



**BLUE
CONNECT**

Under revision

Barriers and enablers to the definition and implementation of conservation measures



This project has received funding from the European Union's HORIZON
Innovation Actions under Grant Agreement No 1011656759

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Project No. | 1011656759 |
| Project Acronym | Blue Connect |
| Project Title | Blue Connect |
| Call | HORIZON-MISS-2023-OCEAN-01 |
| Start Date | 02.11.2024 |
| Duration | 36 Months |
| Delivery Title | Barriers and enablers to the definition and implementation of conservation measures |
| Due Date Delivery | 30.04.2026 |
| Date of Submission | 25.04.2026 |
| Deliverable Lead Partner | NIVA |
| Dissemination Level | Public |

Recommended citation:

Sævold, M.H., Friedrich, L., Kvanneid, A.J., Skjeie Thorstensen, H., Hjallen Eriksen, G., Fabres, J., Spinu, A., Esparza Alaminos, O., Otero Villanueva, M., Trabulo, R., Eggermont, M., da Silva Santos, N., Gutierrez, D., Macedo, T., de Raedemaecker, F. and Baeckelandt, M. 2026. *Barriers and enablers to the definition and implementation of conservation measures. Deliverable 3.2 under WP3 of the BLUE Connect project (GA n° 1011656759).*

| Document History | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------------------------|---|
| Version | Date | Note | Revised by |
| 01 | 27.02.2026 | Internal review | Saba Başkır, Maria del Mar Otero Villanueva |
| 02 | 23.03.2026 | Internal review | Saba Başkır, Maria del Mar Otero Villanueva, Natascha Jaspert |
| 03 | 25.03.2026 | Final version for submission | |





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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| ANANP | National Agency for Protected Areas |
| CBD | Convention on Biological Diversity |
| EU | European Union |
| FPS | Federal Public Health Service |
| MPA | Marine Protected Area |
| MSFD | Marine Strategy Framework Directive |
| MSP | Maritime Spatial Planning |
| OSPAR | Oslo-Paris Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| RAMPA | Rede Regional de Áreas Marinhas Protegidas dos Açores |
| RBINS | Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences |
| SAC | Special Area of Conservation |
| SCI | Site of Community Interest |
| SPA | Special Protection Area |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| WWF | World Wildlife Fund for Nature |

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Executive summary

The BLUE CONNECT project responds to the urgent need to increase and improve the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems in European Seas. Understanding the institutional factors that hinder or facilitate the designation and effective implementation of MPAs is key for improving protection for European seas and for the EU to reach the 30x30 target. This report investigates institutional barriers and enablers for the definition and implementation of effective conservation measures in European Seas through the lens of the BLUE CONNECT Demonstration Sites (Demo Sites). While the topic itself has been studied many times before, the BLUE CONNECT project aims to contribute new perspectives from its Demo Sites to strengthen or add to the existing evidence base. The report is based on a review of institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified in selected key literature, interviews with five BLUE CONNECT Demo Sites and a comparative analysis across the five sites.

While not adding any new factors to the list of known barriers and enablers, the comparative analysis of the five BLUE CONNECT Sites does confirm the existing findings from previous projects. In particular, the study highlighted six key institutional factors that contribute to facilitating or hindering effective MPAs. These factors are stakeholder engagement, roles and mandates, communication and coordination, legal frameworks, funding and human resources. None of these factors on their own would guarantee successful designation and implementation of effective MPAs. However, the experience from BLUE CONNECT Demo Sites and other studies shows that these factors play an important role either as barriers or as enablers.

A central challenge for MPAs highlighted by the Demo Site experiences is the **competition between conservation and economic interest**. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation, economic interests are still often prioritised. The resulting lack of political will to advance effective conservation leads to weak, unrestrictive conservation measures, stalling designation processes or 'paper parks' with limited or no active implementation. Solving this challenge will be critical to help put important institutional enablers for MPAs in place and support effective conservation measures.

Looking forward, the report concludes that, while there is a growing evidence base for what the institutional barriers and enablers for effective MPAs are, the next question that needs to be addressed is what can be done to overcome the barriers and capitalise on the enablers.

1 Introduction

The BLUE CONNECT project responds to the urgent need to increase and improve the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems in European Seas. The European Union needs to expand and strengthen its network of marine protected areas (MPAs) in order to meet the ambitious 30x30 targets set by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (European Commission 2020) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD 2022). Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework reads:

“Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures [...]” (CBD 2022, p.9, Target 3)

Understanding the institutional factors that hinder or facilitate the designation and effective implementation of MPAs is key for improving protection for European seas and for the EU to reach the 30x30 target. In 2025, only about 11.4 % of the EU’s marine areas were designated as MPAs (WWF 2025). Moreover, the majority of MPAs in EU waters were found to have low levels of protection (Aminian-Biquet et al. 2024). The WWF report found that most MPAs in the EU do not currently have a management plan (WWF 2025). Management plans are one of several important institutional enablers for effective marine conservation and restoration (Bouvet et al. 2023, OSPAR 2024). Without management plans, MPAs often risk ending up as ‘paper parks’ without meaningful conservation effect (WWF 2025).

This report investigates institutional barriers and enablers for the definition and implementation of effective conservation measures in European Seas through the lens of the BLUE CONNECT Demonstration Sites (Demo Sites). While the topic itself has been studied several times before, the BLUE CONNECT project aims to contribute new perspectives from its Demo Sites to strengthen or add to the existing evidence base. The project has 12 Demo Sites in eight countries across four sea basins. The Demo Sites range from local MPAs to national or regional MPA networks. This report looked at five of the Demo Sites and studied the designation and implementation of MPAs in the context of different national and regional governance frameworks. A comparative analysis across Demo Sites revealed several institutional barriers and enablers that were common across multiple sites and confirmed the findings from other studies.

The next chapter presents the methods used in the study. Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of the EU Natura 2000 network which plays a central role most of the BLUE



CONNECT Demo Sites. Chapter 4 provides an overview of institutional barriers and enablers identified by other studies and EU projects. Chapter 5 presents the findings for the five Demo Sites and Chapter 6 compares these findings across the different governance contexts. The report concludes with key take aways on barriers and enablers for designating and implementing MPAs.

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2 Method

The report is based on a literature review, desktop study and interviews with five Demo Sites. A brief literature review was conducted to gather a baseline list of institutional barriers and enablers related to European MPAs. This was followed by a desktop study and interviews to identify barriers and enablers at the Demo Site level. In the final step, a comparative analysis of the gathered information was conducted to identify commonalities and differences between Demo Sites and draw recommendations from this.

Literature review

The aim of the literature was to identify common institutional barriers and enablers for European MPAs found by previous studies. First, reports from relevant organisations and EU projects (MSP4BIO, Blue4All, eMSP, CrossGov) were screened for relevant content. From this screening, three reports were selected to be taken forward in the literature review:

- Bouvet et al. 2023. Benchmarking institutional and policy frameworks for MPAs. Deliverable 1.1 under the Blue4All project (GA n° 101094014).
- [Bocci et al. 2023. State of the art overview of the current protection and restoration measures in place. Deliverable - D2.3, under the WP2 of MSP4BIO project \(GA n° 101060707\).](#)
- [OSPAR Commission 2024. OSPAR Report on potential solutions to overcoming barriers to effective management of Marine Protected Areas.](#)

The next step was to read through the reports thoroughly and extract institutional barriers and enablers related to administrative processes, legal frameworks and actors involved. Technical and economic barriers were not included unless they were directly related to institutional systems.

Third, the identified institutional barriers and enablers were coded and grouped into overarching themes (ten barriers and eight enablers). The final list provided a starting point for the Demo Site analysis and formed the basis of the questions in the interview guide.

Demo Site review

Five BLUE CONNECT Demonstration Sites (Demo Sites) were selected for an in-depth review of MPA designation and implementation processes. The Demo Sites were selected to cover a good representation on different governance aspects: 1) individual MPAs and

MPA networks, 2) MPAs with and without implemented management plans, 3) MPAs with and without co-management schemes, 4) MPAs with limited and strong integration with Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) processes, 5) MPAs established under the EU Nature Directives and under national legislation, 6) transboundary/transnational MPAs and 7) MPAs from different sea basins. Further, only MPAs that were already formally established were selected to enable the review of governance challenges in the establishment and implementation phase.

The selected Demo Sites are:

- 1) [The Vlaamse Banken, Belgium, North Sea – single offshore MPA](#)
- 2) [Central Romanian Coast, Romania, Black Sea – small network of MPAs](#)
- 3) [Pitiusas Islands, Spain, Mediterranean – small network of MPAs](#)
- 4) [Macaronesia, Atlantic Ocean – transnational network of MPAs](#)
- 5) [Raet National Park, Norway, North Sea – single combined terrestrial and marine protected area](#)

For each site, a ‘Demo Site country governance context’ background document was prepared with information on the governance system, distribution of competences, legal frameworks and key actors. The background documents were based on BLUE CONNECT Deliverable 4.1 (Baeckelandt et al. 2025) and supplemented with a desktop review and information from the Demo Site leads and project partners.

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted in October and November 2025. Pre-interview meetings were held with the Demo Site leads to plan the interviews. An interview guide was developed to be used across the sites (see Appendix 1). The interview guide was adapted to each Demo Site depending on different institutional challenges or opportunities found in the background country governance context review. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviews. Half of the interviews were conducted as group interviews.

Table 1. Overview of interviews with Blue Connect Demo sites conducted for this report.

| Demonstration site | Interviewees | Date | Interviewer |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|
| The Vlaamse Banken MPA | Group interview SPF Santé Publique - FOD Volksgezondheid Institute of Natural Sciences University of Gent Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee | 14. Oct 2025 | NIVA |
| Macaronesia | Group interview University of the Azores Fundação Maio Biodiversidade | 22. Oct 2025 | NIVA |
| Pitiusas Islands | World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) Spain | 31. Oct 2025 | NIVA |

| Demonstration site | Interviewees | Date | Interviewer |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|
| Central Romanian Coast | <i>Group interview</i> National Institute for Marine Research and Development | 03. Nov 2025 | NIVA |
| Raet National Park | National Park manager | 12. Nov 2025 | SALT |
| Raet National Park | State administrator | 13. Nov 2025 | SALT |

A site description focusing on institutional barriers and enablers was then prepared for each Demo Site based on the background document and interviews. The text was shared with the Demo Site leads and other project partners involved in the interviews, who were asked to comment and suggest revisions and additions.

Comparative analysis

The information gathered about the Demo Sites was compared across sites to identify commonalities and differences in governance factors that enabled or hindered effective MPA establishment and implementation. The main barriers and enablers found for the Demo Sites were further compared to the findings from the literature to establish whether the experiences from BLUE CONNECT aligned with experiences from other studies.

Study limitations

It is important to mention that this study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the literature review was not systematic or comprehensive. The approach chosen was to focus on the findings from reports that, in turn, had investigated the topic in depth. This was done to avoid duplicating and instead build on work that other EU projects and organisations had already addressed. The potential consequence is that there might be important academic literature or studies from other parts of the world that were not considered in this report. The other point to consider is that, while the interview method was chosen to enable exploring the topic in depth with the Demo Sites, the type of stakeholders interviewed as well as the input and level of detail obtained from the interviews varied across the sites. The availability of literature and information to complement the interview findings also varied between sites. In an ideal scenario, multiple interviews would have been conducted with various stakeholders at each site. However, due to the available resources, the study was limited to one to two interviews per site. As a result, some sites could be discussed in more detail than others, and it is possible that not all relevant aspects were captured for each site.

3 The EU Natura 2000 network

The Natura 2000 network integrates all sites designated under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives into one ecological network of protected areas. The Birds and Habitats Directives, also referred to as the Nature Directives, are the EU's main tool for nature conservation. They provide the overall legal framework for protecting and managing nature in the EU.

The Birds Directive (Directive 79/409/EEC) was adopted in 1979 as the first environmental legislation in the EU. Under the Birds Directive, Member States are required to protect all wild bird species and their habitats. For threatened bird species listed in Annex I of the directive, Member States have to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

The Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) was adopted in 1992. Under the Habitats Directive, Member States have to ensure that species and habitat types listed in the Annexes of the directive are maintained at, or restored to, a favourable conservation status. Member States have to designate and manage protected areas for habitat types and species listed in Annex I and Annex II. First, Member States submit a proposed list of important national sites to the European Commission. From the national lists, the Commission selects Sites of Community Importance (SCIs) and includes these in the Natura 2000 network. The Member States then have six years to designate their SCIs as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). Together with the SPAs for birds, SCIs and SACs form the Natura 2000 network.

As required for EU directives, the Nature Directives have been transposed into national legislation by Member States. Natura 2000 sites then are designated under national legislation. The legal frameworks vary from country to country. Thus, the Natura 2000 network includes a multitude of diverse protected areas with different protection levels and management frameworks.

The Natura 2000 network includes over 3000 marine sites, covering over 9% of Member States' marine waters. The Nature Directives include nine marine habitat types, 16 marine species and threatened 60 bird species that depend on marine environments for which Member States are required to designate protected areas (European Commission n.d.).

4 Overview of institutional barriers and enablers

This chapter examines the main barriers and enabling conditions that influence the effective designation, management, and implementation of European MPAs. The analysis draws on three recent assessments (Bocci et al. 2023, Bouvet et al. 2023, OSPAR Commission 2024). Table 2 summarises the main overarching themes of barriers and enablers. The barriers are presented in more detail in Table 3 and enablers are listed in Table 4.

Table 2. Overarching institutional barriers and enablers for effective MPAs in Europe.

| Barriers | Enablers |
|--|--|
| 1. Unclear roles and responsibilities | 1. Clear roles and responsibilities |
| 2. Conflicting interests and political priorities | 2. Synergies in parallel processes |
| 3. Inadequate or ineffective administrative procedures | 3. Legal clarity and incentives |
| 4. Weak legal frameworks | 4. Constructive and effective stakeholder engagement |
| 5. Inadequate or ineffective stakeholder engagement | 5. Established financing strategies |
| 6. Insufficient knowledge or scientific evidence | 6. Clear and effective management measures |
| 7. Limited management resources | 7. Adaptive management approaches |
| 8. Lack of adequate management measures | 8. Clear objectives |
| 9. Lack of adaptive management approaches | |
| 10. Inadequate objectives | |

Table 3. Barriers for effective MPAs in Europe.

| Barriers | Details |
|---|---|
| Unclear roles and responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear distribution of mandates • Fragmented responsibilities • Overlapping authorities • Lack of coordination |
| Conflicting interests and political priorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low political priority for MPAs • Blue growth prioritised over environmental governance • MPA decisions based on political agenda rather than scientific evidence • Conflicting views on the socioeconomic and ecological costs and benefits of MPAs |



| Barriers | Details |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing political priorities |
| Inadequate or ineffective administrative procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of administrative procedures • Complex administrative procedures • Decentralised designation processes • Uncertainty about future national conservation • Long and complex procedures to restrict fisheries within Natura 2000 sites • Management measures fragmented across different documents |
| Weak legal frameworks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity on the responsibilities of different institutions under national transpositions of the Birds and Habitats Directives • National legislation remains incomplete and not fully harmonised with the Birds and Habitats Directives • Limited legal power to restrict human activities in MPAs • No legal requirement to adopt management plans for MPAs • No legal requirement to undertake impact assessments for activities in MPAs • No legal requirement to consider socio-economic and cultural aspects when identifying sites for MPA designation • Limited mandates to introduce conservation measures |
| Inadequate or ineffective stakeholder engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of stakeholder engagement • Stakeholder engagement limited to the early stages of the MPA process • Stakeholders not involved in MPA management or decision-making • Top-down approaches hindering effective stakeholder engagement |
| Insufficient knowledge or scientific evidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information to communicate MPA benefits to stakeholders • Lack of regular and consistent monitoring • Lack of reference areas and/or baseline data on the state of the marine environment • Lack of assessments of the long-term effects of conservation measures |
| Limited management resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No MPA manager in place • Lack of permanent MPA management staff • MPA management bodies lacking the skills to assess the ecological and conservation status of habitats and species • No or limited funding dedicated to MPA management • Only short-term funding available • Funding dependent on political support |
| Lack of adequate management measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No management plan in place • Unclear measures in the management plan • Lack of measures that restrict damaging and extractive activities • Lack of clear enforcement measures • Lack of compensation measures for displaced or restricted activities |



| Barriers | Details |
|---|--|
| Lack of adaptive management approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of approaches to account or adapt to changes in external environmental factors (e.g. climate change, invasive species) • Lack of approaches to account for or adapt to changes in socio-economic activities, including diversification of human activities |
| Inadequate objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear MPA objectives • Unambitious MPA objectives |

Table 4. Enablers for effective conservation measures.

| Enabler | Details |
|--|---|
| Clear roles and responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear institutional mandates • Clear definition of responsibility for designation • Single (coordinating) authority |
| Synergies with parallel processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combining conservation and restoration measures • Synergies between MPAs and underwater cultural heritage protection • Coordination and collaboration with other processes that collect marine data |
| Legal clarity and incentives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legally require adopting a management plan • Financial compensation for voluntary measures • Legal guarantees for the continuity of (some) commercial activities |
| Constructive and effective stakeholder engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early stakeholder involvement • Adapting to stakeholders availability/timing • Active involvement of stakeholders in data collection • Raising stakeholder awareness and recognition of the problem • Training maritime professionals and local firms to build capacity for engagement • Adherence to procedural justice for stakeholder engagement can lead to increased acceptance of the measures |
| Established financing strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering financing strategies in the planning phase • Collaborations with external partners to mobilize funding • Using certification schemes to attract investments |
| Clear and effective management measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple designations can make it more likely for an MPA to have a management plan • Clear management plan in place • Explicit definitions of which activities are forbidden within established MPAs • Clearly stated sanctions for violations • Management plan easily accessible to stakeholders • Compile regulations within MPAs in a single document to ensure clarity and to avoid conflicts of interest between sectoral organisations • Spatially defined activities to help the management of the area and aid conflict resolution • Voluntary measures can be implemented through sustainability labels (e.g. Green Marine Europe, MSC Labels) |



| Enabler | Details |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protection measures can lead to additional voluntary and desirable goodwill efforts (e.g., voluntary change of location of planned navy activities in MPAs)• Educating visitors and stakeholders to ensure regulations• Actively working with stakeholders when new measures are implemented to build awareness |
| Adaptive management approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defining a management plan to undertake in case of emergency due to incidents (e.g., oil spills, fire) |
| Clear objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicitly linking management measures with the MPAs conservation objectives can aid in monitoring the effectiveness of the measures |

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5 Case study analysis

The case study analysis describes the governance context and the main institutional barriers and enablers for each of the selected Demo Sites. This includes understanding the role of institutional aspects, such as the division of mandates and competences, design of legal frameworks or stakeholder engagement, in enabling or hindering the designation and implementation of MPAs.

The Vlaamse Banken, Belgium

The Vlaamse Banken MPA is the largest MPA in Belgium, covering one third of the country's marine area. Established in 2005, and significantly expanded in 2012, the MPA aims to protect the shallow sand banks, biogenic reefs and gravel beds in a very busy maritime area (Figure 1). The designation process of Vlaamse Banken is an example of how shifting from authoritative governance to a deliberative, stakeholder oriented process can reduce conflict and protest (Bogaert et al. 2009).

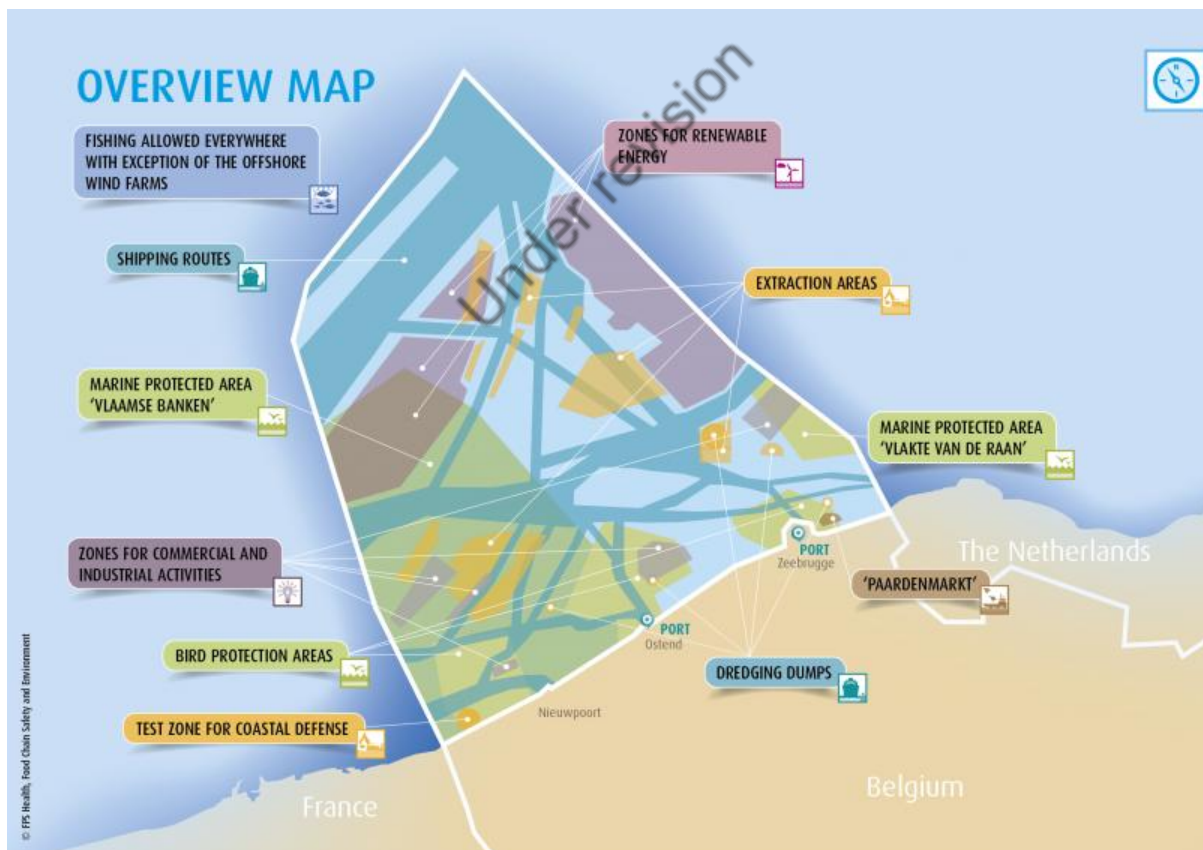


Figure 1. Map of the Belgian MSP (2020-2026), including the Vlaamse Banken MPA Demo Site. From: FPS Health.

Governance context

The governance system in Belgium is a complex multi-level system (Pecceu et al. 2016), with the management of the coastal zone and the marine areas being vertically divided over three levels of government (federal, regional and local). Each level has its own government, parliament and departments. Management of maritime activities, such as fisheries, ports and coastal protection are regional competence. Marine nature conservation falls under the authority of the federal government. The 1999 Marine Environmental Protection Act, which transposed the Birds Directive and Habitats Directive was transposed to Belgian law, provides the legal basis for designating and managing MPAs (Bogaert et al. 2009). The regional and federal governments are on the same level of hierarchy. Overall, while the governance system is complex, the interviewees described the division of roles and responsibilities to be clear.

Currently, 38 % of Belgium's marine and coastal areas are designated as MPAs (European Environment Agency 2025). Most MPAs in the country are Natura 2000 sites, including three SPAs and two SACs (The Vlaamse Banken and Vlakte Van de Raan). Other MPAs include Ramsar sites and one nationally designated marine reserve. All of the current sites are included in the Belgian Marine Spatial Plan.

Designation phase

The marine area that is now part of the Vlaamse Banken was first designated as an Environmentally Sensitive Area in 1979. In 1986, it became a Ramsar site because of its importance for seabirds and coastal-marine biodiversity (Ramsar 1992). However, this designation did not introduce substantial management measures for the area. The Ramsar site was enlarged to 170 km² and designated as a Natura 2000 site (SAC) in 2005 under the name 'Trapegeer-Stroombank', then enlarged to 1,100 km² in 2012 under the name Vlaamse Banken. The area was also designated as an OSPAR site, covering 1181 km² (UNEP-WCMC 2026a).

The designation phase of MPAs in Belgium was characterised by significant protests and delays. Central to solving the issues was the appointment of a 'Minister for the North Sea' who had the mandate to oversee and coordinate all North Sea related matters (Pecceu et al. 2016). The Minister for the North Sea proceeded to create a Master Plan for the North Sea in two phases. In the first phase, zones for commercial use of the sea were assigned. In the second phase, multiple MPAs were designated, including The Vlaamse Banken. To rebuild trust and reduce conflicts, the second phase included bilateral, grouped and confidential consultations with stakeholders (Pecceu et al. 2016). This second phase proved to be important for enabling the designation (Bogaert et al. 2009, Pecceu et al. 2016). When expanding the MPA in 2012, there was little conflict, and the stakeholders were promised to be consulted during the development of future management measures.

Formally establishing conservation objectives and a management plan for Vlaamse Banken has been a long process, mainly due to a continuously evolving legal framework. The first management plan was introduced for Trapegeer-Stroombank in 2009. The plan had few limitations on activities, nor concrete measures enabling effective conservation. A 2010 scientific study helped define the conservation objectives for The Vlaamse Banken (Degraer et al. 2010), but shortcomings in the legal framework hindered the formal adoption of these objectives. Following the expansion in 2012, the development of conservation objectives and drafting management plans for Vlaamse Banken was initiated, parallel to Belgium developing MSP procedures and frameworks. A legal framework for such procedures was finalized in 2016. Conservation objectives for The Vlaamse Banken were formally introduced by ministerial decree in 2017, followed by the first management plan in 2018 (running from 2018-2022) (Belgische Staat 2018). The management plan and conservation objectives have since been revised, following efforts to streamline multiple legal frameworks and processes. In 2022, the Marine Environmental Protection Act was revised to better integrate all European directives concerning the marine environment (incl. Nature Directives, MSP Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)), as well as related Royal Decrees. The current and second management plan covers 2022-2027 (Belgische Staat 2022), and the revision process for the third management plan is ongoing. Conservation objectives have been revised to better align with MSFD targets, while the programme of measures and monitoring programme are under revision to better align with the EU Nature Restoration Regulation.

Implementation phase

The management of The Vlaamse Banken MPA lies with the Federal Public Health Service (FPS), who is responsible for implementing measures, ensuring enforcement, as well as the revision of management plans and conservation objectives. The Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) oversees monitoring as required by the integrated monitoring programme for Natura 2000 and MSFD and gives scientific support and advice. Funding limitations for implementing measures and monitoring were identified as a challenge for both RBINS and FPS in the interviews.

Communication between different actors connected to The Vlaamse Banken is considered to be good, despite a complex governance system and a very broad stakeholder group covering different sectors of the blue economy. For the management of The Vlaamse Banken, a structured communication approach has been put in place by the FPS, including multiple communication networks, a communication list and an emergency response plan. For example, the FPS holds informal quarterly meetings with the Shipowners Association to keep updated on what is happening with shipping and ports. These stakeholder dialogues are greatly reducing conflicts and establishing trust and future understanding for the need of compromises when setting measures.

There is limited on-site management and enforcement in the offshore parts of the MPA. The Coast Guard and fisheries control vessel patrol the Belgian offshore areas (including the MPA) and can spot irregularities and breaches of rules.

The Vlaamse Banken MPA does not have strict protection measures with most commercial maritime activities still allowed within its boundaries. One potential reason for the lack of more stringent restrictions is that the development of the management plans was based on compromises between the different interest groups. The focus on finding compromises is very typical in Belgium (“compromise a la Belge”).

Integration between MSP and MPA processes

Belgium is a pioneer in maritime spatial planning. The ‘North Sea Master Plan’ was introduced in 2005. Belgium transposed the EU MSP Directive into national legislation through the Marine Environment Act in 2012. Two years later, the country adopted its first Maritime Spatial Plan for the Belgium Part of the North Sea. The current plan is Belgium’s second maritime spatial plan and runs from 2020 to 2026. The third plan is expected to be adopted in March 2026.

The integration of MPAs within the Belgian MSP process is considered to be good. The maritime spatial plan acknowledges conservation as part of sustainable management of the seas and includes MPAs as an important spatial use. Thus, the plan creates the necessary preconditions for the sustainable management of MPAs (Stancheva et al. 2025). Moreover, the delineation of MPAs is based on scientific evidence (Birdlife and natuurpunt 2022), which helps with justifying strict MPAs.

The first maritime spatial plans have been criticised for presenting conservation objectives and measures aims or options rather than concrete restrictions (Birdlife and natuurpunt 2022). In addition, there was considerable overlap between zones for conservation and zones for industrial uses of the sea (Birdlife and natuurpunt 2022).

However, the integration of MPAs in MSP has evolved considerably in recent years. Previously raised concerns have been addressed in subsequent MSP rounds through the revision and adaptation of plans and legal frameworks. The Vlaamse Banken MPA was initially established before maritime spatial planning began Belgium. The designation of the Vlake Van de Raan MPA, on the other hand, was part of the second MSP round, including through shared stakeholder engagement. The third MSP round now includes bottom integrity areas, where fisheries will be restricted, and strictly protected marine reserves, where most activities are restricted according to the Marine Environment Act. The third MSP process also provides advice on monitoring and suggestions for developing a comprehensive monitoring programme for marine areas, including MPAs (Calado et al. 2024).

Two important institutional enablers to note are that the MSP and MPA processes are both run by the federal Marine Environment Department and share the same legal basis in the Marine Environment Act. This enables collaboration and synergies between the two processes. The Marine Environment Department, responsible for managing all MPAs, also maintains a good and systematic dialogue with the MSP Advisory Committee, which includes all governments involved in the process.

Summary

Table 5 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified for the Vlaamse Banken Demo Site.

Table 5. Summary of key barriers and enablers for MPAs in The Vlaamse Banken Demo Site.

| Most prominent barriers | Most prominent enablers |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long process due to complex and evolving legal framework • Lack of support for measures restricting activities (economic interests prioritised over conservation) • Many different interests in limited space | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear roles despite complexity of governance system • Good coordination and collaboration between different public and private actors • Streamlined legal framework for marine environmental governance (MPA and MSP under same ministry and legislation) • Stakeholder consultation and dialogues, structured communication with industry actors • MPAs and measures based on scientific evidence |

Central Romanian Coast, Romania

The Central Romanian Coast Demo Site consists of five Natura 2000 sites (four SACs and one SPA) located between Midia Cape and Aurora Cape in the Black Sea (Figure 2). The MPAs were established between 2007 and 2011 and make up five of the twelve Romanian MPAs (Stanciu et al. 2023)¹. As of 2024, around 21 % of marine and coastal waters in Romania were covered by protected areas (UNEP-WCMC 2026b)². Almost all MPAs were designated as Natura 2000 sites³.

¹ <https://gis.mmap.ro/portal/apps/dashboards/536847f1c8634173a08b209c48432e56>

² <https://water.europa.eu/marine/countries-and-regional-seas/country-profiles/romania> [accessed February 2026]

³ <https://biodiversity.europa.eu/countries/romania> [accessed February 2026]

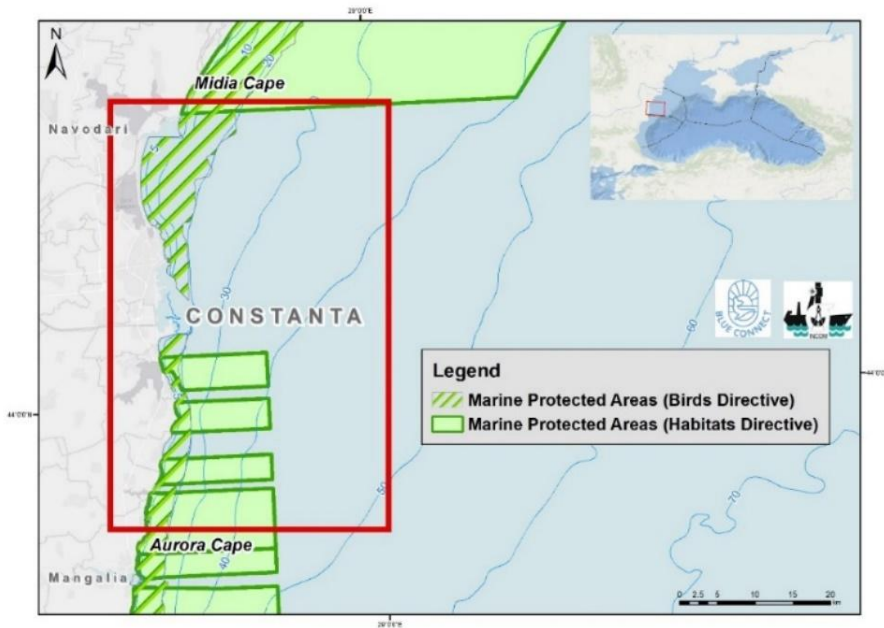


Figure 2. Map of the Romanian Demo Site. Figure from: NIMRD, Blue Connect.

Governance context

The designation of protected areas in Romania was driven by the country joining the EU in 2007 (Manolache et al. 2017). Romania transposed the EU Nature Directives into national legislation through Emergency Ordinance 57/2007⁴, followed by Ministerial Order 2387/2011⁵ regarding the establishment of a network of Natura 2000 sites. Only two MPAs were established under national law; both were established before Romania's entry into the EU and the introduction of the Emergency Ordinance.

The responsibility for marine and coastal protection in Romania lies with the national Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests (hereafter Ministry of Environment). Between 2007 and 2018, management responsibility for the MPAs was delegated to "custodian" organisations. In 2018, the custodianship system was removed and responsibility for the MPAs transferred to the National Agency for Protected Areas. This changed again in 2024, when the National Agency for Protected Areas and the National Environmental Protection Agency were merged into the National Agency for Environment and Protected Areas. The new national agency is now responsible for managing the Natura 2000 sites (European Commission 2025).

Designation phase

In the first three years after joining the EU, Romania established the first round of protected areas (267 SCIs and 108 SACs), including five MPAs. In 2011, through Ministerial Order No. 2387/2011, Romania updated its SCI list and expanded the area under

⁴ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/83289>

⁵ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/133254>

protection. In 2016, further SCIs and SPAs were added to the network of protected areas (Manolache et al. 2017). In 2023 and 2024, following an infringement procedure from the European Commission, Romania designated 222 of its SCIs as SACs, and by 2025, Romania had 606 Natura 2000 sites (European Commission 2025).

The formal process of designating MPAs in Romania began under the authority of the Ministry of Environment through a series of Ministerial Orders. Ministerial Order 776/2007 declared the first sites; Ministerial Order 1964/2007 instituted legal protection and established the protected area regime for sites of Community interest, including six marine sites that were placed under special conservation status; and Ministerial Order 1284/2007 established legal protection for birds. The first step was the identification of marine habitats and species of Community interest, in line with the European Commission's guidelines for establishing marine Natura 2000 sites. To support this, the Ministry tasked national research institutes and universities with proposing areas of high ecological value, focusing on habitats and species listed in the EU Nature Directives. The expert proposals served as the scientific basis for the national list of candidate marine sites. While the selection of candidate marine sites was based on sound scientific criteria, the scientific evidence base on species and habitat diversity and distribution was incomplete (Withouck et al. 2023). The Ministry evaluated the proposed sites, seeking input from other relevant national authorities, and was ultimately responsible for making the final selection of sites.

The designation of MPAs was a government-led process with limited to no stakeholder engagement, resulting in opposition from stakeholders and local communities (Withouck et al. 2023). Interviewees reported that the administrative process has been perceived as unclear and somewhat rushed, suggesting that Romania should have taken time to learn from other member states' experiences with Natura 2000 sites.

Implementation phase

In Romania, all protected areas are required to have a management (Stringer and Paavola 2013). Guidelines for management plans and a standard template for protected areas information, were developed through the project "Integrated Management System and Awareness of Natura 2000 in Romania (2010-2012)" (Ministry of Environment and Climate 2014). The first management plans for MPAs were developed between 2010 and 2012 for the sites already designated at that time. The interviewees considered the management plans to be generally well written, detailing measures for achieving the MPA objectives. However, the MPAs designated in 2011 do not have management plans, existing management plans have not been updated since 2010 and there are no monitoring programmes for MPAs. Thus, there is currently no active management or monitoring of MPAs. The interviewees also pointed out that the approval process for the management plans was very slow and bureaucratic.

Two key challenges for the management of MPAs in Romania are the lack of budget and changing responsibilities. As mentioned, initially, the Ministry of Environment delegated the management of MPAs to local custodians, including research institutes, universities, local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or private companies (Manolache et al. 2017). The custodians were given responsibility for implementing the management plans and systematic monitoring, ensuring regulatory compliance and coordinating collaboration with competent environmental authorities. However, the custodians were not provided with a budget for the MPA management and were dependent on finding other funding sources, like donations or project-based funding (Manolache et al. 2017).

In 2016, the National Agency of Protected Areas (ANANP) was established to coordinate the protected area management (Manolache et al. 2017). In 2018, the custodian system was discontinued by the Ministry and the mandate for managing MPAs was given to ANANP. However, ANANP was allocated a very limited budget. According to the interviewees, this was due to overall limitations in the Romanian state budget. While ANANP did establish regional offices and hire people for MPA management, the agency was unable to properly implement the MPA management plans. In 2024, ANANP underwent a major structural transformation as part of a broader governmental reorganisation of environmental authorities. The agency was merged with the National Environmental Protection Agency to form a new, consolidated national authority: the National Agency for Environment and Protected Areas. The new national agency is responsible for environmental regulation and for the management of all protected areas, including MPAs. Though the new agency is still in the process of building up institutional capacity (European Commission 2025).

As a result of changing responsibilities and lack of state budget for management and monitoring, there is currently no active management of the MPAs. Romania does have monitoring programmes established under the Marine Strategy Directive and the Habitats Directive. The interviewees mentioned that, though not specifically directed at MPAs, these monitoring programmes can act as institutional enablers for MPAs by providing scientific and procedural foundations for effective conservation management. According to the interviewees, the national fisheries authority and border police include the MPAs in their patrols for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. However, there are not enforcement measures specifically for the MPAs. New development projects in the MPAs need to submit an environmental impact assessment in order to obtain a permit. However, according to the interviewees, exemptions are given to strategically important national projects such as coastal protection works. Construction of dykes and beach nourishment activities have resulted in the loss of reefs and other ecologically important habitats in the MPAs.

Integration between MSP and MPA processes

Romania transposed the EU MSP Directive into national legislation in 2016 through Government Ordinance 18/2016. Following a long MSP process, the country adopted its first maritime spatial plan in 2023⁶.

Different ministries are responsible for MPAs and MSP. While the Ministry of Environment is responsible for marine and coastal protection, MSP is the responsibility of the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration. According to the interviewees, there is good collaboration between the two ministries, and the Minister of Environment was actively involved in the MSP process.

The integration of marine and coastal ecosystem conservation in MPS is considered to be good. The maritime spatial plan is based on the principle of biodiversity conservation and protection, and MPAs are recognised as key conservation measures (Withouck et al. 2023). The existing MPAs are described in the plan and included in the accompanying maps. The spatial overlap and trade-offs between MPAs and maritime uses with its related human pressures are also identified. The current plan does not regulate human activities and does not identify or designate areas for future MPAs or other uses (Withouck et al. 2023). However, the maritime spatial plan does provide a legal framework that aligns and integrates conservation objectives with sectoral spatial planning, enhances coordination among competent authorities and supports the consistent application of biodiversity requirements across maritime sectors.

Summary

Table 6 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified for the Central Romanian Coast Demo Site.

Table 6. Summary of key barriers and enablers for MPAS in the Central Romanian Coast Demo Site.

| Most prominent barriers | Most prominent enablers |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow, centralised bureaucracy and unclear procedures • No stakeholder involvement • Changing management authorities • Lack of designated budget for management and monitoring • Lack of institutional capacity in government agencies for implementing management plans • Management plans do not exist or are not updated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU legislation acting as driver for MSP designation • Involvement of national research institutes and universities in MPA identification and management • Monitoring programmes for MSFD can provide scientific foundation • Good collaboration between ministries responsible for MSP and MPAs |

⁶ <https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/media/document/15024>

Pitiusas Islands, Spain

The Pitiusas Islands Demo Site is a small network of MPAs around the islands of Ibiza and Formentera in the Balearic Archipelago in the Spanish part of the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 3). The site is considered to be among the ‘best’ conserved areas in the Mediterranean Sea. However, the area is also threatened by human pressures, including tourism, coastal development and pollution (Baeckelandt et al. 2025).

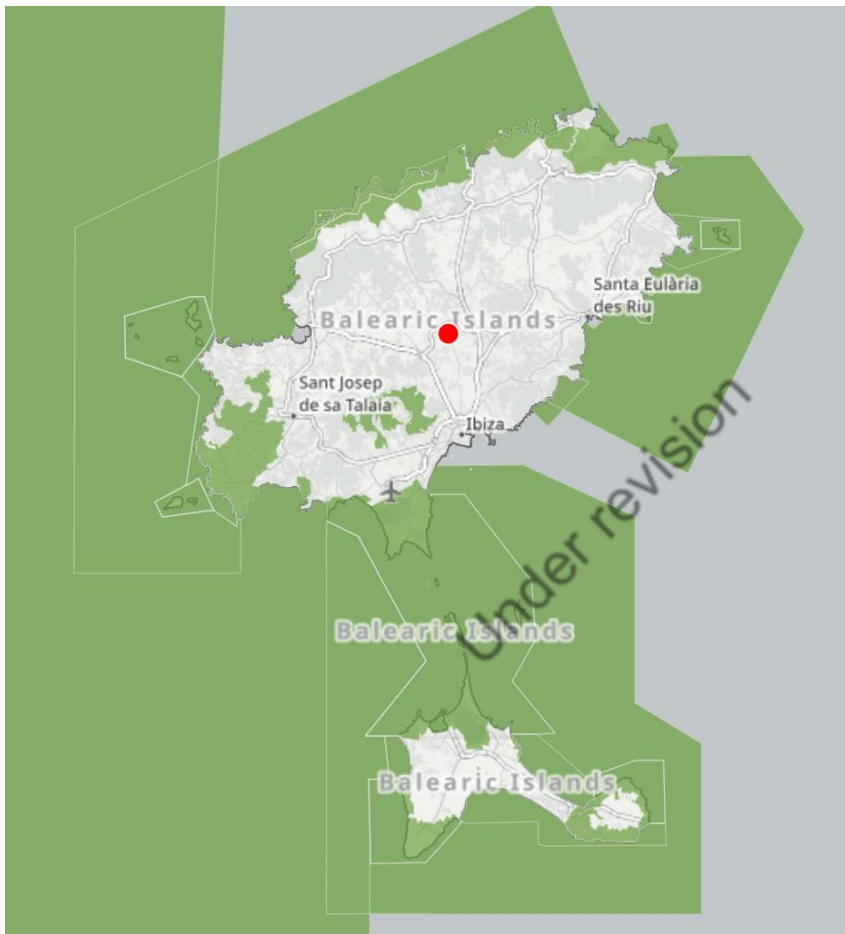


Figure 3. Map of the Pitiusas Islands Demo Site. From: Natura 2000 Viewer, EEA 2024.

Governance context

The governance system in Spain is highly decentralised, with the autonomous regions holding substantial competences, including for coastal and marine conservation (Hogg et al. 2021, Otero and Jeudy 2015). The regions are responsible for designating and managing coastal protected areas, spatial planning in the coastal zone and related monitoring activities. The national level government is responsible for the overarching marine environmental framework, designating and managing MPAs beyond 12 nautical miles from the baseline, developing national conservation strategies and transposing EU legislation. The process of designating MPAs is government driven, with the national and



regional administrations being responsible for designating and managing coastal and MPAs. Even if some agreements are established for management or resource use purposes (e.g. patrolling), complex issues arise from this division of competences on transboundary measures or multiple resource uses.

The Pitiusas Islands Demo Site lies within the competence of the regional government of the Balearic Islands, specifically under the Conselleria de Agricultura, Pesca i Medi Natural (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Natural Environment). In 1991, the Ses Salines area of salt marshes and seagrass meadows located between the two islands was established as a Natural Area of Special Interest by the regional government (Boletín Oficial del Estado 1991). In 1995, the national government converted the Ses Salines into a Nature Reserve (Boletín Oficial del Estado 1995). However, the Balearic government appealed against this decision claiming that the region holds the exclusive right to declare protected areas within one nautical mile of the shoreline. The appeal was approved and in 2001, the Ses Salines was reclassified as a Natural Park by the regional government (Boletín Oficial del Estado 2002). In addition, the regional government designated the site as an SPA in 2006 and as an SAC in 2015, thus adding it to the Natura 2000 network (Natura 2000 2024)⁷. Parallel to these designations, Ses Salines was listed as a Ramsar site in 1993 (Ramsar 1999), and the extended seagrass meadows were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1999 (UNESCO n.d.).

According to the interviewee, in recent years, NGOs have been working on making MPA designation processes more participatory, involving scientists and civil society in the site selection. Frequent changes in government personnel across different institutions were identified in the interview as a challenge for the designation and management of MPAs. The result of changing staff during ongoing processes are delays, loss of competence and confusion about responsibilities for resource use and environment protection (e.g. fisheries resources use, tourism permission, patrolling).

Designation phase

Most MPAs in the Pitiusas Islands have been established under the framework of the Nature Directives. The Birds Directive and Habitats Directive were transposed into Spanish law in 1989 and 1995 respectively (MITECO 2006). The Balearic government established a series of SPAs and SACs between 2006 and 2020. Other MPAs and area-based conservation zones at the demo site include bordering Natura 2000 sites (SPA) beyond 12 nautical miles designated by the national government and regional marine reserves of fisheries interest managed by the regional government.

⁷https://www.caib.es/sites/xarxanatura/es/es0000084_ses_salines_daeivissa_i_formentera_zec_z_eпа/

Implementation phase

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Natural Environment of the Balearic government is responsible for managing the regionally designated Natura 2000 sites and the marine reserves. The nationally designated SPA is managed by the national government (Spanish Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge).

All regional MPAs and marine reserves in the Pitiusas Islands have management plans. The management plan for the national SPA Canal of Ibiza is currently under development by the national government. To help coordinate between different sites and management plans, in 2022 a Marine Stewardship Committee was established in the Pitiusas Islands (Thursday Daily Bulletin 2022). The Committee includes a broad range of actors from scientific institutes and universities, public administrations, NGOs and fisheries and artisanal fisheries representatives. The Committee provides advice on management.

One challenge for MPAs in the Pitiusas identified in the interviews was the lack of resources for MPA management. While it seems that there are sufficient resources for surveillance and monitoring of the fisheries marine reserves, this is not the case for the Natura 2000 sites. The regional administration does not have enough staff for managing and coordinating across the MPAs and only limited funding for monitoring and engagement activities. Stakeholder engagement and participatory processes are largely dependent on NGOs and funding from European research projects.

Integration of MPA and MSP processes

Spain adopted its first maritime spatial plan in 2023. The MSP process was a national process coordinated by the Ministry for the Ecological Transition. It resulted in five plans for Spain's five marine areas (Thursday Daily Bulletin 2022). The Pitiusas Demo Site is covered by the plan for the Levantine-Balearic area. While MSP was a national process, the regions played an important role as they are responsible for the coastal protected area network and share competences for maritime and coastal affairs with the national government. The maritime spatial plan for the Levantine-Balearic area lists all MPAs and fisheries reserves in the Pitiusas Islands and describes the species and habitats protected across the sites. Current and potential MPAs are in the MSP maps, though the plan does not propose zones for regulating activities within the MPAs as these are usually covered by the management plans.

The MPA and MSP processes are separate. While MSP is a broad national process, MPA designations are driven by different regional authorities (for fisheries or protected areas) or national authorities depending on the MPA goals and geographic location. According to the interviewee, the first MSP process was not very participatory. Spain is now in its second MSP cycle and, according to the interviewee, there are efforts to improve stakeholder participation. The ongoing revisions of the maritime spatial plans are also

working on improving aspects related to the integration MPAs into MSP, including better inclusion of local stakeholders, a better assessment of activities and potential new MPAs.

Summary

Table 7 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified for the Pitiusas Islands Demo Site.

Table 7. Summary of key barriers and enablers for MPAs in Pitiusas Islands Demo Site.

| Most prominent barriers | Most prominent enablers |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbouring designations with different management plans and different responsible authorities at local level • Frequent changes in government personnel • Lack of resources for MPA management and monitoring • Lack of staff for managing and coordinating MPAs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active engagement of NGOs, in particular in promoting stakeholder engagement and supporting coordination across MPAs • Marine Stewardship Committee facilitating stakeholder engagement • Adaptive MSP process enabling better integration of MPAs and stakeholder involvement • Small area with easier pro-active engagement |

Macaronesia MPA network, Spain, Portugal, Cape Verde

The Macaronesia Demo Site consists of a large network of MPAs across the Macaronesia region in the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 4). The site includes MPAs in three countries: Spain, Portugal and Cape Verde. The region is characterised by volcanic oceanic islands that are particularly known for their rich populations of cetaceans, seabirds and pelagic fish, as well as endemic species. While the Macaronesia Demo Site is not a formal MPA network, efforts are ongoing towards creating a network to improve cross-boundary connectivity across these large offshore archipelagos.

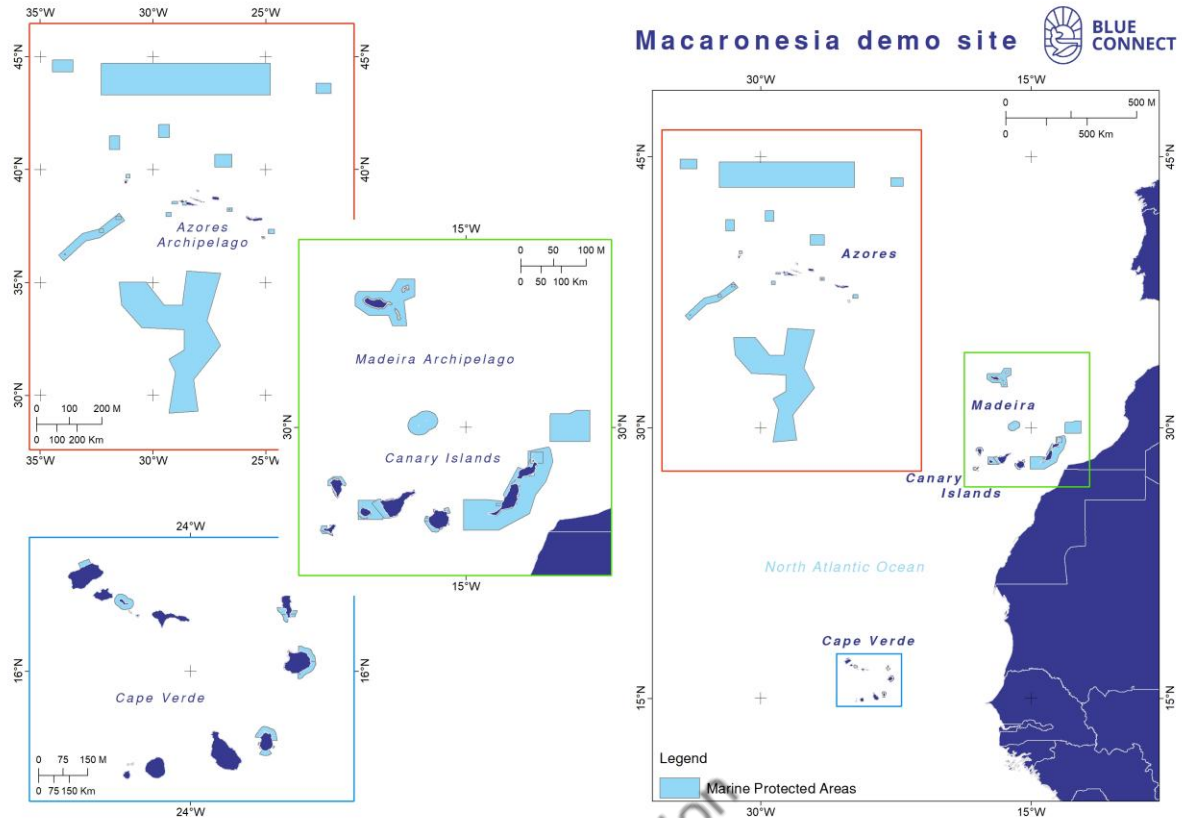


Figure 4. Map of the Macaronesia Demo Site. Figure from Baeckelandt et al. 2025.

Governance context

The Macaronesia region consists of the four island groups: the Azores archipelago, the Madeira archipelago, the Canary Islands and Cape Verde. The Azores and Madeira are autonomous regions of Portugal, and the Canaries are an autonomous region of Spain. As autonomous regions, the Azores, Madeira and the Canaries have their own regional government with a wide range of competences. As Outermost Regions of the EU, these regions are entitled to derogation from some EU policies. Cape Verde is an independent island nation on the northwest coast of Africa.

The Azores archipelago consists of nine volcanic islands in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Portugal. The marine area surrounding the islands makes up 56 % of the Portuguese marine areas. The autonomous region is governed by a regional government. The Regional Secretariat of Environment and Climate Action is the main authority responsible for environment and conservation. The Azores region started designating the first MPAs in the 1980s and, following significant investment in marine science in the 1990s, gradually implemented a network of MPAs in the 2000s (Abecasis et al. 2015). This network includes regional government MPAs, Natura 2000 sites, OSPAR MPAs and UNESCO biosphere reserves (Abecasis et al. 2015).



In 2024, the regional government of the Azores formally established the largest network of MPAs in the North Atlantic. The Rede Regional de Áreas Marinhas Protegidas dos Açores (RAMPA) covers 30 % of the sea around the Azores (Blue Azores n.d.). The process that led to RAMPA started with a government led initiative to define scientific conservation objectives. This was followed by significant investment in marine science to establish a robust evidence base. Between 2021 and 2023, a large oceanic participatory process was conducted to integrate different perspectives and sectoral knowledge. This resulted in robust legislation that incorporates best available scientific knowledge and active, informed participation of marine stakeholders. The law establishing RAMPA was passed in 2024, followed by the preparation of a management strategy, monitoring system and penalties regime for the MPA network. The RAMPA network is managed by the Management Authority under the Regional Secretariat of Environment and Climate Action. The network also has an advisory council that supports the Regional Secretariat and Management Authority in formulating and monitoring public policies related to MPAs.

In the interviews, high political willingness for marine conservation was mentioned an important enabling factor. The interviewees also described that NGOs play a central role in driving forward marine conservation and promoting co-creation, co-management and general stakeholder engagement. The NGOs invest a considerable amount of resources into this. Though they also mentioned that the coordination and integration of efforts between different NGOs is not always so good.

Another initiative highlighted by the interviewees was the Blue Azores Program⁸, a partnership between the Regional Government of the Azores, the Oceano Azul Foundation and the Waitt Institute. The Program brings together experts from various fields to support the protection, promotion and valuation of the marine resources of the Azores. According to the Blue Azores Program, the designation of MPAs in the Azores is backed by a robust legal framework, strong scientific evidence and broad stakeholder participation.

The Madeira archipelago is a group of Portuguese islands in the Atlantic Ocean to the west of Morocco. Same as the Azores, Madeira is an autonomous region of Portugal with an autonomous regional government. The Regional Secretariat for the Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change is responsible for the designation and management of MPAs. MPA management is delegated to the Institute for Forests and Nature Conservation, a regional government agency under the Secretariat for the Environment. According to the interviewees, regional government authorities and research institutions are the main actors driving marine conservation in Madeira, whereas the involvement of NGOs is limited. The MPA Network of Pico Branco-Porto

⁸ <https://pt.blueazores.org/>

Santo, a protected area composed of several zones, was established in 1995 and is part of the EU Natura 2000 network. The protected area is managed by the Institute for Forests and Nature Conservation through the Plan for the Management and Regulation of the Porto Santo MPA Network. Management plans for MPAs in Madeira are developed by the Institute for Forests and Nature Conservation in consultation with other government agencies, researchers and other relevant stakeholders (Ribeiro and Neves 2020).

The interviews revealed limited information about institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs in the Madeira and Azores archipelagos. However, a recent study on management effectiveness of MPAs in the Azores, Madeira and mainland Portugal provides some insights (Aguiar 2024). The study identified four key enablers for effective MPAs. Among the highest scoring indicators were the existence of a robust legislative framework for MPA designation and targeted regulations for manging activities in the MPA. Also important were the identification and description of valuable ecological features (natural values) and of ongoing uses and activities in the MPAs. Important barriers included unspecific conservation objectives and lack of reference values for an adequate assessment of ecological condition. Absence of specific regulations for the MPAs beyond legislation relating to the EU Nature Directives was also found to be a challenge. Other key barriers were lack of human resources and insufficient funding for MPA management, surveillance and monitoring as well as limited and ineffective stakeholder participation in MPA management. In particular, the study pointed out that the current co-management model is often limited to communication and awareness raising activities rather than active involvement of stakeholders in MPA management.

The Canary Islands are an archipelago of seven larger and numerous smaller islands off the west coast of Africa. The Canaries are the southernmost region of Spain and are governed by the Canarias autonomous government. As with other Spanish regions, marine protected areas outside the 12 nautical miles within the Exclusive Economic Zone are under the administration of the Ministry at national level. The Canary Islands are regarded as a hotspot for marine biodiversity, especially for cetaceans (Herrera et al. 2021) and have several MPAs including Natura 2000 sites, natural parks, marine fisheries reserves and geoparks. In an effort to expand Spain's MPA area to reach 30 % by 2030, the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, has proposed to include several new MPAs as SCIs, of which two are located in the Canary Islands as well as an additional new National Park "Parque Nacional del Mar de las Calmas" in one of the islands.

The marine fisheries reserve La Restinga, also part Natura 2000 site as well as geopark and Man and Biosphere UNESCO site, has been studied for how participation of the fishing community facilitated the designation of the reserve (Pascual-Fernández et al. 2018). Community support was enabled by close synergies between the local fishing

community, scientists and the Islands administration, and later to the tourism sector (Pascual-Fernández et al. 2018).

Cape Verde is an island nation off the west coast of Africa. The MPA network of Cape Verde includes 47 MPAs designated under national legislation that cover about 5.8 % of the country's marine waters. The National Directorate for Environment, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, is responsible for the designation and management of MPAs. Implementation and enforcement of MPA management are delegated to regional and local authorities on the different islands. One representative of the National Directorate for Environment is also present on each island.

Long-term commitment from NGOs was identified in the interviews as critical for driving forward conservation efforts in Cape Verde. The NGOs support the government representatives on the islands in their work, in particular with stakeholder engagement and monitoring. Decision making in Cape Verde is generally government led. Stakeholder engagement and co-management are not part of the legal framework. Therefore, NGOs play a central role in enabling stakeholder engagement and are working on implementing co-management initiatives such as small-scale fisheries co-management schemes and citizen science-based monitoring. Stakeholder engagement is often also a requirement in projects funded by non-state actors.

The decentralised governance system for MPAs has benefits and challenges. On one hand, it means that governance can be organised to fit the local context of each island. On the other hand, until recently, there has not been an established communication system between the islands. The result was that each island was acting in isolation. According to the interviewees, only recently national projects were initiated to organise activities across islands. A similar challenge was also described for the involvement of NGOs. There is at least one NGO working on each island, with some larger NGOs working across islands and on national projects. Recently, the NGOs started to organise a network with the aim to establish shared goals and approaches.

Related to the decentralised approach and multitude of actors involved, another challenge that came up in the interviews was that roles and responsibilities are not always clear. This was mentioned both in connection with the island representatives of the National Directorate and in relation to the collaboration between government authorities and NGOs.

The MPAs are at different stages of implementation. About half of the MPAs (24) have approved spatial planning and management plans, with plans eight further plans currently under development. According to the interviewees, management plans are a legal requirement for MPAs. However, the preparation and approval process tends to

take a long time. The interviewees also mentioned that it is not always clear who is responsible for developing the management plans.

One major challenge for establishing management plans, and for MPAs in general, raised in the interviews is the lack of human resources and funding in the government authorities. Funding from non-state sources like NGOs or philanthropic organisations plays an important role. However, the interviewees also pointed out that external funding can be challenging as it is often connected to requirements for innovation instead of enabling continuity and long-term monitoring.

Integration of MPA and MSP processes

The maritime spatial plan for the subdivision of the autonomous region of Madeira is integrated into Portugal's main maritime spatial plan, the Plano de Situação do Ordenamento do Espaço Marítimo Nacional. The plan was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2019. The competent authority for MPS in Portugal is the Ministry of the Sea (European MSP Platform 2024a). Under the Ministry, the Directorate General for Natural Resources, Safety and Maritime Services is responsible for coordinating the Portuguese maritime spatial plan and for developing the plans for the continent and extended continental shelf subdivisions. The plan for the subdivision of Madeira was developed by the Regional Directorate for the Sea of the Madeira Regional Government. The maritime spatial plan for the subdivision of the Azores was developed separately by the Regional Directorate for Sea Affairs of the Azores Regional Government. The maritime spatial plan for the Azores was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2024 (European MSP Platform 2024a). The Portuguese maritime spatial plan is focused on promoting compatibility between competing economic activities with the aim to increase economic use of the marine environment while minimising human impacts (European MSP Platform 2024a). Areas of relevance for nature conservation are identified in the plan and mapped on the official MSP geoportal⁹, including MPAs and Natura 2000 sites (Council of Ministers 2019).

The maritime spatial plan for the Canary Islands is one of six MSP plans covering Spain's marine subdivisions. The competent MSP authority in Spain is the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, even though environmental management within the 12-nautical-mile zone falls under the regional governments.

Environmental objectives, existing and potential future MPAs, are included in the maritime spatial plan. Moreover, MSP and MPAs outside internal waters in Spain fall under the remit of the same national Ministry. Nonetheless, the WWF has criticised the MSP process for low stakeholder involvement, as well as for "lacking the necessary

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<https://webgis.dgrm.mm.gov.pt/portal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9ea76f6fe4ca463a8ced196e30fcc2e1>

coherence and coordination” needed to meet EU’s biodiversity and climate objectives (WWF 2023).

MSP in the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands has a similar legal framework since it is based on the national transpositions of the EU MSP Directive into Portuguese and Spanish law. Since Cape Verde is not a member of the EU, the MSP Directive does not apply here. Cape Verde does not currently have any legislation mandating MSP. According to the interviewees, a tentative plan was developed but not taken forward by the government. The country does have a coastal zone spatial plan covering marine areas out to three nautical miles from the coast. The MPA management plans and coastal zone plans are elaborated by different parts of the governmental actors, and there is currently no integration between these two processes.

Summary

Table 8 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified for the Macaronesia MPA network Demo Site.

Table 8. Summary of key barriers and enablers for MPAs in the Macaronesia MPA network Demo Site.

| Most prominent barriers | Most prominent enablers |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unspecific conservation objectives (Azores and Madeira) • Lack of sufficient ecological data (Azores and Madeira, Canary Islands) • Lack of human resources (Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde) • Insufficient funding for MPA management, monitoring and enforcement (Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde, Canary Islands) • No legal framework for stakeholder engagement (Cape Verde) • Lack of communication between decentralised government authorities on different islands (Cape Verde) • Lack of communication between NGOs on different islands (Cape Verde) • Unclear roles and responsibilities for government authorities and NGOs • Management plan process takes a long time and responsibilities are unclear • Non-state funding comes with requirements that do not enable continuity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High political willingness for marine conservation (Azores) • Robust legal framework and targeted regulations (Azores) • Investments in marine research (Azores) • Broad and continuous stakeholder participation (Azores, Canary Islands) • Strong NGO engagement (Azores, Cape Verde, Canary Islands) • Decentralised governance enabling locally adapted approaches (Cape Verde) • Non-state funding (Cape Verde) |

Raet National Park, Norway

Raet National Park is a single combined terrestrial and marine MPA, and one of four marine national parks in Norway, all located along the populated southeastern Skagerrak coastline. Raet National Park was established in 2016 under Norwegian legislation. With a total area of approximately 607 km², about 98 % of the park area is marine (Figure 5). National parks are large natural areas with distinctive or representative ecosystems or landscapes without major human disturbances. These large, protected areas are intended to preserve important natural processes, cultural heritage, and prevent the extinction of plant and animal species.

Raet National Park encompasses a wide range of geological formations and habitats, from shallow coastal areas to deep mesopelagic habitats. Marine living resources in Raet are used by both commercial and recreational fisheries. The coastal zone is also highly valued for recreation and tourism. As a result, Raet National Park is of high cultural, social and economic significance alongside its ecological values. Raet National Park was established to conserve a large natural area of representative ecosystems, geological formations from the last ice age and cultural heritage associated with the coastal region of Aust-Agder (LOV 2016). The marine parts of the park are intended to safeguard the underwater landscape and associated marine species and marine habitat types.

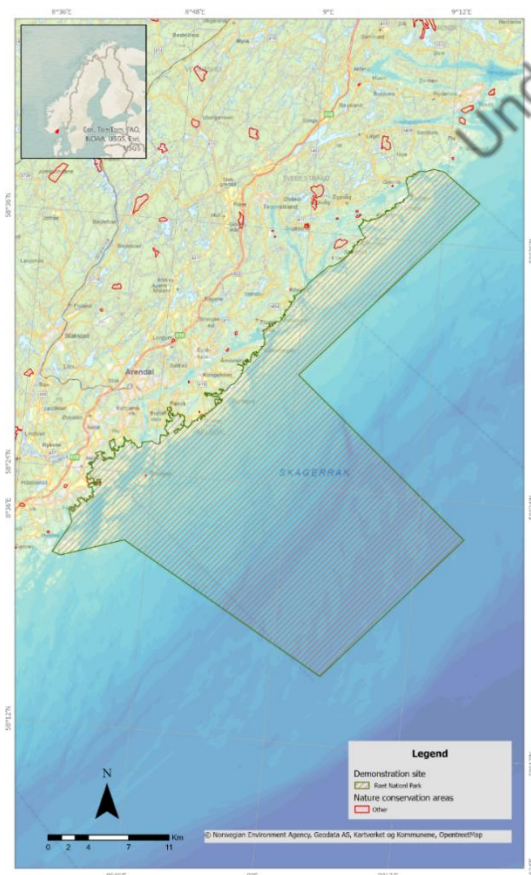


Figure 5. Map of the Norwegian Demo Site Raet National Park. From: Blue Connect Deliverable 4.1



Governance context

Until the late 2000s, national parks in Norway were terrestrial, and largely located on state owned land. When the adoption of the Nature Diversity Act of 2009 introduced a more flexible legal framework for nature protection, it facilitated the establishment of protected areas in marine environments and in areas with mixed ownership, such as marine national parks (NEA 2025). Raet National Park is governed under Norway's national framework for nature conservation under the Nature Diversity Act. The Act provides different types of designations with different levels of protection, including national parks. National parks are established under section 35 of the Act, which is not the strictest category of protection in the statute. Currently, 4,6 % of Norway's territorial sea areas, out to 12 nautical miles, are protected as marine national parks under the Nature Diversity Act.

Under this framework, overall responsibility for marine conservation policy lies with the Ministry of Climate and Environment, which coordinates biodiversity protection at the national level. The Norwegian Environment Agency (NEA) serves as the principal implementing authority, providing technical guidance, oversight and ensuring national consistency across protected areas. Enforcement and compliance are carried out in cooperation with national authorities, particularly NEA, who oversees adherence to regulations and supports monitoring activities. The County Governor plays a supervisory role, ensuring that national environmental policies and legal requirements are implemented consistently at the regional level. National parks are managed by a National Park Management Board (Nasjonalparkstyre)¹⁰, with day-to-day management handled by a National Park Manager under the Board's direction.

Designation phase

Raet National Park covers marine and coastal areas within Tvedestrand, Arendal and Grimstad Municipality. The designation process was formally initiated by NEA in July 2013 (Fylkesmannen i Aust-Agder 2015). Initially, Raet National Park was planned to cover a smaller area of pre-existing landscape protected areas and nature reserves to provide stronger and more coherent protection through the national park status. During the designation phase, it was decided to integrate a larger marine protected area (Transect Skagerrak) to protect more of the marine environment.

National parks that combined marine and terrestrial areas were a new type of conservation process in Norway at the time. Moreover, Raet National Park encompassed a diversity preexisting protection regimes, landowners and user interests that had to be aligned. The designation process involved significant discussions and negotiations around trade-offs between conservation objectives and other interests, including

¹⁰ <https://www.nasjonalparkstyre.no/Raet/styret>

agriculture, cultural heritage protection, recreational infrastructure, fisheries and emerging marine industries.

From an early stage, the process was locally anchored through dialogue with the three municipalities. Efforts were made to document natural values and identify areas suitable for inclusion in the national park, resulting in a shared knowledge base to support the designation. To ensure political and administrative support at multiple levels, a formal governance structure was established. A steering group was formed consisting of the mayors of the three municipalities, the county governor and a representative from the Directorate of Fisheries. In parallel, a project group was established to carry out the administrative and technical work, including impact assessments, drafting of proposals and coordination of input. In addition, a reference group was created, providing a platform for voluntary organisations, landowners, fisheries representatives and other stakeholders to raise concerns and provide input.

Implementation phase

The implementation of Raet National Park occurred in two phases. The first phase established the park as a legal entity in 2016, through a conservation regulation (verneforskrift) that defined the park boundaries, conservation objectives, zoning system and activity restrictions. This phase was characterised by high levels of stakeholder integration and high levels of community support.

The governance structure on the regional level was set up with the Raet National Park Board responsible for the overall administration and management through the 2016 regulation on conservation, such as granting exemptions, maintenance measures and ensuring compliance. A National Park Manager was set to be responsible for the day-to-day management of the National Park. The National Park Manager is employed by the County Governor but operates under the Board's direction.

In 2017, an Advisory Committee (Rådgivende utvalg) appointed by the Board was established. The Advisory Committee was designed to be a large and stakeholder inclusive committee with representatives of landowners, local associations, businesses, voluntary organisations, nature and environmental organisations and public bodies such as outdoor recreation councils etc. The Advisory Committee functions as a reference group for plans and projects developed by the Board, including management plans, restoration measures, maintenance plans and visitor strategies. It also serves as a forum for dialogue between the board and stakeholder representatives through regular meetings with the Board.

Finally, a Working Committee (Arbeidsutvalg) consisting of appointed Board members facilitates coordination between administrative levels and supports efficient decision-making. The Working Committee has authority to make decisions in accordance

with the relevant legislation and principles set out by the Board, in cases that are not critical for the conservation objectives.

However, from the outset, Raet National Park had few and weak measures applied to regulate marine activities, restricting the park to function as intended in terms of preserving the marine environment (Jørgensen, et al. 2021, Kleiven et al. 2024). With a policy push from the international and national level towards stricter marine protection in Norway, a project ('Bevar Raet' - initially started as a local initiative by the local municipalities and the National Park Board a year earlier) was launched in 2020 to strengthen marine protection. The project is led by the municipalities, the Board, and the Institute of Marine Research, facilitated and hosted by the Agder County Municipality. This initiative, together with other measures to strengthen protection in the park, has so far been slow, conflicted and contested. According to the interviewees, there are several reasons for this. Firstly, the park lacks an approved management plan. Despite the 2016 conservation regulation requiring the establishment of a management plan to provide more detailed guidelines for management, measures, maintenance, facilitation, information etc., the plan has only existed as a draft, last submitted to NEA for approval in 2023. The plan has not yet been approved by NEA, which is complicating the implementation of measures in the park. Additionally, there is incoherence between marine and terrestrial governance frameworks, a highly complex land/coastal shore-ownership structure, lack of political will due to conflicts between conservation goals and commercial interests (esp. regarding restrictions on marine transport and fisheries), a complex decision-making structure across several levels of public governance that delay regional efforts and initiatives, low funding for data collection, surveillance and monitoring. Additionally, human resources are stretched with only one person responsible for carrying out the day-to-day management of a complex and contested combined terrestrial and marine MPA.

Considerations for marine conservation in Norwegian MSP

Norway has taken a different approach to maritime spatial planning compared to the EU. The country has not adopted the EU Maritime Strategy Framework Directive. Instead, Norway introduced a system of integrated ocean management plans for the Barents Sea-Lofoten area, the Norwegian Sea and the North Sea and Skagerrak (Meld. St. 21 (2023-204)). The plans are updated every four years in a white paper report to Parliament. The plans cover Norway's marine areas from the baseline out to the exclusive economic zone. The purpose of the integrated ocean management plans is "to provide a framework for value creation through the sustainable use of marine natural resources and ecosystem services and at the same time maintain ecosystem structure, functioning, productivity and diversity" (Meld. St. 21 (2023-204), p.11). The plans set out goals for value creation, pollution and biodiversity and ecosystems. The goals for biodiversity and ecosystems include a goal to establish a marine protected area network (Meld. St. 21 (2023-204)).



However, the plans are not legally binding and only provide a framework to establish management priorities and facilitate cross-sectoral coordination. The spatial allocation and regulation of activities in the four management plan areas are governed by sector legislations and sector authorities (Meld. St. 21). For example, fisheries are regulated as harvest of a wild marine resource under the Marine Resources Act (2008), with its rationale primarily geared towards protection for sustained resource harvesting, and not conservation for biodiversity, which guides the rationale behind the Nature Diversity Act of 2009.

Landownership of the Norwegian coastal zone constitutes a mosaic of private and public ownership. Under the Norwegian Plan and Building Act (2008), municipalities have planning authority for marine areas out to one nautical mile from the baseline. Municipalities' land use plans designate zones for different uses or conservation, including use and protection of marine areas. Local municipalities could use the Plan and Building Act (2008) to manage land use in line with conservation targets. However, in practice, municipalities frequently grant exemptions from conservation-oriented laws and directives (Jørgensen et al. 2021, Hauge and Stokke 2021).

Summary

Table 9 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers for MPAs identified for the Raet National Park Demo Site.

Table 9. Summary of key barriers and enablers for MPAs in the Raet National Park Demo Site.

| Most prominent barriers | Most prominent enablers |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No approved management plan • Complex legal framework and distribution of competences across different levels of governance • Incoherence between marine and terrestrial governance frameworks • Lack of political will to use strict protection due to conflict between conservation goals and commercial interests • Lack of funding for data collection monitoring and enforcement • Limited human recourses for management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early stakeholder engagement • Formal MPA governance structure |

6 Comparative governance review

Table 10 summarises the key institutional barriers and enablers identified in the comparative review of findings across the selected Demo Sites. The review confirms the findings from other studies on the main challenges and supporting factors for effective MPAs (see chapter 4). All but one of the barriers and enablers identified for the Demo Sites were also found in previous reports (Bocci et al. 2023, Bouvet et al. 2023, OSPAR Commission 2024). The description of the governance contexts in the Demo Site countries shows complex marine governance landscapes that involve different levels of government and legislations, different ministries, government agencies and non-state actors. It also shows that most MPAs are the result of government driven initiatives and national or regional legislation. However, the interviews and supplementary studies suggest that institutional complexity and government driven designations in themselves are not the main challenge for successful designation and implementation of MPAs. Instead, as described further down, key factors that can either facilitate or hinder MPAs were found to be effective stakeholder engagement, funding and resources for management and monitoring and conflicts between conservation and commercial interests.

Table 10. Key institutional barriers and enablers for designating and implementing MPAs identified across the five BLUE CONNECT Demo Sites, including in which Demo Sites examples of the barriers and enablers were found and whether these were also found in the relevant literature.

| Key barriers and enablers | Examples found from Blue Connect Demo Sites | Also found in the literature |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Enablers | | |
| Clear roles and responsibilities | The Vlaamse Banken, Raet National Park | ✓ |
| Good coordination and collaboration between different state and non-state actors | The Vlaamse Banken | ✓ |
| Continuous and effective stakeholder involvement | The Vlaamse Banken, Pitiusas Islands, Canary Islands, Azores, Raet National Park | ✓ |
| Strong driving force behind MPA designation | The Vlaamse Banken, Azores, Central Romanian Coast | |
| Robust and coherent legal framework | The Vlaamse Banken, Azores | ✓ |
| Adaptive MSP | Pitiusas Islands | ✓ |
| Strong NGO involvement | Azores, Cape Verde | |

| Key barriers and enablers | Examples found from Blue Connect Demo Sites | Also found in the literature |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Barriers | | |
| Unclear roles, responsibilities and administrative procedures | Central Romanian Coast, Cape Verde | ✓ |
| Slow, bureaucratic processes | All sites | ✓ |
| Lack of communication and coordination between different state and non-state actors | Madeira, Cape Verde | ✓ |
| Lack of state funding for management, monitoring and enforcement of MPAs | All sites | ✓ |
| Lack of human resources and institutional capacity in government agencies and MPA management authorities | All sites | ✓ |
| Low political priority of marine conservation (conflict between conservation and commercial interests) | The Vlaamse Banken, Pitiusas Islands, Raet National Park | ✓ |
| No effective stakeholder engagement | Central Romanian Coast, Cape Verde | ✓ |
| No, or old, management plans | Central Romanian Coast, Cape Verde, Raet National Park | ✓ |

Effective stakeholder engagement was found one of the key factors for the establishment of MPAs. The majority of MPAs in the selected Demo Sites were designated through national legislation under the initiative of national, regional or local government. The fact that the initiative for designating MPAs came from government rather than local stakeholders was not discussed as a significant problem in the interviews. What was highlighted instead was the importance of stakeholder engagement in the designation and implementation processes. Several examples indicate that key to successful MPA designation and implementation was broad, continuous and effective stakeholder participation. In the Vlaamse Banken, ongoing dialogue and consultation with keyholders was essential for reducing conflicts, finding compromises and establishing trust in the MPA process. In the Pitiusas Islands, the Marine Stewardship Committee brings together actors from science, industry civil society and government and plays an important role in supporting coordination across different sites. In the Azores, a large participatory process, with considerable support from NGOs, ensured that different perspectives and knowledge were integrated in individual MPAs designations. In Raet National Park, the Advisory Committee, made up of local stakeholders, is a formal part of the national park government framework. In the Demo Sites in Romania and Cape Verde, on the other hand, the lack of effective stakeholder engagement was mentioned as a barrier, for

example leading to opposition to MPAs from local communities. The case of the marine fisheries reserve of Restinga on the Canary Islands illustrates the importance of stakeholder involvement, particularly the participation of the local fishing community facilitated its designation (Pascual-Fernández et al. 2018).

The importance of effective stakeholder participation in marine governance and conservation has been highlighted by many studies (e.g. Di Franco et al. 2020). The EU has responded to this by including requirements for stakeholder participation in legislations such as the MSP Directive. The EU MSP Directive mandates stakeholder participation in the spatial organization of marine waters. Consequently, as MPAs are key spatial designations within these plans, their implementation should align with these overarching requirements for transparent engagement. However, as findings from Aguiar (2024) for the Azores and Madeira highlight, only relying on sharing information and raising awareness is not sufficient. Effective stakeholder engagement requires active participation in co-design and co-management of MPAs. In countries where stakeholder engagement is not embedded in the legal framework, the experience from the Cape Verde Demo Site shows that NGOs play an important role in facilitating stakeholder engagement.

Clear roles and responsibilities and **good communication and coordination** were other enabling factors that emerged in the interviews. In the Belgian and Norwegian Demo Sites, having clear roles and mandates, and well-established communication and coordination mechanisms between different actors, helped navigate complex, multi-level governance frameworks. In Cape Verde and Romania, on the other hand, the Demo Sites reported lack of clear responsibilities and communication as a major challenge. In Cape Verde, where both government agencies and NGOs are involved in MPA processes, it is not always clear who is responsible for MPA management or writing management plans. Moreover, lack of communication between government agency representatives, and between different NGOs, across the decentralised islands, was reported as a key challenge for the coordination of conservation efforts. In Romania, responsibility for MPA management was first given to non-state custodian organisations and then centralised in one government agency, which shortly after underwent significant restructuring. As a result, stakeholders are unsure who is responsible for the MPAs. The review of MPA integration in MSP also showed that marine conservation was better integrated in countries where both processes were under the responsibility of the same ministry, such as Belgium, or where the two responsible ministries worked closely together, as was the case in Romania.

Another enabling factor that is often discussed in studies of effective marine governance are **robust legal frameworks**. This was highlighted in particular for the Demo Sites in Portugal (Aguiar 2024). In Belgium, it was mentioned that the evolving legal framework

was a challenge, though overall, legislation on marine conservation was improving. The importance of not only robust but adaptive legal and administrative frameworks was highlighted in Spain. Here, the MSP process has been adapted over time, and the third round of MSP is now better integrating stakeholder engagement and marine conservation interests. However, the Demo Sites also showed that a strong legal framework on its own is not a guarantee for effective MPAs. This became particularly clear when looking at management plans. In all Demo Site countries, management plans are legally required for all MPAs. However, in practice not all MPAs have management plans. One reason mentioned for this was that the process of establishing and approving management plans is often very slow and bureaucratic. Existing plans are not always updated and, as a result, may be based on outdated ecological data. In other cases, lack of resources or political interest were identified as a reason for why existing management plans were not being implemented.

The main challenges identified across all five Demo Sites were the **lack of funding and human resources for MPA management, monitoring and enforcement**. In Belgium, funding limitations affect both the work of the government agency responsible for implementing the Vlaamse Banken MPA and the research institute in charge of monitoring. Aguiar (2024) reported lack of human resources and funding as a major challenge for MPAs in Portugal. In the Pitiusas Islands MPA network, the lack of resources and staff not only affects management and monitoring of single MPAs but also coordination across the MPAs. Lack of human resources and funding in government authorities was also reported as a key challenge for Cape Verde and Pitiusas Islands. In particular for stakeholder engagement, funding is often limited. In Cape Verde and Pitiusas Islands, stakeholder engagement depends largely on NGOs and the funding they bring in. However, it was raised that external funding from projects or other donors is often tied to specific requirements for innovation and does not support continuous activities needed for MPA management. In Romania, as a result of the poor national economy, neither the custodian organisations nor the government agencies responsible for MPAs were given a budget for MPA management. Moreover, the continuous changes in responsibilities and government agencies in Romania makes it difficult to build up capacity for MPA management. A similar challenge was also mentioned for the Pitiusas Islands, where frequent changes in government personnel slowed down MPA processes. The importance of human resources as a barrier was also highlighted in Raet National Park, where one person is responsible for the day-to-day management of the entire national park.

The other key barrier that came up in most of the Demo Site interviews is **competing interests and prioritisation of economic interests over conservation**. In Belgium, as a result of strong reliance on compromises, most commercial activities are still allowed in the Vlaamse Banken. In Romania, exemptions are given to strategically important

national projects despite negative impacts on MPAs. In Pitiusas Islands, more resources are available for the surveillance and monitoring of the fisheries marine reserves than for the Natura 2000 sites. Looking at the Raet National Park, the lack of political will to implement stronger conservation measures is a result of conflict between conservation and commercial interests.

Under revision

7 Conclusions

If the EU is to reach the ambitious 30x30 targets set by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (European Commission 2020) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD 2022), Member States have to increase and improve the protection of their marine areas. To achieve this, it is important to understand what is currently hindering the expansion of effective MPA networks and what factors are supporting successful initiatives. As part of the BLUE CONNECT project, this report looked in particular at the institutional barriers and enablers for designating and implementing effective MPAs.

Looking at the findings from previous projects and studies, several of these barriers and enablers were already well known, such as the important role of stakeholder engagement, clear mandates, sustainable financing and conflicting interests (Bocci et al. 2023, Bouvet et al. 2023, OSPAR Commission 2024). The comparative analysis of five BLUE CONNECT Demo Sites did not add any new barriers or enablers to the list. However, despite being based on a limited set of literature findings and Demo Site interviews, the study corroborated the existing findings from previous projects.

In particular, the study highlighted six key institutional factors that contribute to facilitating or hindering effective MPAs. None of these factors on their own would guarantee successful designation and implementation of effective MPAs. However, the experience from Blue Connect and other studies shows that these factors play an important role either as barriers or as enablers:

- 1. Stakeholder engagement:** Government driven, top down MPA designation in itself is not necessarily a barrier. What is more decisive for successful MPAs is the quality of stakeholder engagement in the designation and implementation process. Effective, continuous and active stakeholder participation is critical for securing buy in, resolving conflicts, integrating local knowledge and facilitating MPA management, monitoring and enforcement. Lack of, or inadequate, stakeholder engagement can increase conflict and result in non-compliance.
- 2. Roles and mandates:** Assigning clear mandates and roles is important so that all institutional actors and stakeholders understand their responsibilities and can take ownership to drive MPA processes forward and implement plans and measures. Absence of clear roles and mandates can cause uncertainty and confusion and result in delays and inaction.
- 3. Communication and coordination:** Good communication and coordination is essential where different institutional actors or stakeholders are involved in MPA processes, for example different levels of government and local NGOs. This is

particularly important for networks of MPAs and MPAs that share boundaries to ensure consistent management strategies. It is also important for ensuring that MPAs are integrated in MSP where these two processes are led by different ministries and government agencies. Lack of communication and coordination can result in incoherent policies and conservation efforts and erode trust among stakeholders.

- 4. Legal frameworks:** Robust and adaptive legal frameworks are important for providing the preconditions for effective conservation efforts. They support clear mandates and dedicated funding and human resources and are a prerequisite for the enforceability of conservation measures. Having adaptive approaches is particularly important to enable conservation strategies and MPA management to improve and respond to changes in scientific evidence, knowledge and other circumstances. Weak legal frameworks, on the other hand, can result in lack of clear mandates for action and make it difficult to enforce conservation measures.
- 5. Funding:** Availability of adequate, dedicated and continuous government funding is critical to enable government agencies and designated MPA management bodies to implement conservation measures, monitoring and enforcement actions. If no dedicated budget is available, or if MPAs depend on project funding from NGOs or other funding sources, this can quickly result in inaction or incoherent approaches and lack of consistent monitoring.
- 6. Human resources:** Not just funding but also sufficient and stable staff in government agencies and MPA management bodies is an important factor in designating MPAs and implementing conservation measures. Lack of human resources, or continuously changing staff, can result in delays and lengthy approval processes and limit management actions on the ground.

The availability of robust legislation, sustainable funding and sufficient human capacity are closely connected to a central challenge for MPAs that was highlighted by the Demo Site experiences: the **competition between conservation and economic interest**. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation, economic interests are still often prioritised. The resulting lack of political will to advance effective conservation leads to weak, unrestrictive conservation measures, stalling designation processes or 'paper parks' with no active implementation. Solving this challenge will be critical to help put important institutional enablers for MPAs in place and support effective conservation measures. To address this challenge, it is important that work continues on demonstrating the value of conservation not just for nature but for societal and economic wellbeing and for a sustainable future. Expanding ongoing efforts on ecosystem accounting in EU Member States and their neighbours to include marine

ecosystems can play a central role in making the value of MPAs more comparable with competing economic interests.

Thus, in conclusion, this study contributed to strengthening the evidence base on the main institutional factors that are supporting or hindering effective conservation measures. The next question that needs to be addressed is what can be done to overcome the barriers and capitalise on the enablers.

Under revision

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

The following interview guide was used across the selected demonstration sites to.

Blue Connect T3.2 Interview guide for use across the selected demo sites

Practical details for the interviews

- Online, 60-90 minutes
- Individual or small group interview
- Different participants may cover different parts

Introduction / icebreaker

1. Can you tell us about your expertise and role in connection to this Demo site?

Part 1: Questions related to establishing the site

2. What were the key steps in planning establishing this Demo Site?
 - a. Follow-ups: Who was involved at each stage? Were there any major challenges?
3. Are there formalized administrative processes and legal frameworks for establishing the site?
 - a. Follow-ups: What are the challenges with the process? Are conservation goals developed and integrated into formal documents? Do you believe the current administrative and legal framework is working as is should?
4. Do you find that roles and responsibilities among actors are clear?
 - a. Follow-ups: How did coordination work? What could have been improved? Do you think the overall governance structure in your country makes planning and coordination clearer or more difficult?
5. When and in what contexts were local stakeholders included in the establishment of the demo site?
 - a. Follow-ups: *Any formalized rules for stakeholder involvement?*
6. Were socioeconomic or cultural impacts of the Demo Site considered during the planning stage?
7. Is the practical management of the Demo Site considered in the planning stage, such as considering financing strategies, monitoring systems, enforcement?

Part 2: Questions related to MPA management

8. How is the Demo Site managed today, in short: who does what?
 - a. Follow up: Is there a management plan?



9. What kinds of institutional or organizational barriers most affect the site's day-to-day management?
 - a. Follow-up: Are there enough staff and other resources (staff, funding, expertise) to meet manage the site effectively?
10. How are you dealing with these challenges?
11. What factors do you consider having been/be the most important for effective management?
12. What organisations, stakeholders or collaborations are the most important for achieving the site's goals?
 - a. Follow-up: *Are there any formalized structure for stakeholder involvement in the management of the park?*
13. How well would you say that MSP and MPA processes are integrated?
 - a. Follow-up: How are roles and responsibilities for these processes overlapping or fragmented? Are there any legal aspects that support or make integration challenging? How are stakeholders involved differently in MSP processes compared to MPA processes?

Under revision

