plans for their OR, two EU projects have been funded: Macaronesia Maritime Spatial Planning (MarSP) and the MSP-OR project. Currently, the archipelagos are in different stages of MSP implementation, with Madeira (2019) and the Canary Islands (2023) having plans in place. The Azores plan is now under stakeholder consultation and is due to be finalised by the end of 2024.

CANARY ISLANDS

The MSP action plans for the Canary Islands were approved by Royal Decree along with other maritime spatial plans for the Spanish seas in February 2023. The competent authority was the Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge, while sectoral policies such as fisheries and marine aquaculture in coastal waters were managed by regional authorities. During the Spanish MSP process, there were some opportunities for the public to participate and share their views, but these public consultations were scarce and mainly focused on a State level, with little engagement from Canarians and regional economic agents. Meaningful and ongoing stakeholder participation from the beginning of planning is key to ensuring plans are well received and that indicators used to assess the progress of a given plan’s implementation – such as those related to sustainability – are widely and rapidly adopted. Positively, the competent authorities have taken steps to increase participation of civil society, which is a positive starting point for improving the MSP process.

There is a national commitment, with milestones and a timetable, to protect 25% of marine and coastal areas by 2025 as an intermediate step towards achieving the EU Biodiversity Strategy target of 30% protection by 2030. In the Canary Islands, there is a proposal for sites to expand and improve the MPA network, as part of achieving this goal. However, delivering this requires protected areas to be properly designated (e.g. with good connectivity between sites) and for management measures to be enforced promptly.

Finally, as in other Spanish regions, the haphazard deployment of offshore wind farms is concerning, particularly in light of RepowerEU’s watering down of environmental regulations and the delayed publication of guidance for the designation of “renewable acceleration areas” by the European Commission.

As highlighted across the series of WWF assessments on maritime spatial planning in the EU, MSP can act as a connecting thread to all human activities within shared marine spaces in a way that is environmentally sustainable and prevents conflicts between sectors, both geographically and over time. However, the success of a plan depends not only on public acceptance of the measures adopted, but on how forward-looking it is. The latter is even more important in the Canary Islands because scientific data on the archipelago’s marine ecosystems and climate change scenarios is still missing. Finally, ensuring cross-border cooperation with non-EU countries in the North of Africa is key to ensure human activities in the region remain within ecosystem boundaries.
MADEIRA

The maritime spatial plan for the Autonomous Region of Madeira was approved by the Government of Portugal in 2019. It covers a maritime area of approximately 442,248 km² — about 500 times greater than Madeira’s land area — and comprises, in addition to the islands and islets, several seamounts (Seine, Lion, Unicorn, Dragon, Susana and Ampere).\(^{25}\)

MSP in the region was a “learn by doing” exercise, functioning as a tool to raise awareness about the importance of good ocean governance and the environment. However, the plan which emerged from the process focuses on current marine and coastal activities, such as tourism (which accounted for more than three-quarters of the maritime gross value added between 2016 and 2017),\(^{15}\) ports and fisheries; it does not promote actions to achieve a more modern, resource-efficient and climate-neutral blue economy, such as through sustainable tourism, offshore wind development and low-impact fishing practices.\(^{27}\) Additionally, it does not actively support connectivity between MPAs in Madeiran waters, nor effective management of these spaces, both of which are key to delivering the European Green Deal.\(^{17}\)

Positively, however, the MSP process has resulted in innovative steps to improve Madeira’s marine area management. For example, an online geodatabase has been developed that allows people to access and visualise the spatial and socioeconomic data authorities used to develop the plan. This digitalisation of the maritime spatial plan is key to disseminating information from the current plan and building knowledge for a future process. Moving forward, it is imperative that Madeira’s blue economy becomes truly sustainable: one that provides social and economic benefits for current and future generations; restores, protects, and maintains diverse and productive marine ecosystems; and preserves nature. To do so, the government should focus on climate-proofing its MSP, which can be done by respecting ecosystem capacities to accommodate increasing human pressures, taking into account land-sea interactions and making science-based forecasts of climate change impacts.

AZORES

In 2022, as part of its Maritime Spatial Planning in the North-East Atlantic report, WWF analysed deterrents to the implementation of the MSPD in the Azores. Since then, the government has still not finalised the MSP process, thus leaving 57% of the Portuguese EEZ (960,432 km²) without a maritime spatial plan in place.

The vast maritime area covered by the Azores holds a multiplicity of natural resources and biodiversity. For example, marine resources are central to the Azores’ economy, contributing to over 20% of the archipelago’s exports.\(^{26}\) Azorean waters are also home to some of the highest rates of cetacean biodiversity on Earth with 28 different species having been reported including blue, fin, and sperm whales.\(^{29}\)

For most people, the high seas (oceanic areas outside of EEZs) are out of sight. But for the Azores, which are the furthest point of the Portuguese EEZ, the high seas play an important role in the healthy functioning of the region’s wider marine system. Because so much of Azorean natural resources are intrinsically connected to what happens in Stateless waters, where little information exists about human activities and marine ecosystems, planning is an incredibly complex process.\(^{30}\)

Not only is data insufficient, MSP in the region was not prioritised by the central government, which resulted in a five-year delay to beginning the MSP process compared to the continental shelf.

Positively, the MSP experience in the Azores has pertinent lessons to help inform processes in other OR and island States worldwide. For example, replicating the process that successfully involved local industries and helped foster awareness among stakeholders about the long-term benefits of MSP could help kick-start the process in places where governance structures are not yet in place. Further, the Azorean case underscores the need for a good plan, as its impacts can be far reaching when in close proximity to the high seas. To this end, ensuring human activities are well aligned with the conservation of marine ecosystems and the transition towards a truly sustainable EU blue economy should be a priority for Portugal in 2024.
WORLDS APART: 
MSP IN FRANCE’S OUTERMOST REGIONS

The six French OR are spread across our planet, stretching from the Caribbean Sea to the West Indies, and face different geopolitical, economic, social and environmental pressures. However, all can benefit from holistic spatial planning, a forward-looking approach to tackling climate change and measures that ensure good transboundary cooperation.

As defined in Article 3(3), the MSPD applies to the marine regions defined in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD, Directive 2008/56/EC, Article 4): the Baltic Sea, the North-East Atlantic Ocean (including Macaronesia), the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. The French overseas departments (Martinique, Mayotte, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion) and community (Saint-Martin), while part of the EU single market and thus legally required to comply with Member State obligations, are exempt from the requirements of the MSPD, including the implementation and subsequent revision of maritime spatial plans. Additionally, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund’s support for MSP only applies to the marine regions specified in the MSPD, creating additional capacity restrictions for the OR which are often subject to an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality in EU policymaking.

While the MSPD does not cover the French OR, the 2017 SNML – which provides the national MSP framework – and the Environment Code – the register of France’s environmental legislation covering nature protection and the sustainable use of natural resources – still require the government to implement spatial planning strategies in France’s overseas basins. As France has the world’s largest EEZ, MSP is a valuable tool for delivering a sustainable blue economy – a marine-based economy that not only provides social and economic benefits for current and future generations, but also restores, protects and maintains the diversity, productivity and resilience of marine ecosystems in the long term – in all French waters.

To address this complex governance context, the country developed a dual approach to MSP that includes two types of strategic planning documents: the DSF and the DSBM (see page 7 for an introduction to these):

- The DSF apply to France’s mainland – i.e. the area covered by the MSPD – and define a strategic vision for integrated planning and sustainable development of the coastal zone. Each DSF covers a different maritime area (East Channel-North Sea, North Atlantic-West Channel, South Atlantic and Mediterranean) and is designed to address the specific challenges and opportunities present in each region. WWF has assessed these mainland strategies in its reports Maritime Spatial Planning in the North Sea, Maritime Spatial Planning in the Mediterranean Sea.

- The DSBM deal with broader maritime spaces and are focused on promoting the sustainable development and coordination of activities in France’s OR.

On the other hand, the DSBM deal with broader maritime spaces and are focused on promoting the sustainable development and coordination of activities in France’s OR.

In particular, they aim to develop a strategic vision for the sustainable management of maritime spaces, taking into account various activities such as shipping, fishing, energy production and environmental protection. As of April 2024, there are four DSBM: Antilles, South Indian Ocean, French Guiana, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon.

The case study below focuses on the development of the DSBM for French Guiana, which was supported by the EU via the HORIZON MSP-OR project and the MSPglobal partnership between UNESCO and the European Commission. The stakes to deliver MSP in French Guiana’s biodiversity-rich marine area and in a State with such a great geographical distance from the European mainland are high, but a successful implementation of ERA-MSP here would help solidify the EU’s role as a leader in policy actions that work across industrial sectors and geographies to deliver global commitments for a more sustainable future.
Today, approximately 5 million European citizens live in the EU’s nine outermost regions spread across the globe. Despite their remote locations and unique contexts, these islands and archipelagos are key to delivering the EU’s climate and biodiversity targets – not only because they constitute the majority of European waters, but because, in many cases, they are at the forefront of climate change. Yet, when it comes to the implementation of maritime and environmental policies to protect biodiversity and vulnerable communities against climate catastrophes, as well as safeguard livelihoods that depend on a thriving ocean, the outermost regions often fall behind.

As a tool that balances complex institutional dynamics with economic, ecological, and social aspects, MSP can strengthen exchanges between stakeholders, facilitate long-term decision making, help gather scientific data and support the transition towards a sustainable blue economy. However, the success of MSP depends on overcoming the current lack of capacity, (human and financial) resources, awareness and, crucially, interest that are essential to secure ongoing, meaningful stakeholder engagement and cross-border cooperation that deliver sustainable management of marine areas in the long term. Addressing these challenges is particularly important in the outermost regions, which often lack scientific information on their diverse ecosystem features despite (if not due to) the broad geographical ranges they cover. Closing this critical gap in ocean literacy could strengthen other EU policies including nature, climate, energy and trade legislation. Further, the legal frameworks to guide the application of an ecosystem-based approach to MSP are frequently missing in the outermost regions, as these areas have less structured ocean governance than the European mainland.

As a global leader in maritime policy, the EU must uphold its commitments in all its waters, including those farthest away from the continental shelf. This can be done by supporting collaborative transboundary projects that promote forward-thinking dialogue, foster knowledge sharing between different actors and, ultimately, contribute to the successful implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to MSP worldwide.

**WAY FORWARD**

**WWF calls on the EU, Member States and civil society to**

- Establish MSP as a political priority for all EU waters – including the French outermost regions where the MSPD does not apply – to deliver healthy, productive and resilient marine ecosystems as a foundation to a sustainable blue economy.
- Build capacity in the outermost regions’ national authorities to independently lead the MSP process, establish transparent interactions with a broad set of citizens and economic agents, and collect robust socioeconomic and environmental data on maritime activities and their long-term sustainable management.
- Foster a culture of meaningful and ongoing engagement with all stakeholders – including groups often excluded from participatory processes – to generate greater awareness about the importance of MSP, address potential scepticism, and better integrate their knowledge, views and needs into maritime spatial plans.
- Invest in collecting scientific knowledge about marine ecosystems and climate change scenarios, establish tools and objectives to monitor a given maritime spatial plan’s success, and publicly share the final plan’s data in a standardised way.
- Intensify transboundary cooperation with non-EU countries to strengthen the role of MSP in the Global South.
REFERENCES


10. Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition, 2017, Article 349 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union on the freedom to provide services.


24. WWF, 2022, The EU is not on track for a sustainable blue future. https://www.wwf.eu/?7990906/The-EU-is-not-on-track-for-a-sustainable-blue-future


40. Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition, 2017, Article 349 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union on the freedom to provide services.

41. Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition, 2017, Article 349 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union on the freedom to provide services.


OUR MISSION IS TO STOP THE DEGRADATION OF THE PLANET’S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND TO BUILD A FUTURE IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE.