



European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

REPORT

Objective 30%: why involving recreational anglers is key for the success of Marine Protected Areas

Co-chaired by MEP Isabel Carvalhais and MEP Søren Gade

20 April 2021

14:00 – 15:30

Videoconference

Introduction

MEP Niclas Herbst (Germany, EPP), Chair of the RecFishing Forum, welcomed the participants to the second event of the Forum dedicated to discussing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), recalling that the previous event on this matter was chaired during the previous EP legislature by former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and now Portuguese Minister of the Sea, Ricardo Serrão Santos.¹ At the time, one of the key conclusions was that there was a **need to balance conservation with recreational activities** that engage people to better protect the marine environment. Referring to last year's RecFishing Forum event on tourism², MEP Herbst added that, when designating MPAs, it is crucial to keep in mind the **link between recreational angling and the many health, social and economic benefits for coastal communities brought by this activity**. On the same note, he stressed that **angling tourism is sometimes the only economic activity in remote areas** and the main source of income of the local population.

Minister Ricardo Serrão Santos (Portuguese Minister of the Sea) in his keynote speech delivered by video message opened the session, by emphasising the many threats that the ocean is facing: climate change, unsustainable human activities, acidification, deoxygenation, etc. and considered that marine biodiversity and some stocks of commercial marine species are under high pressure. He recalled that the international community is taking steps to address the situation, such as the Biodiversity Convention and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He then highlighted the **Biodiversity Strategy as a relevant tool at the European level, to guarantee the good ecological status of the European marine waters notably through its MPAs' objectives**. He expressed his firm belief that, if correctly designed and effectively managed, MPAs could greatly contribute to conserving biodiversity and enhancing oceans' resilience and fisheries.

“Recreational fishermen are a powerful group of stakeholders who support and contribute to conservation objectives and to a sustainable economic development, including by raising awareness about nature and oceans. Many recreational anglers are involved in the conservation of aquatic species and the habitats they depend upon.” – Minister Ricardo Serrão Santos

¹ European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment, [Marine Protected Areas and recreational fisheries: Sustainable management and benefits](#), 9 October 2017.

² European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment, [How can angling contribute to the recovery of the EU tourism sector?](#), 16 July 2020.



Referring to recreational angling as a very popular leisure activity rooted in Europe's cultural heritage, he underlined the **positive role played by recreational anglers in MPAs, such as through conservation activities or cooperation with scientists**. He also acknowledged the socio-economic relevance of recreational fishing activities for coastal communities in terms of income and jobs. He nevertheless drew attention to the **poorly known impact of angling** as an

“Responsible angling practices and the engagement of society in conservation initiatives benefit local communities by attracting economic activity, generating positive spill-overs throughout many sectors.”

Minister Ricardo Serrão Santos

extractive activity on marine stocks: more data is needed for a proper management. He noted in his keynote speech that as commercial fisheries, recreational fisheries should be regulated especially if they are going to happen inside MPA, and concluded by reiterating that it is essential to involve the recreational angling sector in the creation, design and management of MPAs.

MEP Isabel Carvalhais (Portugal, S&D Group) reminded her personal and national connections with the protection of seas. She stated that Portugal represents in fact 11% of the EU exclusive economic zone (3rd position in terms of EEZ in the EU after France and Denmark, and in 11th position at the global level). She underlined that the recent European Court of Auditors' report '*Marine environment: EU protection is wide but not deep*', identified several shortcomings that still need to be addressed in order to ensure a better protection of the EU seas and marine biodiversity.³ The report brought to the fore, *inter alia*, the **need to ensure a full implementation of existing MPAs, with fully fledged management,**

“Everyone has to be involved in MPAs management, ideally to create a shared sense of appropriation of MPAs as a higher common good. One that is worth collective efforts.”

MEP Isabel Carvalhais

monitoring and control plans, as well as the necessity to create a European network of MPAs that is both coherent and representative of the diversity of existing habitat, thereby ensuring comprehensive protection of the marine environment. Against that background, she emphasised **the paramount importance of involving all stakeholders, especially recreational fishers, in the implementation and management phases of MPA.**

MEP Søren Gade (Denmark, Renew Europe Group) recognised that the Biodiversity Strategy's guidelines are necessary to reach the European Commission's protection objectives. However, he raised attention to the fact that, to strike the right balance, it is of **utmost importance to first get the definitions and targets right**, echoing both MEPs Herbst and Carvalhais statements. He then recalled to the audience that, unfortunately, some MPAs are protected only “on paper”. He called on the European Commission **to integrate recreational fishers into effective management plans to reach the MPAs conservation targets**. Speaking from his personal 50 year-long experience of angling on the coast of Denmark, he strongly believes that recreational anglers are part of the solution, as **their practice is inherently respectful of nature** and of the marine environment they use. Taking the example of grandparents who take their grandchildren fishing, he warned against **any unnecessary restrictions or ban that might hinder them from passing on their knowledge and this cultural heritage to younger generations.**

“Recreational fishers often are the only eyes and ears within MPAs and can contribute, throughout their activities, to the MPAs' objectives.”

MEP Søren Gade

³ European Court of Auditors, [Marine environment: EU protection is wide but not deep](#), Special Report 26/2020, 26 November 2020.



Roundtable moderated by MEP Isabel Carvalhais

From today to 2030: what's left to achieve?

Odran Corcoran (Policy Officer, WWF) started by highlighting that it is **scientifically demonstrated that MPAs are efficient and cost-effective tools to protect marine ecosystems**, alleviating climate change impacts, reinforcing ecosystem resilience and improving the capacity of habitats to act as a blue carbon sink. He added that, if managed-well, MPAs could support large fish populations and diversity, bringing food and economic security to people.

“Good MPA planning fosters dialogue between diverse users and stakeholders of marine spaces.”

**Odran Corcoran
(WWF)**

Despite the well-documented MPAs' positive impacts on seas, species and humans, **only 1,28% of the EU sea area is under effective and enforced management plans**. Referring to both the European Court of Auditors⁴ and the European Environmental Bureau⁵ recent reports, he highlighted the **absence of a well-connected MPAs network**. To turn the tide on that dire situation, he suggested to follow the best practice of the marine park of 'Côte Bleue' near Marseille (France). Since 1983, this successful marine park, part of the Natura 2000 network, has enabled the sustainable development of recreational and small-scale fishing, scientific research, protection of the environment and public awareness raising about environmental issues. He then laid forth some recommendations pertaining to the Biodiversity Strategy and its objective to protect 30%, of which one third should be strictly protected:

- ◆ **Restoring and maintaining ecosystems** to enhance ecosystem functionality;
- ◆ **Ensuring that MPAs are designated in ecologically-meaningful locations**, to create a well-connected and coherent networks; and
- ◆ Ensuring that the main priorities of all MPAs are the **conservation of biodiversity and the restoration of ecosystems**.

He added that **fully implemented management plans, monitoring and transparent reporting** are some of the keys for the success of MPAs. He concluded by calling for **the creation of local ownership and co-management schemes for the relevant communities**, whereby the management of resources is a shared responsibility.

How to contribute to the success of MPAs: the role of recreational fishermen

“From the age of 4, I was part of daily summer fishing adventures. The great catches triggered my fantasy quite early. In my childish mind, epic battles between these massive predators and their preys took place in the depths, unseen from human eyes.”

Olivier Portrat (EFTTA)

Olivier Portrat (CEO, European Fishing Tackle Trade Association) shared a personal approach with regards to MPAs. As a recreational fisher by family tradition since his early childhood, he has been the witness of depleting fish stocks and aquatic habitat deterioration, decade after decade. Against that background, he welcomed the Biodiversity Strategy's objectives to turn 30% of European seas into MPAs and strongly believed that this will lead to a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ European Environment Agency, [State of nature in the EU: results from reporting under the Nature Directives 2013-2018](#), 19 October 2020.



massive improvement of the fish stocks' condition. He however highlighted the **necessity to secure the acceptance and ownership of the local population**, so that they can **help reaching the protection objectives**. He added that, in many parts of Europe, the only form of tourism, including offering boats for rent, guiding services, accommodation, is linked to recreational fisheries.

He further stated that **recreational anglers are ready to be better managed and controlled so as to make MPAs become a reality, *inter alia*** by accepting bag-limits, strict size limits and closed fishing seasons for some species. He concluded by highlighting that best practices with regards to cooperation between recreational fishers and local authorities do exist. He took the example of the French 'Parc Naturel Marin Iroise' in Brittany and the 'Parc Naturel Marin du Golfe du Lion' in the Mediterranean Sea. There, a co-management of the area works well, with recreational anglers and **recreational angling allowed, with strict tailor-made regulations depending on the parks' characteristics and needs**.

"The bigger the conservation area is, the more important is the acceptance by locals. The local population should take ownership of the conservation area and, if possible, they should be active in its creation."

Olivier Portrat (EFTTA)

David Vertegaal (Marine Public Affairs Officer, European Anglers Alliance) started by highlighting that recreational anglers have an important role to play in both management and control of MPAs. He welcomed the recent opinion adopted by the European Parliament's Committee on Fisheries, which highlights in its paragraph 33 **the necessary balance between the conservation goals and the actual impacts that different activities can have**.⁶ However, he shared his concerns regarding the Commission's draft technical note on criteria and guidance for protected areas designations, in which **recreational angling - as part of fisheries - is considered as an 'extractive activity'**, in the same category as mining and dredging, although those activities have diametrically opposed impacts on the sea. He urged the European Commission to use the terms 'exploitation' as in the Common Fisheries Policy or 'use' as in the Convention on Biological Diversity when referring to recreational fisheries and their impacts, rather than 'extraction'.

He then expressed his views on how recreational anglers can help to reach MPAs' objectives. According to him, due to their presence in these areas, anglers **exert some sort of social control, to report environmental incidents and impede on illegal activities by being there**. They cannot fulfil that role if they are not present.

He concluded by stressing that recreational fishers can also be **partners in research and data collection**. When it comes to this topic, he referred to another best practice for the presence of recreational fishers in protected areas with the ongoing successful cooperation in the Netherlands between local fishers and scientists in the framework of sea bass catching and tagging projects.

How to effectively protect MPAs: marine protected and strictly protected areas definition

Nicola Notaro (Head of the Nature Protection Unit, DG Environment, EU Commission) acknowledged that there currently is a real lack of effective management of MPAs. In that context, he insisted that it is of **paramount importance that national authorities put in place clear regulations and implement**

⁶ Committee on Fisheries, Opinion of the Committee on Fisheries for the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Bringing nature back into our lives, 25 March 2021.



MPAs rules effectively, together with stakeholders such as recreational anglers, to eliminate illegal activities through strictly controlled licenses, zoning, controls and enforcement in MPAs. He then echoed the previous presentations, recognising the importance of MPAs for recreational anglers, given **the socio-economic benefits produced, notably in terms of tourism**, fishers' expenditure, local economy and nutritional activities brought by this activity. He however underlined that **angling can raise challenges depending on the sensitivity of the areas in which it takes place, the intensity of the fishing efforts, the type of fishing gear used etc.**; and warned that **even catch-and-release has been shown to have some impacts**.

He then highlighted that the Nature Directives expert group was currently discussing a possible definition of and criteria for 'strict protection' zones within MPAs, which will be proposed for further discussions in a revised non-binding document in June 2021. Under the present draft definition, a strictly protected area is *"where nature processes are left essentially undisturbed from human activity."* However, he clarified that **it does not mean that all human activities need to be excluded. In fact, some activities which are compatible with the ecological requirements of these areas, would still be allowed subject to monitor and control.** The Nature Directives expert group is currently discussing the types of activities that would fall within this category. He further highlighted the strong link between MPAs and the legally binding restoration targets that the Commission plans to propose later this year, in accordance with the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, as the strict protection of the seas can be an extremely powerful instrument to ensure their self-restoration.

"Our goal is not to exclude recreational angling from MPAs, but rather to identify within MPAs a subset of zones in which extractive activities would be excluded."

Nicola Notaro (DG ENV)

He concluded by stressing that **the designation of MPAs will be done by Member States, through national consultative processes**. It will be up to them to use the guidance document prepared at the EU level to identify the areas that need to be protected in order to reach the Biodiversity Strategy's targets. Member States will then be invited to participate in sea-basin seminars by the end of 2022, where they would pledge their designations. There will then be a peer review process for these pledges with Member States and stakeholders in 2023.

Reactions from MEPs and debate with the audience

Jan Kappel (European Anglers Alliance) raised a question regarding the timeline for the adoption of the draft technical note. He also asked about **the relevance of passive restoration measures** at sea to reach the Biodiversity Strategy's objectives. He then **expressed his concerns about the actual state of knowledge on recreational fishers' impacts on the marine environment** and asked the European Commission for more data in that regard.

Nicola Notaro (DG Environment, EU Commission) responded that the next round of discussion on the technical note is planned for June and, while it may be too early to reach agreement in June, the plan is to achieve this before the end of the year. He then answered that, in his opinion, passive restoration was often an adequate option at sea but that this should not exclude active restoration where appropriate. He added that **the goal of the Biodiversity Strategy was not to ban all activities in MPAs but rather to allow activities that meet the ecological requirements and needs in these protected areas**.



Olivier Portat (CEO, European Fishing Tackle Trade Association) highlighted that, when done properly, catch-and-release has very high rates of survival. He argued that it was **a good solution to continue allowing the practice of recreational angling in MPAs.**

MEP Isabel Carvalhais (Portugal, S&D Group) referred to the European Parliament Committee on Fisheries' opinion on the Biodiversity Strategy, as well as to the Data Collection Framework and wondered **whether there is sufficient and detailed information on recreational fisheries for each sea basin** in order to evaluate the implementation of MPAs on a regional basis. She then asked if the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems would cover the impacts and the needs of recreational fishers.

Nicola Notaro (DG Environment, EU Commission) admitted that **data gaps on recreational fishers – and more widely on the marine environment – exist and that the European Commission would continue its efforts to address those.** He further specified that the European Commission has already published the consultation roadmap on the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems⁷, which is expected to be adopted by the end of the year and will also address knowledge gaps.

David Vertegaal (Marine Public Affairs Officer, European Anglers Alliance) asked how the European Commission **intended to help Member States put in place the enforcement and control measures**, to make sure that the Biodiversity Strategy's objectives are reached.

Nicola Notaro (DG Environment, EU Commission) responded that **enforcement can only take place when clear objectives and measures are in place**, stressing that gaps exist at that level for Natura 2000 sites and the Commission has opened a wide range of infringements against Member States to address the issue. He further noted that, behind poor implementation and enforcement at national level, there was also **an issue of capacities and resources.** He explained that the European Commission has helped Member States via the Common Fisheries Policy, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, as well as with resources devoted to monitoring and control. He added that this support will continue under the new multi annual financial framework and will **certainly be a key tool** to ensure that Member States monitor what is happening. Ultimately, **enforcement responsibility is of the Member States.**

Conclusions

MEP Isabel Carvalhais (Portugal, S&D) concluded by thanking all participants for the insightful discussions. With less than nine years to reach the objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy, she exhorted the European institutions **to ensure the participation of all stakeholders, especially recreational anglers**, which are both users and beneficiaries of the protection of marine environment. That is why, **recreational anglers should be part of MPAs' protection at all phases** - in the design, implementation, management and control - to protect habitats and species as well as to contribute to a healthier and more resilient marine environment.

“The protection of biodiversity is more than just a desirable goal, it is an urgent necessity. Actions must be as much daring as feasible. All sectors must be involved, especially recreational fisheries.”

MEP Isabel Carvalhais

⁷ [Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)



MEP Søren Gade (Denmark, Renew Europe) insisted on **the need to avoid systematically banning activities from strictly protected areas**, as well as to consider different kinds of variables to determine which activities have negative impacts on fish stocks and the aquatic environment.

MEP Niclas Herbst (Germany, EPP) thanked everyone for the many perspectives developed and their respective positive approach with regards to MPAs. He added that all speakers appeared to agree that **MPAs best fulfil their goals when they are properly managed**. He then recognised that there is **still plenty of work to do, especially by raising awareness when it comes to the use of the term 'extractive' to qualify recreational angling**. He concluded by stressing the necessity to include recreational fishers in the creation, design, management and control of MPAs and, to this end, joined MEP Gade in saying that ***"recreational anglers are part of the solution"***.

During the concluding remarks, participants were invited to propose **a word to share their key takeaways from the meeting**. This is the result:

