



Realising the ambition of the EU Biodiversity Strategy in the ocean

Key recommendations for the European Commission's Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems

The ocean is key to tackling the climate and biodiversity emergencies

Life on Earth depends on the ocean: no matter where you are, you depend on the ocean and its unique and rich biodiversity for the production of oxygen, food, energy, and the enormous amount of heat and carbon it absorbs. Yet, as United Nations Secretary General António Guterres says, 'Humanity has waged war on nature and making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century [...] This is an epic policy test. But ultimately, this is a moral test'.

None of the European seas are healthy¹, and fishing remains the biggest driver of marine biodiversity loss.² The 2030 EU Biodiversity Strategy includes a commitment to develop, by 2021, an Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems, with a focus on limiting the use of fishing gear most harmful to ocean biodiversity, especially on the seabed.

A Plan centered on Action

The EU already has a comprehensive body of policy and legislation aimed at protecting the marine environment, but they are not being implemented, as confirmed by the European Court of Auditors.⁶ There is an urgent need to address this performance gap and ensure that all sectors contribute to delivering the ambition of the European Green Deal. This should complement and articulate other EU policies, such as the future restoration law, the fisheries technical measures regulation and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

However, ultimately, the current challenges and the ambition set out in the European Green Deal and the Biodiversity Strategy will not be met by 2030 without a restructuring of the EU fleet and fisheries footprint to address the impacts of destructive fishing gear (particularly bottom-towed gear), mitigate the ecosystem and climate impacts of fishing, and put European fisheries on a path of adaptation to the climate emergency. If the European Union is serious about that ambition, bold and courageous steps are needed, starting in 2022 (see Annex). To improve the health of marine ecosystems, deliver climate action and create a lasting legacy for future generations, the Action Plan must address the following elements:

Destructive fishing

The EU seabed is the most bottom-trawled in the world, more than five times the global average,³ and 80% of EU coastal areas are disturbed by trawling.⁴ Bottom-towed gear is widely used in the EU, including in sensitive coastal areas and even inside Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), with some studies indicating a higher intensity of trawling inside than outside designated areas.⁵

It is therefore natural that ending the destructive impacts of fishing, especially on the seabed, is highlighted in the Biodiversity Strategy. Achieving the 2030 objectives for seabed integrity, protection and restoration of all marine habitats requires action in the short term. To start with, the Action Plan

must make a strong political statement that all bottom-towed fishing must end inside MPAs and other sensitive areas immediately, while setting a clear target for the reduction of all bottom-trawling by 2025 at the latest. Furthermore, fishing remains the greatest threat to the survival of protected and sensitive species. Mitigation of bycatch must be addressed as a matter of urgency to preserve marine biodiversity in EU waters.

To achieve this, the Action Plan should set out a process that will bind the EU to:

- **In early 2022** at the latest, expedite closure to bottom-fishing in areas of the deep-sea below 400 metres where Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems are known or likely to occur;
- **In 2022**, prohibit bottom-towed gear in all EU MPAs and;
- **In 2022**, remove bottom-trawling from the most sensitive and productive parts of our seas by establishing trawl-free zones along the whole EU coast, while preventing the increase of bycatch of sensitive species caused by other types of fisheries.
- **By 2023**, eliminate bycatch of sensitive species through mandatory introduction of remote electronic monitoring, clear guidance on mitigation measures for each sea basin evaluated by scientific bodies, and national action plans;
- **By 2025**, drastically reduce the footprint of bottom-trawling on the EU's seafloor, including by eliminating it in areas deeper than 400m.
- **By 2027**, prohibit all destructive and unselective fishing gear in order to transition fisheries to low impact fishing, compatible with agreed biodiversity and climate targets.

Climate change and healthy marine ecosystems

A central pillar of the Action Plan must be to eliminate the threat that overfishing poses to the critical role the ocean plays in regulating the climate and serving as a carbon sink. Enshrining a just transition to low-impact, localised fisheries and value chains will have far-reaching positive impacts on ocean health, the climate and our coastal communities. The Action Plan is a timely opportunity to fill policy gaps and realise our moral obligation to ensure EU fisheries adapt to changing circumstances and comply with our climate laws and international biodiversity commitments by 2030.

To achieve this, the Action Plan should bind the EU to:

- **In 2022**, develop an Ecosystem and Climate Impact Assessment process for all EU fisheries and fleets, to ensure that the setting of annual fishing opportunities incorporates climate and ecosystem considerations (including precautionary climate buffers, minimisation of bycatch of protected species, food web functioning, adaptation capacity of fish populations, and seabed integrity);
- **In 2022**, develop a robust scientific assessment process that evaluates the impact of fishing activity on the carbon sequestration potential of fish populations and of the seabed/habitat, and reviews fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions from EU fishing fleets;
- **In 2022**, provide guidance to Member States on criteria and a rating process that can assist in transitioning European fleets to low impact fishing by allocating quota to fleet segments that are low carbon emitters, have no impact on the seabed and avoid bycatch of sensitive species;
- **In 2023**, formally propose annual fishing limits (Total Annual Catch) for all fish populations using the above climate and ecosystem-based management approach.

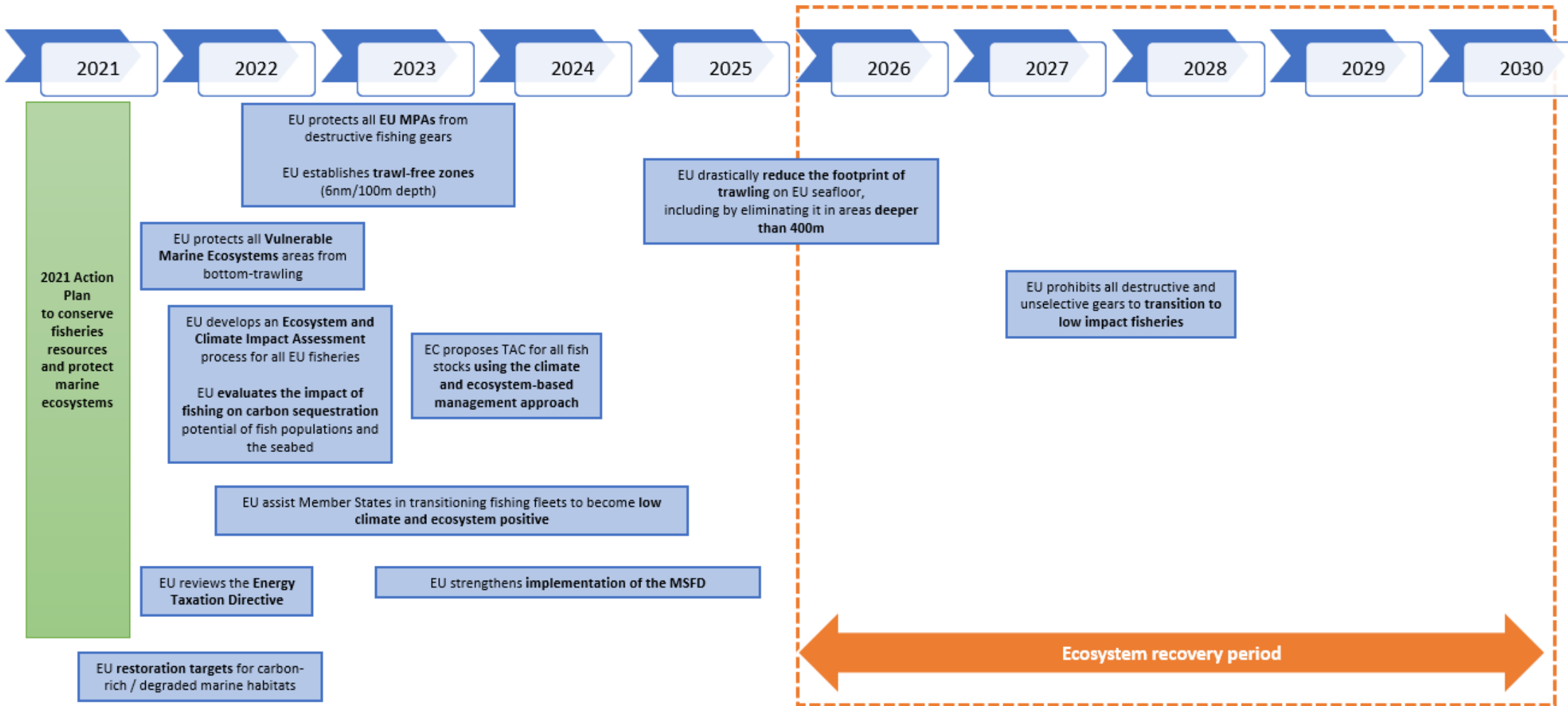
2030 starts now

The combination of measures listed above will enable conditions for natural processes to recover, restoration to happen, and marine life to bounce back. The missing element is the political will to realise those benefits.

More than 100 environmental NGOs have summarised the key actions that must happen in this regard in the [Blue Manifesto](#), whose focus is broader than fisheries, but serves as roadmap to deliver healthy European seas in 2030.

Acting with urgency on these key measures will deliver multiple benefits in terms of climate resilience, biodiversity protection, food provisioning, job security and healthy coastal communities. We only have eight years.

Annex: Illustrative timeline for shadow NGO Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems by 2030



¹ European Environment Agency, Marine messages II, Navigating the course towards clean, healthy and productive seas through implementation of an ecosystem based approach. 77 pp.

² IPBES 2019. Global Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

³ Amoroso, R. O. et al. Bottom trawl fishing footprints on the world's continental shelves. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 115.43 (2018): E10275-E10282.

⁴ European Environment Agency, idem.

⁵ Dureuil, M et al. Elevated trawling inside protected areas undermines conservation outcomes in a global fishing hot spot. (2018) In Science (New York, N.Y.) 362 (6421). DOI:

⁶ European Court of Auditors Special Report 26/2020: Marine environment: EU protection is wide but not deep.