



# 8th Environment Action Programme

Designated marine protected areas in Europe's seas

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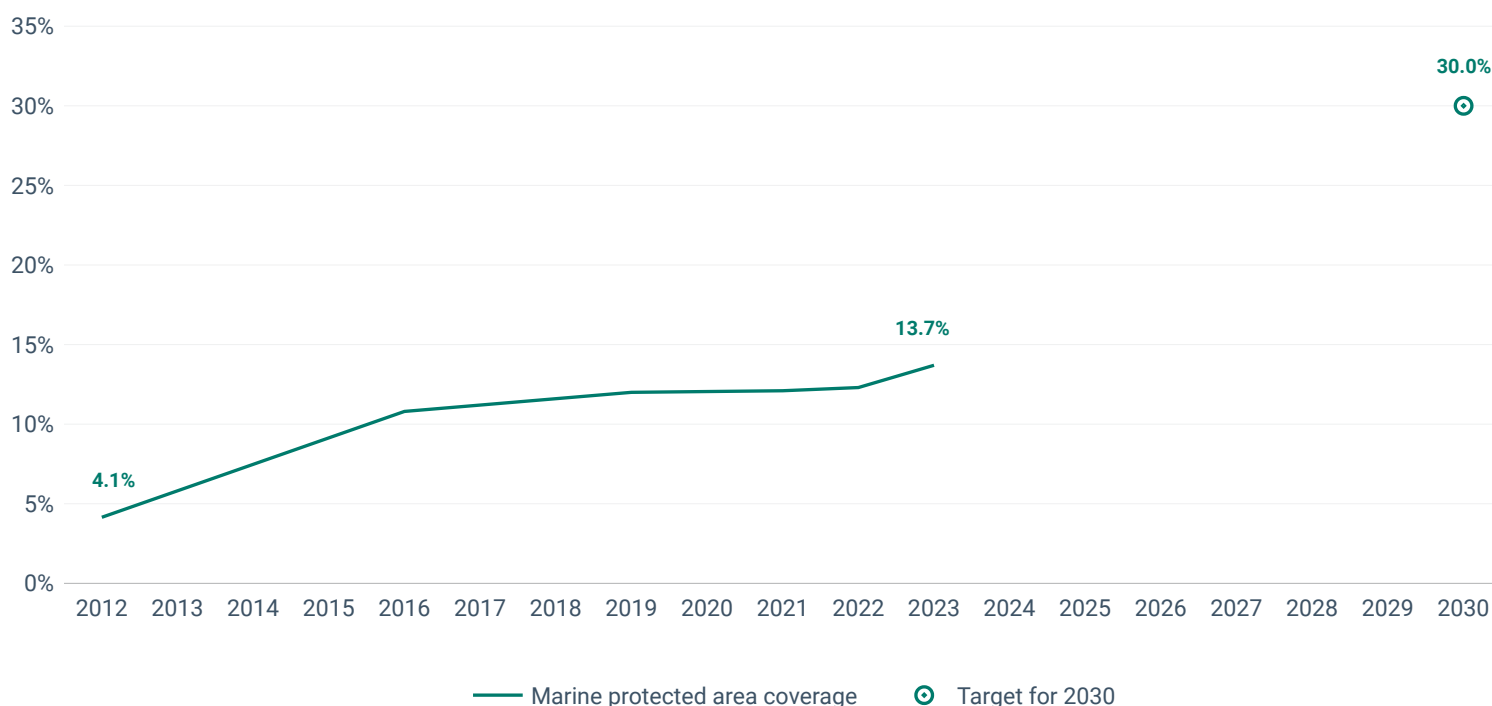


# Marine protected areas in Europe's seas

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The European Union has made progress in designating new marine protected areas, both as part of the Natura 2000 network and through complementary national designations. As a result, marine protected area coverage more than tripled, to 13.7%, between 2012 and 2023. However, further significant efforts are required to achieve the EU Biodiversity strategy target of protecting at least 30% of EU seas by 2030, while also ensuring that all protected areas are effectively managed. At present it appears unlikely that the target will be met.

Figure 1. Marine protected area coverage in the EU, 2012-2023



The conservation of coastal and marine areas is important for maintaining **biodiversity** and ensuring that ecosystems and their services are fully functional. Marine protected areas (MPAs) play a key role in conserving coastal and marine ecosystems, and provide significant economic and societal benefits supporting local livelihoods.

Designating protected areas is essential to halt biodiversity decline. One target of the [EU Biodiversity strategy for 2030](#) is to legally **protect** and effectively **manage** a minimum of 30% of European Union seas by 2030. [Target 3 of the CBD's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) also includes a similar coverage target of "at least 30%".

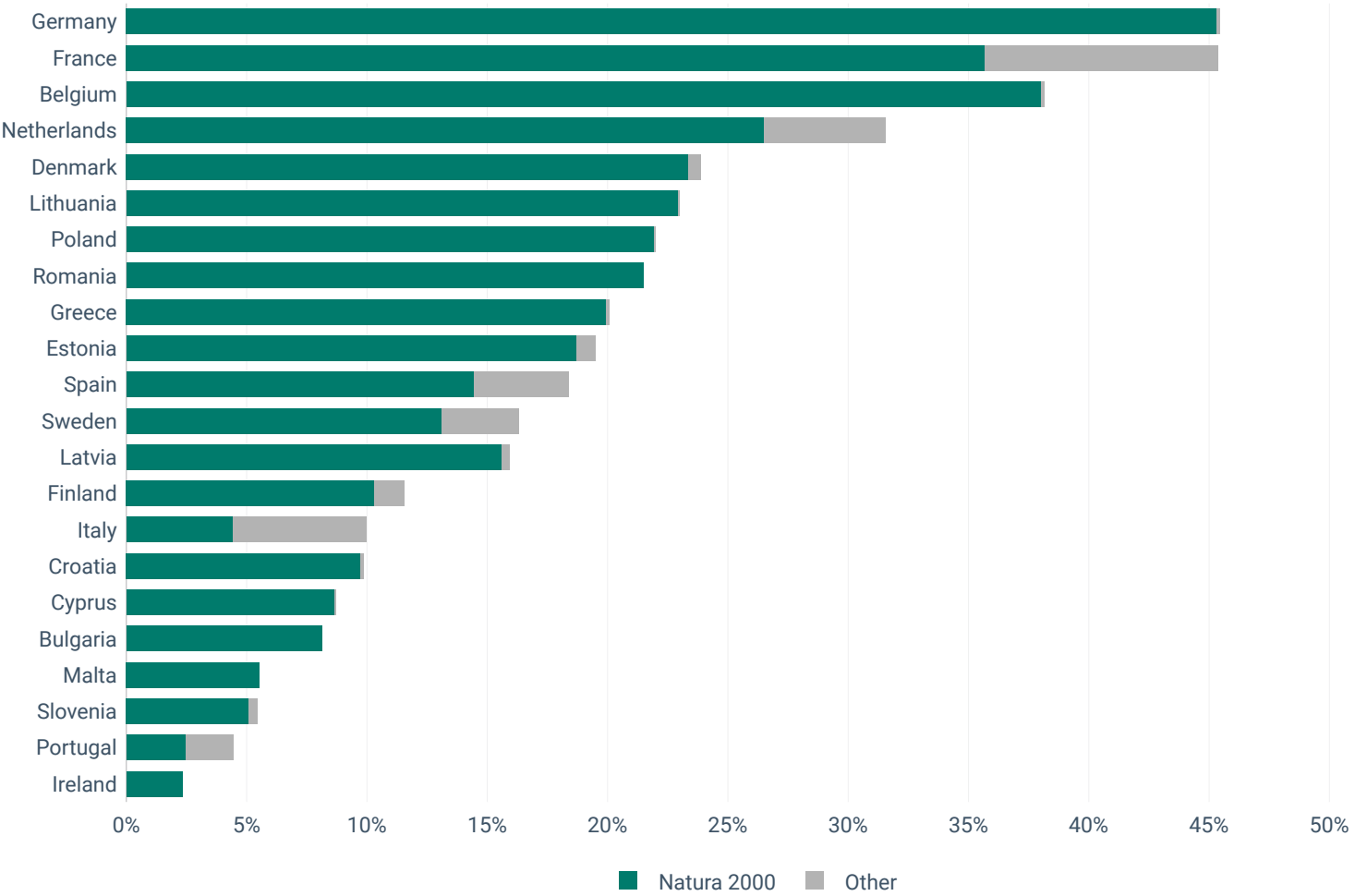
Over the last decade, the total area covered by marine protected areas in the EU has **increased** gradually, from 4.15% in 2012 to 13.7% in 2023. This is the result of both the expansion of the [Natura 2000 network](#) (a network of protected areas designated under the EU nature directives) and protected areas established through complementary national designations. It also includes protected areas designated under the [Regional Seas Conventions \(RSC\)](#), namely the Barcelona Convention, HELCOM & OSPAR.

Although this trend is positive, **further expansion** will be needed to reach the target of legally protecting at least 30% of EU’s seas by 2030. The current rate of designation must increase more than double compared to the progress made over the last decade.

The [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) highlights the importance of building a truly coherent Trans-European network of protected areas through improving their connectivity. It will therefore be particularly important for the designation of new protected areas in EU’s seas to ensure that these areas are defined based on sound **scientific analysis** ensuring ecological representativity, coherence and connectivity.

Additionally, improving management effectiveness of individual marine protected areas and of their networks should become a major focus in the coming years. While no comprehensive information is available yet to provide an overview of how effectively managed European MPAs are, it will be essential to develop such indicators in the coming years to track progress in implementing targets of the [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#).

Figure 2. Marine protected area coverage in EU Member States, 2012-2023



By 2023, several EU Member States had made **significant progress** in protecting their marine ecosystems through the designation of MPAs. Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands have surpassed 30% coverage. Other countries such as Denmark, Lithuania, Poland and Romania have expanded their networks of MPAs beyond 20%. [Natura 2000](#) plays a very significant role in the MPAs networks in most countries, with complementary national designations adding to the network.

Progress in designating new MPAs could be observed in most Member States over the last 10 years; however, it has been slow in several countries. While it is important for Member States to continue working at national level to define new MPAs, it is also crucial to ensure cooperation across European regional seas. This will support the development of a coherent network of MPAs across the EU and achieve the joint target of protecting at least 30% of seas.

## ▼ Supporting information

### Definition

This indicator illustrates the changes in the share of marine protected areas in the EU-27 Member States over time. It also distinguishes between protected areas designated as Natura 2000 sites, other national designations, and those designated under Regional Sea Conventions.

A protected area is a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

### Methodology

#### Methodology for data collection

The [Natura 2000 network](#) is based on the [1979 Birds Directive](#) and the [1992 Habitats Directive](#). The European database of Natura 2000 sites consists of a compilation of the data submitted by the Member States of the European Union. This European database is generally updated once a year to take into account any updating of national databases by Member States.

However, the release of a new EU-wide database does not necessarily mean that a particular national dataset has recently been updated.

The data for the nationally designated protected areas inventory are delivered by the [Eionet partnership countries](#) as spatial and tabular information. The inventory began in 1995 under the CORINE programme of the European Commission.

The same geographical area may be designated several times under different legislation. When producing area statistics on protected areas, nationally designated protected areas and Natura 2000 datasets are overlaid to avoid double counting of overlapping site designations in the datasets. To streamline the management of the complex spatial vector data from Natura 2000 and Nationally Designated Areas the data were combined into a single dataset. This unified dataset was transferred to the EEA-JEDI data cube as a 10m gridded "dimension".

The reporting guidelines with full details on the methodology are available from: <http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/cdda> and <https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/natura2000/>

To ensure a comprehensive coverage of EU waters, protected areas designated under the [Regional Seas Conventions](#), including the Barcelona Convention, HELCOM and OSPAR were included using the latest available data from the databases published by these conventions.

#### Methodology for indicator calculation

As the terrestrial protected area indicator is already calculated within the JEDI systems, the same methodology was adopted for calculating the marine protected areas indicator. To achieve this, the relevant data was first transferred to a data cube, consolidating all necessary information:

In the next step, the protected area coverage was calculated individually for each country. If multiple countries reported protected areas within the same marine region, these areas were assigned to both countries.

Next, a second statistic was calculated to assess the coverage of protected marine areas within the EEA marine assessment areas for the EU. Since individual countries do not need to be considered in this case, no overlaps were accounted for, and the results accurately reflect the percentage of protected areas.

All calculations were performed using Azure Databricks.

### Policy/environmental relevance

The indicator is a headline indicator for monitoring progress towards the goals of the 8th [Environment Action Programme \(8th EAP\)](#). It will contribute mainly to monitoring progress towards the 8th EAP biodiversity-related priority objective set out in Article 2(e), to be met by 2030: 'protecting, preserving and restoring marine and terrestrial biodiversity and the biodiversity of inland waters inside and outside protected areas by, inter alia, halting and reversing biodiversity loss and improving the state of ecosystems and their functions and the services they provide, and by improving the state of the environment, in particular air, water and soil, as well as by combating desertification and soil degradation'<sup>[1]</sup>. The European Commission's communication on 8th EAP monitoring specifies that this indicator should monitor progress towards meeting the target to legally protect at least 30% of the EU's sea area by 2030<sup>[2]</sup>.

The indicator is included in the [EU Biodiversity Strategy dashboard](#). The [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) contains specific targets for protected areas to be delivered by 2030, including expanding the current network, in line with the following targets:

- to legally protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's land area and 30% of the EU's sea area and integrate ecological corridors, as part of a true trans-European nature network;
- to strictly protect at least a third of the EU's protected areas, including all remaining EU primary- and old-growth forests;
- to effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitor them appropriately.

This indicator directly tracks progress towards achieving the 30% target for protecting the EU's seas. The indicator is used by several EU monitoring mechanisms, such as the EU biodiversity dashboard and for the [EU's Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) monitoring](#).

Other relevant EU policy instruments include the [EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive \(MSFD\)](#).

At the global level, targets for protected areas have been adopted as part of the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#), including [Target 3](#) to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the world's marine area.

The indicator is also used for monitoring progress towards SDG14 in the European context.

#### **Accuracy and uncertainties**

#### **Methodology uncertainty**

Due to differences in data resolution, variations in coastline delineations may occur, potentially leading to minor inaccuracies near coastal regions. For instance, small sections of terrestrial protected areas might be mistakenly included in the marine area data.

#### **Data sources and providers**

- [Natura 2000 \(vector\) - version 2023](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [Nationally designated areas for public access \(vector data\) - May 2024](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [EEA marine assessment areas - version 3.0, Oct. 2022](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [EEA coastline for analysis \(polygon\) - version 3.0, March 2017](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [EEA Marine waters for analysis - INTERNAL VERSION, Oct. 2022 \(includes sensitive data\)](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [OSPAR Marine Protected Areas Network \(version 2023\)](#), OSPAR Commission
- [HELCOM MPAs \(2022-12-05\)](#), Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)
- [Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance \(SPAMIs\), \(2019 edition, version 2\)](#), Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (SPA/RAC)

## DPSIR

Response

## Topics

# Biodiversity

## Tags

# Designated areas # protected areas # 8th EAP # CDDA # Habitats Directive # MAR004 # Natura 2000

## Temporal coverage

2012-2023

## Geographic coverage

Austria	Belgium
Bulgaria	Croatia
Cyprus	Czechia
Denmark	Estonia
Finland	France
Germany	Greece
Hungary	Ireland
Italy	Latvia
Lithuania	Luxembourg
Malta	Netherlands
Poland	Portugal
Romania	Slovakia
Slovenia	Spain
Sweden	

## Typology

Descriptive indicator (Type A - What is happening to the environment and to humans?)

## UN SDGs

SDG14: Life below water

## Unit of measure

Percentage

## Frequency of dissemination

Once a year

## ▼ References and footnotes

1. EU, 2022, Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a general Union Environment Action Programme to 2030, OJ L 114, 12.4.2022, p. 22–36.  
[↩](#)
2. EC, 2022, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the monitoring framework for the 8th Environment Action Programme: measuring progress towards the attainment of the programme's 2030 and 2050 priority objectives, COM(2022) 357 final.  
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