SCIENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE ESTUARINE AND COASTAL ENVIRONMENTS

Recommendations from the ECSA 61 Conference, Scientific Committee and EU Project Leads

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This policy brief highlights how recent scientific evidence, innovative methodologies and good practices from research can be applied to strengthen management, conservation and restoration of estuarine and coastal waters. It underlines the pivotal role of researchers and practitioners in translating knowledge into actionable, place-based solutions. The priority now is to accelerate uptake of the lessons learned into policy and practice. To this end, this brief from the Scientific Committee of the 61st Conference of the Estuarine and Coastal Sciences Association (ECSA) sets out six key messages concrete actions to strengthen science-based decision-making for estuarine and coastal waters.

Key Messages

1. Elevate Estuarine and Coastal Zones across Policy Frameworks and Implementation
2. Advance Cumulative Impact Assessments at Land-Sea-Interfaces
3. Scale Next-Generation Monitoring Tools for Estuarine and Coastal Ecosystems
4. Invest Strategically in Nature-Based and Nature-Positive Solutions for Coastal and Estuarine Waters
5. Institutionalise Science-Policy-Community Co-Design in Coastal Governance
6. Support Early Career Researchers and Ocean Professionals in their Careers and in Engagement

Why this matters

The European Union is advancing ambitious policy frameworks, including the EU Mission *Restore our Ocean and Waters*, the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Water Framework Directive (WFD), Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR), the Ocean Pact, the EU Green Deal and the long-standing Birds and Habitats (Natura 2000) Directives, to halt biodiversity loss, restore ecosystems and strengthen climate change resistance and resilience. Emerging policy initiatives are now being discussed, such as the European Ocean Act, dealing with similar objectives.

Coastal and estuarine zones are critical interfaces between land, sea and society, supporting biodiversity, ecosystem services and human well-being. They play a central role in carbon cycling, flood protection, food provision from fisheries and aquaculture and water quality maintenance. Yet, despite their importance, many gaps persist within these systems in the implementation and operationalisation of EU marine monitoring and assessment frameworks.

These environments are strongly affected by land-sea interactions and face numerous cumulative pressures arising from coastal urban development, port and shipping activities, agriculture and aquaculture, dredging and land reclamation, tourism, and climate change, among others. Impacts from riverine inputs, nutrient and contaminant loads, changing salinity and temperature, biodiversity loss or noise, interact across river catchments and coastal zones, across ecosystems and administrative boundaries. However, monitoring systems lack fine-scale, specific indicators and, management and governance instruments and approaches remain fragmented across policy domains (terrestrial and aquatic). Furthermore, the investment in conservation and restoration, particularly nature-based and nature-positive solutions, such as wetland and saltmarsh creation, and effective marine protected areas, remains insufficient.

Our research, and its advice to policymakers, has generated a rich and practical knowledge base to address these challenges, including tools for spatial planning, cumulative impact assessment, ecosystem monitoring and restoration. The key challenge now is the coordinated uptake of these research outputs and their implementation into policy and practice.

Key Messages

The whole science community, including natural, social and political scientists, are essential actors in advancing science-based marine policy, especially at the land-sea interface. Many research initiatives provide powerful approaches and tools: Now is the time to identify and apply them. These recommendations stem from many years of expertise and are underpinned by research findings from major and extensively-funded EU projects. They reinforce existing calls for action and provide a concrete new impetus.

1. ELEVATE ESTUARINE AND COASTAL ZONES ACROSS POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Estuarine and coastal zones are dynamic interfaces that are hotspots for biodiversity, ecosystem services and nature's contributions to people; yet, they are not sufficiently addressed, and in some cases are not included, in marine governance processes such as MSP (Maritime Spatial Planning), MPA (Marine Protected Area) design or restoration targets.

Actions

- Systematically integrate estuarine and coastal waters into the implementation of environmental policies such as the MSFD, NRR and WFD, as well as national MSP and biodiversity restoration frameworks;
- Strengthen the inclusion of estuarine habitats in MPA design, restoration targets and spatial planning priorities;
- Use case studies and local evidence for MPA design and spatial targets and to guide implementation of legislation;
- Adopt a social-ecological perspective that links biodiversity protection with the delivery of societal benefits.

Insights and evidence:

- GES4SEAS has created a decision-support tool (SEAS4GES) to select the most adequate tools for decision-makers in ecosystem-based management.
- Marine SABRES has proposed a simple Social-Ecological Systems analysis in holistic marine environmental management.
- MARBEFES has developed a framework for plural valuation of marine biodiversity and nature's contributions to people.
- MarinePlan has highlighted the need to align MSP processes with conservation and restoration actions, co-developed with stakeholders an operational tool to assess ecosystem based MSP in practice and illustrated the identification of priority areas for conservation.
- MPA Europe has developed an open-access atlas and decision-support platform for MPA and MSP[1], incorporating open-source species distribution models, species distribution data, selected environment variables, the representative biodiversity areas, and the seabed carbon map and model based upon a new EURO-CARBON databases.

Supported by published research: Addamo et al. (2025), Alfonso et al. (2026), Barnard et al. (2026), Bramley et al. (2026), Galparsoro et al. (2025), Giakoumi et al. (2025), Graversen et al. (2025), Lukyanova et al. (2025), Smith et al. (2025), Tocco et al. (2024)

See also: [1]MPA Europe Map Platform

2. ADVANCE CUMULATIVE IMPACT ASSESSMENTS AT LAND–SEA INTERFACES

Estuarine and coastal systems support most human activities and therefore are exposed to unique overlapping pressures from agricultural runoff to urban and coastal development and climate stressors. These cumulative impacts require tailored indicators and integrative policy considering the cascaded impacts on these ecosystems, cross-cutting economic sectors and knowledge domains. The environmental impacts are currently determined for single activities while the cumulative impacts of all activities and all operations are relatively understudied. Current assessment frameworks (WFD and MSFD) remain largely fragmented with limited integration of land-based and marine pressures, particularly so against a changing climate. As a result, cumulative impacts in estuarine and coastal systems are not consistently captured or managed, reducing the effectiveness of measures to achieve good environmental status of areas (e.g. Good Environmental Status (GES), Good Ecological Status, Favourable Conservation Status) and restoration targets.

Actions

- Adopt an ecosystem-based and a systemic framework of analysis to address cumulative impacts;
- Develop and implement problem- and/or solution-driven models and decision-support approaches that explicitly combine pressures from estuaries, coastal zones and marine systems, aligned with policy instrument requirements;
- Integrate social-ecological thresholds in the design of models and policy frameworks to address cumulative pressures, applying the precautionary principle where significant uncertainties remain;
- Enable international and cross-sector data sharing to capture systemic coastal catchment impacts and support integrated assessments across governance scales;
- Include connectivity, coherence and equivalence in transboundary marine management.

Insights and evidence:

- The GES4SEAS project has developed a comprehensive toolbox to support the achievement and management of GES in European seas. It provides science-based instruments for assessing cumulative effects, monitoring ecological components and exploring management scenarios. It can be used for conducting MSFD assessments, designing MSP measures, or evaluating risks from human activities, in Europe, and elsewhere.[2]
- The MARBEFES project has created a toolbox for exploring the multi-pressures facing marine ecosystems and their consequences for ecosystem function and their services and societal benefits.
- The Marine SABRES project has created a decision-support tool underpinned by a simple social ecological system to assist decision-makers in the management of complex challenges in the marine environment.[3]
- ACTNOW uses what-if scenarios to explore the cumulative impact of multiple drivers on marine biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- DiverSea strongly depends on participatory co-design to identify the drivers and impacts of marine biodiversity loss and introduces stakeholders and local experts to systems thinking.

Supported by published research: Borja et al. (2010), Cardoso et al. (2022), de Oliveira et al. (2025), Elliott et al. (2023), Kołbuk et al. (2026), Shubham et al. (2025), Vermeulen-Miltz (2023)

See also:

[2] Policy Brief: Cumulative Pressures at Sea Demand Action: Tools to Make Management Possible

[3] MARBEFES toolbox

3. SCALE NEXT-GENERATION MONITORING AND MANAGEMENT TOOLS FOR ESTUARINE AND COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS

There is the need for functional tools for ecosystem-based management and monitoring that are easily accessible and available. Newer approaches such as genomics, autonomisation and high-resolution modelling offer significant potential to monitor more easily and cost-effectively over larger areas.

Actions

- Support implementation of innovative technologies specifically calibrated for estuarine conditions;
- Provide support for schemes deploying advanced tools (e.g. omics, drones, acoustics, autonomous sensors) in coastal and estuarine waters;
- Promote integration of multiple data streams into monitoring and assessment frameworks;
- Ensure that data archiving, interoperability and provenance (FAIR principles) are built into monitoring design;
- Support interoperable marine dataspaces, common biodiversity standards, and Digital Twin technologies to enable harmonised monitoring, integrated assessments and evidence-based decision-making across coastal and marine ecosystems;
- Critically evaluate the opportunities and limitations of AI for next generation monitoring.

Insights and evidence:

EU-funded initiatives contribute to the development of integrated European observation systems, linking in-situ monitoring, Earth observation and modelling, and demonstrate that next-generation monitoring is feasible:

- eDNAqua-Plan has developed a roadmap for integrating environmental DNA (eDNA) into aquatic monitoring frameworks.
- OBAMA-NEXT has developed a toolbox integrating emerging technologies (e.g. remote sensing, eDNA, optical instruments and citizen science) to generate accurate and relevant information on marine ecosystems and biodiversity.
- DiverSea has developed and applied integrated methods and technologies to monitor biodiversity and the drivers of its decline. Using remote sensing, eDNA, autonomous sampling and mapping, indicator-based approaches, monitoring of selected essential ocean variables and citizen science, DiverSea creates models linking functional biodiversity indicators to ecological status class, environment goods and services. DiverSea visualizes and communicates the data in a cutting-edge science-policy dashboard based on systems thinking.
- MARCO-BOLO has developed an integrated suite of technological solutions for biodiversity observation and mapping, including DNA-based approaches, autonomous multi-sensor monitoring systems, remote sensing and advanced modelling tools.
- GuardIAS has developed an integrated framework for aquatic invasive species surveillance and management, combining AI, early warning systems, eDNA, autonomous robotics, remote sensing, passive acoustics, citizen science and advanced modelling. By linking next-generation monitoring technologies with risk assessment, decision-support tools and systematic conservation planning, it enables proactive, adaptive and cost-effective management of aquatic ecosystems.
- ACTNOW critically appraises marine biodiversity indicators and recommends a suite of measures to capture changes in not only species but also communities and habitats.
- MARBEFES has developed metabarcoding frameworks, technologies for collecting sublethal genetic indicators, explored novel methods for monitoring benthic ecosystem function and created new tools for monitoring ecological, economic and societal value of marine ecosystems.

Supported by published research: Bohan et al. (2017), Bourlat et al. (2013), Eguidazu-de la Parte et al. (2025), Forsblom et al. (2024), Hillebrand et al. (2025), Katsanevakis et al. (2024)

4. INVEST STRATEGICALLY IN NATURE-BASED AND NATURE-POSITIVE SOLUTIONS FOR COASTAL AND ESTUARINE WATERS

Coastal and estuarine habitats (e.g. saltmarshes, wetlands) deliver high-value multifunctional ecosystem services and societal benefits, yet nature-based and nature-positive solutions remain underfunded and undervalued.

Actions

- Launch earmarked funding for coastal restoration (e.g. saltmarsh creation, wetland rewilding);
- Link restoration outcomes to ecosystem service valuation (e.g. flood protection, carbon sequestration) and to the delivery of societal benefits (e.g. fish and shellfish resources, water purification and cultural ecosystem services);
- Incorporate restoration from catchment to coast as a holistic system.

Insights and evidence:

- ROWER analyses restoration solutions from catchment to coast.
- Marine SABRES has analysed how Social-Ecological Systems can help advance ecosystem-based management and balance biodiversity conservation with economic activities.
- MARBEFES has developed tools to estimate the ecological, economic and cultural value of marine ecosystems, which allows the multifaceted benefits of restoration to be measured in parallel.
- DiverSea shows the value of seagrass meadows and other coastal habitats/species function as nature-based solutions, delivering biodiversity, coastal resilience and/or ecosystem services benefits.

Supported by published research: Buitendijk et al. (2024), Moreas et al. (2022), OCEAN & CLIMATE (2021), Watson et al. (2026)

5. INSTITUTIONALISE SCIENCE–POLICY–COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN IN COASTAL GOVERNANCE

Strengthen collaborative management and governance by involving local communities, citizen scientists, practitioners and researchers in co-produced science, planning and restoration.

Actions

- Introduce co-design requirements into EU-funded research to ensure early, continuous and meaningful engagement and participation of local stakeholders, communities and scientists;
- Develop multi-actor platforms, field laboratories (e.g. living labs) and participatory models to support adaptive, inclusive and sustainable decision-making;
- Engage local communities in management actions and the implementation of nature-based and nature-positive solutions;
- Encourage related projects to work collaboratively on stakeholder co-design to maximise input from shared stakeholder groups and minimise contributor fatigue;
- Foster ocean literacy among diverse sectors and communities, from citizens and consumers to economic actors and policymakers, to enable more informed decision-making.

Insights and evidence:

- MARBEFES integrates stakeholder engagement and co-production approaches to develop its biodiversity and ecosystem functioning/services toolbox.
- Marine SABRES applies transdisciplinary and co-design approaches to enhance marine biodiversity resilience. Marine SABRES and MARBEFES shared stakeholder engagement activities and this model is well-received by stakeholder groups.
- GuardIAS promotes participatory aquatic invasive species management through citizen science, stakeholder co-design, communities of practice, applied games and BioArtBlitz events. By engaging communities, practitioners and managers in monitoring, early warning and management actions, it advances inclusive and evidence-based governance of aquatic ecosystems.
- DiverSea strongly depends on participatory co-design to identify the drivers and impacts of coastal marine biodiversity and ecosystem loss and introduce stakeholders and local experts to systems thinking. This approach is further strengthened through the integration of citizen science initiatives and targeted capacity development, enhancing community engagement in coastal ecosystem assessment and decision-making.
- MPA Europe has adopted a stakeholder-driven win-win approach to mapping optimal Marine Protected Areas for biodiversity conservation and blue carbon. Stakeholders have been involved from the outset through interactive workshops, helping shape case studies and policy recommendations. This ensures recommendations are scientifically robust while reflecting stakeholders' needs and priorities, bridging science, policy and practice.

Supported by published research: Borja et al. (2025), Bramley et al. (2026), Katsanevakis et al. (2024), Norström et al. (2020), Pendleton et al. (2023), Verling et al. (2025)

6. SUPPORT EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS AND OCEAN PROFESSIONALS IN THEIR CAREERS AND IN ENGAGEMENT

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOPs) are essential to the future of marine and coastal science, innovation and governance. However, they face persistent structural challenges, including job insecurity, limited access to long-term funding, high competition for grants and barriers to their inclusion in policy engagement. At the same time, ECRs and ECOPs are well-positioned to drive interdisciplinary approaches, innovation and science–policy–society integration, which are critical for addressing complex coastal challenges. Horizon Europe projects provide development opportunities for ECRs and ECOPs. However, their participation is typically based on short-term, project-funded contracts, with limited continuity beyond project lifetimes; such conditions force trade-offs between career and personal lives.

Actions

- Strengthen support for STEM initiatives across funding programmes, including through dedicated opportunities within Horizon Europe;
- Invest in multi-year funding and dedicated fellowship and placement programmes to support sustained participation of Early Career Ocean Professionals in policy engagement. Provide stable career pathways and long-term funding opportunities;
- Allocate dedicated funding for ECR-led research and development;
- Ensure representation in policy and advisory processes;
- Invest in skills, mobility and interdisciplinary training.

Insights and evidence:

- The UN Ocean Decade ECOP Programme highlights the importance of supporting Early Career Professionals to ensure long-term ocean sustainability and innovation capacity.
- Horizon Europe projects (e.g. MARBEFES, Marine SABRES, GES4SEAS, OBAMA-NEXT, GuardIAS, ACTNOW[4]) have created a community of ECRs, actively involving them in modelling, monitoring, living labs, stakeholder engagement, competency training, transferable skills and policy-relevant work, making them central to developing innovative approaches and bridging science, policy and practice.

LinkedIn Early Career Researchers Community

Supported by published research:
Satterthwaite (2025)

See also:
[4] Recommendations for Horizon Europe: Reframing ECRs in Marine Science

Strategic Outlook

The science community will continue to support the European Commission and Member States, and international partners facing similar challenges with science-based recommendations and place-based expertise to meet the goals of the EU Ocean Pact, Mission Ocean and Waters and the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

Together, we will be able to strengthen governance by integrating estuarine and coastal systems better into marine policy, planning, monitoring and management. We emphasise that implementing these six recommendations will improve the coherence and effectiveness of EU policies: It will help to overcome the separation of terrestrial, marine and coastal approaches through integration. Supporting cumulative impact assessment, innovative monitoring, nature-based solutions, participatory decision-making and sustained investment in future scientific capacity will support healthier and more resilient ecosystems, enhance biodiversity and climate resilience. Importantly, it will increase the delivery of ecosystem services and nature's contributions to people.

Who we are

This brief represents the views of a leading network of scientists, practitioners and managers across Europe and beyond who have contributed extensively to EU-funded (and UKRI-funded) research on marine biodiversity, ecosystem services, spatial planning and climate change resilience. These scientists and practitioners facilitate stakeholder engagement in local and national planning, provide real-world baseline and datasets and local expertise. Furthermore, they have collaborated in demonstration projects across different ecosystems, regions and contexts.

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Supporting Projects

GES4SEAS, MPA, MARINE SABRES, GuardIAS, ACTNOW, MARCO-BOLO, MARBEFES, OBAMA-NEXT, BIOcean5D, MarinePlan, bioagora, DiverSea, eDNAqua-Plan

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Fahrenheitstr. 6, D-28359 Bremen, Germany
Editors: Rebecca Lahl, Gioia Marcovecchio
Layout: Henning Becker
E-Mail: Rebecca.lahl@leibniz-zmt.de
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