



## **EU Biodiversity strategy ignores fisheries management achievements**

### **- The strategy puts at risk European food production -**

The European Commission has unveiled today its proposal for an EU Biodiversity strategy calling for urgent action to protect nature in the EU and worldwide. The strategy claims to set up a full transformative plan towards an EU environmentally-friendly food production system that preserves and restores biodiversity. Europêche agrees that the EU must be ambitious in setting high environmental standards but not at the cost of increasing imports and lowering EU food production. EU fishermen oppose the new strategy since it is discriminatory, undermines the viability of the sector by decreasing its productivity and capacity to invest in improving social and environmental performance, further restricting the sustainable use of the oceans, subjecting fish products to additional taxation and making fisheries the target of discrediting campaigns.

European seafood is famous for being safe, nutritious, of high quality and produced under a well-developed and effective fisheries management system. EU vessels are subject to hundreds of European and national rules to ensure a responsible and sustainable activity. Many more conservation measures for fishery resources, including by-catch, and for the protection of marine ecosystems have been adopted by the EU only last year. The sector assures that, at present, EU fisheries poses no threat for the long-term preservation of fishery resources.

The European Commission strategy claims that nature is in crisis due to the overexploitation of resources, climate change, pollution and invasive alien species and that more species risk extinction than at any point in human history. To revert the situation, the EU governing body proposes to increase the marine protected area (MPA) coverage from 10% to 30%, including a 10% no-take zone for strict conservation purposes, maintain or reduce fishing mortality to or under maximum sustainable yield (MSY) levels and increase offshore windfarms even in vulnerable areas under the guise of a win-win solution.

Europêche regrets that the strategy does not appreciate at all the huge improvements in EU fish populations. According to the latest scientific figures, in the North East Atlantic there is 50% more fish at sea in only ten years and overfishing in the EU is at an all-time low. In addition, almost 100% of the landings from EU-regulated stocks in that area come from catches fished at the MSY levels. It also fails to recognise that fishing has the lowest carbon footprint if compared with other food production industries, since wild-caught seafood does not require being artificially fed, the use of water supply, antibiotics or pesticides.

The fishing industry criticises that while for fishing there are strong binding targets, other maritime industries such as oil, gas, dredging, aquaculture or shipping that have a massive carbon footprint, displace animals, disrupt ecosystems and biodiversity are not even mentioned. Europêche qualifies

this as discriminatory treatment and window-dressing since the Commission is trying to greenwash the image of the EU through fisheries restrictions.

Furthermore, according to Europêche, the socio-economic consequences of the disproportionate targets are clearly missing since the strategy will consider impact assessments only as a second step. For fishermen, this is putting the cart before the horses. In this line, it is crucial that other effective area-based conservation measures are considered on an equal footing with MPAs and developed in close cooperation with fishermen given the tremendous socio-economic costs of these measures.

Europêche argues that, when indicating the economic benefits of MPAs - largely related to tourism, ocean energy and recreation - the Commission fails to mention that the economic benefits generated by these sectors have a negative impact on biodiversity, fish stocks and ecosystems. Furthermore, the Commission heavily relies on tourism and recreation as the main sources of new jobs and growth, two sectors that are very much struggling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Daniel Voces, Managing Director of Europêche declared: *“Closing off parts of the ocean to fishing actually conflicts with fundamental Sustainable Development Goals such as increasing food security and reducing poverty - both of which require the use of the ocean. We are shocked to read that while fishing would be heavily restricted or closed in protected areas, offshore wind farms will be permitted and even prioritised. The Commission already tried in the past to convert the oceans into a mining extraction site and now wants to transform our seas into the new European energy engine”.*

Fishing industry representatives fear that the combined effect of Brexit, the expansion of offshore wind farms, 30% MPAs plus stronger environmental EU regulations such as Natura2000, could restrict access to traditional fishing grounds to the point that fishermen would have nowhere to fish.

By 2030 the world's population is expected to top 8.5 billion with the same right for healthy and high quality food supply. According to Europêche, the Commission should focus on how to produce more seafood in a sustainable manner rather than further closing traditional fishing areas. The strategy, as it is, would reduce the productivity and force Europe to import more from 3<sup>rd</sup> countries which are far from the European environmental and social standards. In light of the trade disruptions created by the COVID-19 crisis, the EU cannot risk further reduction of our fisheries in exchange for more seafood supply from overseas from an environmental, social and food security point of view.

The Commission proposes to phase out bottom trawling. The fishing industry rejects this proposal since it would prevent the use of one of the most common, certified, regulated and researched fishing gears in Europe. Bottom-trawling is the only viable way of fishing for key species such as sole, megrim, plaice, Greenland halibut, shrimps and nephrops which are fished at MSY levels.

Javier Garat, President of Europêche, concluded: *“Despite the recovery of the stocks and biodiversity, mitigation of environmental impacts and lower greenhouse emissions, the Commission refuses to acknowledge these achievements and uses fishing as the easy scapegoat to launch their environmental campaign. We want a real strategy with proportionate, rational and achievable objectives where all industries are treated on an equal footing, not an ill-founded proposal based on stereotypes. Therefore, we call on the European Parliament and Member States to stop this derailing train and send the proposal back to the Commission for full revision, so as to include the full cost of the policy in terms of impacts by the new users of space, intensification of fishing in limited space,*

*reduction of fishing pressure and food production, elimination of trawling without a viable alternative and impact on exporting the environmental debt of the EU to developing countries. If the strategy is not changed, the Commissioner will fail to live up to his promise not to single out any of the pillars of sustainability - social, economic and environmental - during his mandate”.*

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