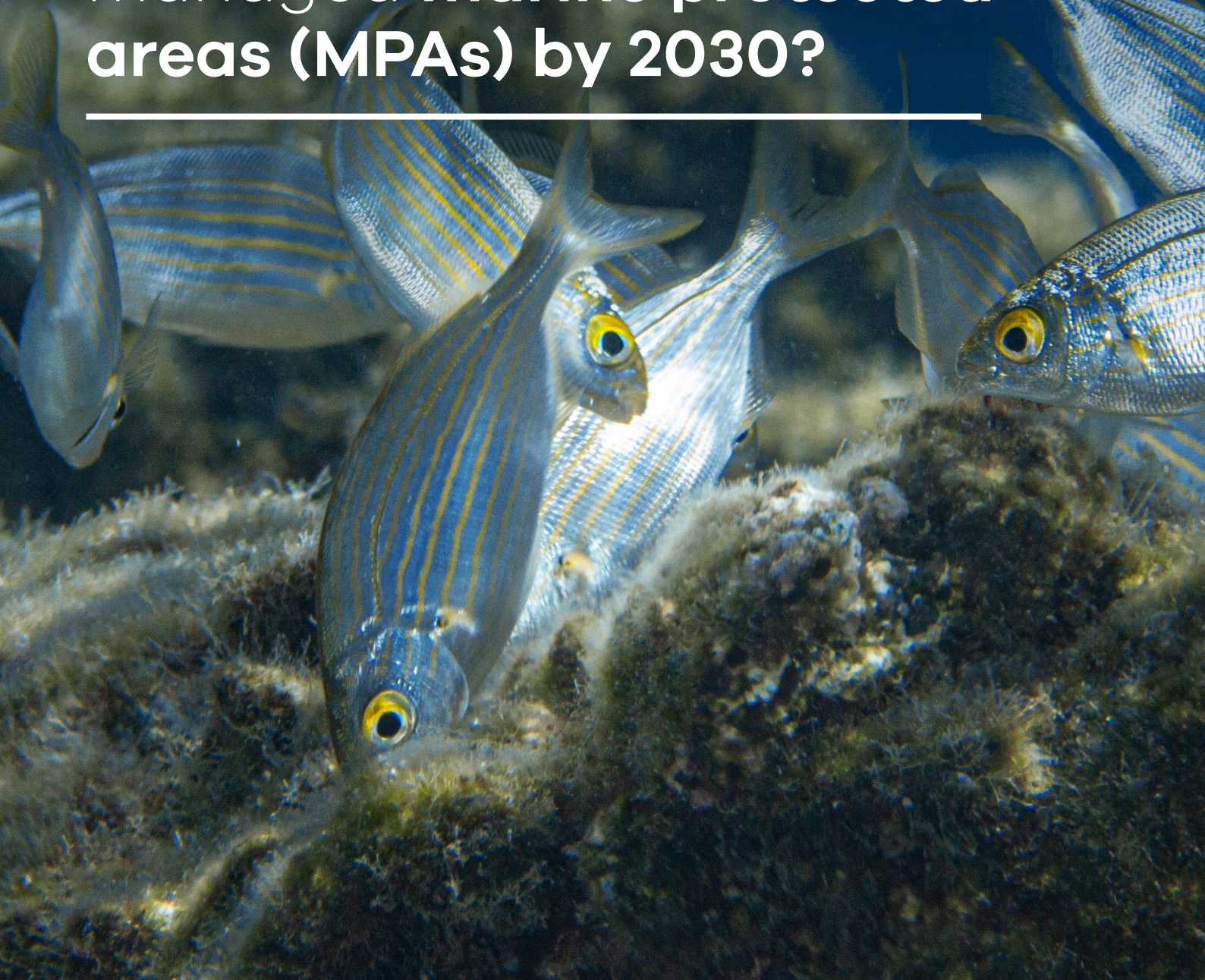


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Is the EU on track to ensure that at least **30 per cent** of its **marine waters** are designated as effectively managed **marine protected areas (MPAs)** by 2030?

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# 1. The state of marine biodiversity in the EU

The overall health of EU seas is declining at alarming rates. The European Environment Agency (EEA) noted that more than 93 per cent of Europe's marine areas are under pressure from human activities.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the European Commission noted, in 2025, that "scientific assessments of the state of EU marine waters and marine ecosystems indicate that EU seas to date do not, generally, have 'Good Environmental Status'".<sup>2</sup> For example:

- In Europe, around 43 per cent of shelf/slope areas and 79 per cent of coastal seabeds are disturbed, primarily by bottom-trawling;<sup>3</sup>
- Only 28 per cent of assessed fish stocks in Europe's seas are fished sustainably and in good biological condition;<sup>4</sup>
- Besides fish, many marine species found in EU waters such as marine mammals, seabirds, sea turtles and elasmobranchs are currently classified as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).<sup>5</sup>

Yet, a healthy ocean, with abundant marine biodiversity is needed to support the livelihoods of coastal communities which depend on it and to ensure that the ocean continues to act as a carbon sink in the context of climate change. Against this background, MPAs have long been identified as a key tool to support ocean conservation and restoration.



<sup>1</sup>See: [Healthy seas, thriving fisheries: transitioning to an environmentally sustainable sector | Publications | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#).

<sup>2</sup>See [659eea3a-8a00-410e-bc2f-f94baf210c9b\\_en](#).

<sup>3</sup>See: [Healthy seas, thriving fisheries: transitioning to an environmentally sustainable sector | Publications | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#).

<sup>4</sup>See: [Status of marine fish and shellfish stocks in European seas | Indicators | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#).

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the conservation status of the main species found in EU waters, see: [R3\\_Bycatch-Guide-Oct7-Web.pdf](#), pp. 8 and 9.

# 2. Benefits of well-managed MPAs

Well-managed MPAs across Europe have shown that they can deliver important environmental and socio-economic benefits. Notably, they lead to **increased fish abundance and in turn to more resilient, sustainable and profitable fisheries.**

A study by Giakoumi *et al.*, (2017) analysed the performance of **Mediterranean MPAs** on fish populations. Where small no fishing MPAs were established, there were strong positive effects on the abundance of fish populations. The study noted that "the biomass and density of fish assemblages and species of high commercial value were significantly greater in fully protected areas than in unprotected areas nearby. Total fish biomass and density were on average 2.3 and 1.4 times greater, respectively, in the fully protected areas of the MPAs compared to control fished locations outside MPAs".<sup>6</sup>

In **Norwegian waters**, another study showed that multi-use MPAs have increased lobster and cod numbers and size: "By 2010, European lobster (*Homarus gammarus*) catch-per-unit-effort

(CPUE) had increased by 245 per cent in MPAs, whereas CPUE in control areas had increased by 87 per cent. Mean size of lobsters increased by 13 per cent in MPAs, whereas increase in control areas was negligible. [...] Partial protection of Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*) was followed by an increase in population density and body size compared with control areas. By 2010, MPA cod were on average 5 cm longer than in any of the control areas."<sup>7</sup>

In **Lyme Bay in the UK**, the establishment and management of an MPA where bottom-trawling was banned showed similar results.

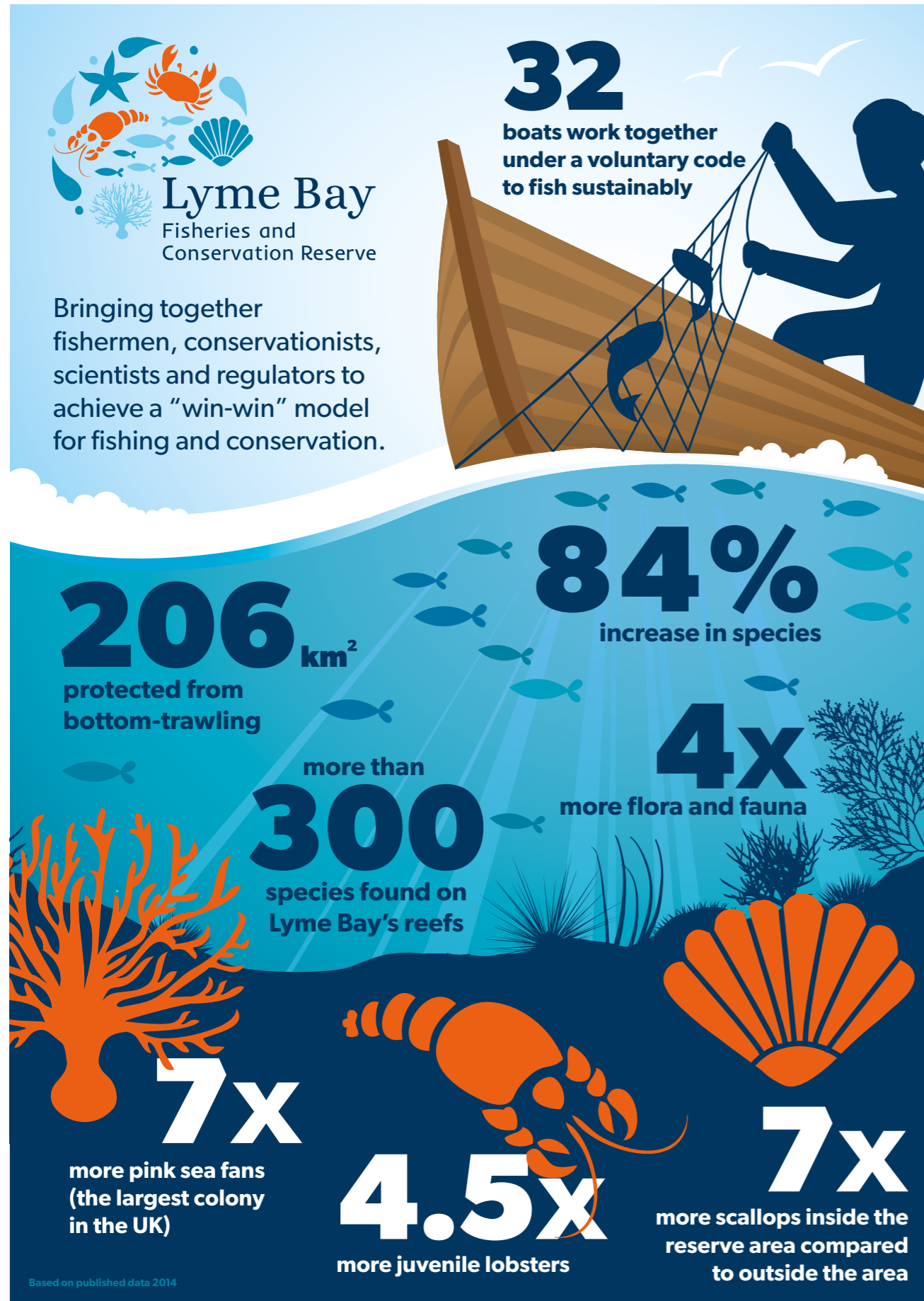
These benefits will only happen if MPAs are established and well-managed. Very concretely, this would mean banning the most destructive practices, such as bottom-trawling, from inside their boundaries. In this respect, the positive economic impact of a ban on bottom-contact fishing in EU MPAs has been evaluated at €8.5 billion over 20 years.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>6</sup>See Giakoumi, S., Scianna, C., Plass-Johnson, J. et al. Ecological effects of full and partial protection in the crowded Mediterranean Sea: a regional meta-analysis. *Sci Rep* 7, 8940 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-08850-w>

<sup>7</sup>See Moland et al. (2013) Lobster and cod benefit from small-scale marine protected areas: inference from a before-after control-impact study. *Proc Roy Soc B*. 280, 20122679.

<sup>8</sup>See: [Valuing impacts of potential ban on bottom-contact fishing\\_NEF\\_FINAL\\_for-publication.pdf](#), pp. 5 and 6.



Source: Blue Marine Foundation, Lyme Bay Reserve Case Studies, p.7

### 3. EU commitments towards MPA designation and management

The EU has recognised that MPAs can help address the marine biodiversity crisis and has taken several international and domestic commitments to designate and manage them.

At the global level, the European Union (EU) and its 27 Member States are Contracting Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and therefore committed to implement Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which states that: "By 2030 at least 30 per cent [...] of marine and coastal areas [...] are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures".<sup>9</sup>

At the domestic level, in its Biodiversity Strategy, the EU committed to protect at least 30 per cent of the sea, of which at least 10 per cent should be strictly protected, by 2030.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, with the Nature Restoration Regulation, EU Member States agreed to restore (and not only conserve or protect) at least 20 per cent of sea areas by 2030 and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.

Economic impact of a ban on bottom-contact fishing in EU MPAs has been evaluated at €8.5 billion over 20 years<sup>11</sup>



<sup>9</sup>See: 2030 Targets (with Guidance Notes).

<sup>10</sup>See: EUR-Lex - 52020DC0380 - EN - EUR-Lex.

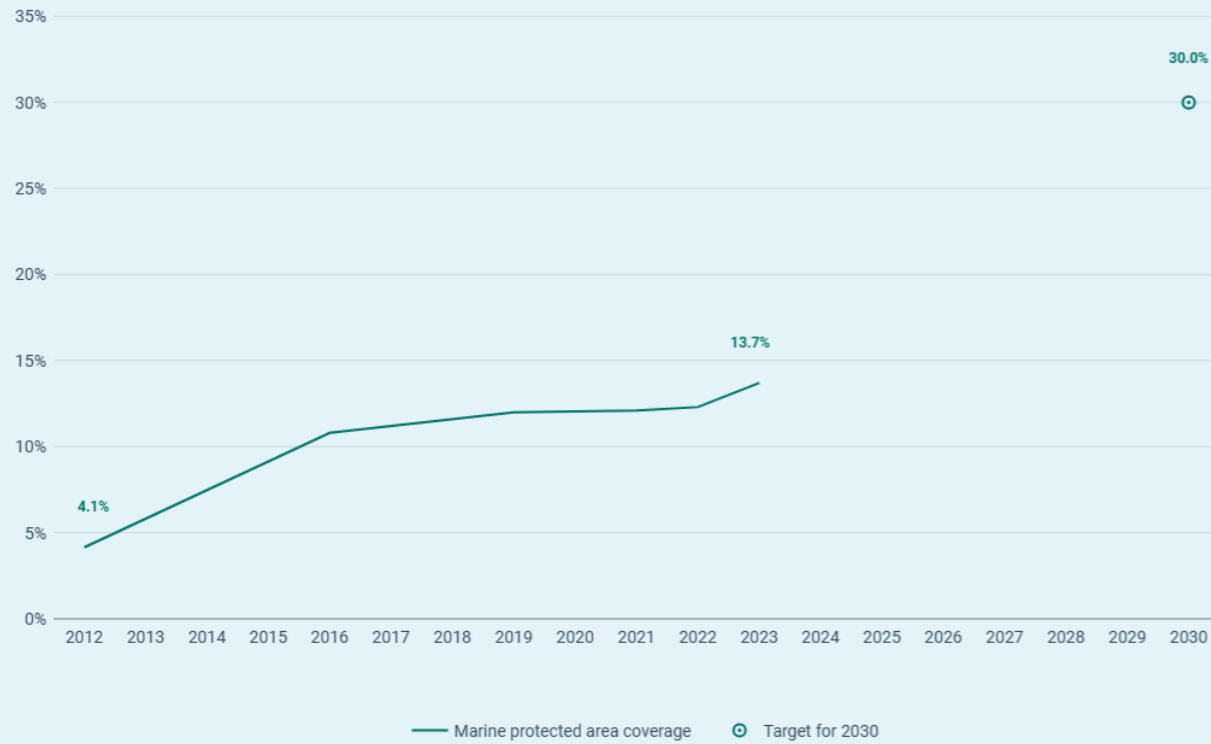
<sup>11</sup>See: Valuing impacts of potential ban on bottom-contact fishing, NEF\_FINAL-for-publication.pdf, pp. 5 and 6.

Photo Riccardo Cingillo

## 4. Reality check

There are two figures which are important to look at when determining whether the EU is on track or not to meet its MPAs commitments.

The first one is the **percentage of EU waters designated as MPAs**. Here, numbers can vary depending on the source, but the most recent data from the European Environment Agency says that as of 2023, **MPA coverage was at 13.7 per cent**.



Source: 10-Marine protected areas in Europe | Indicators | European Environment Agency (EEA)

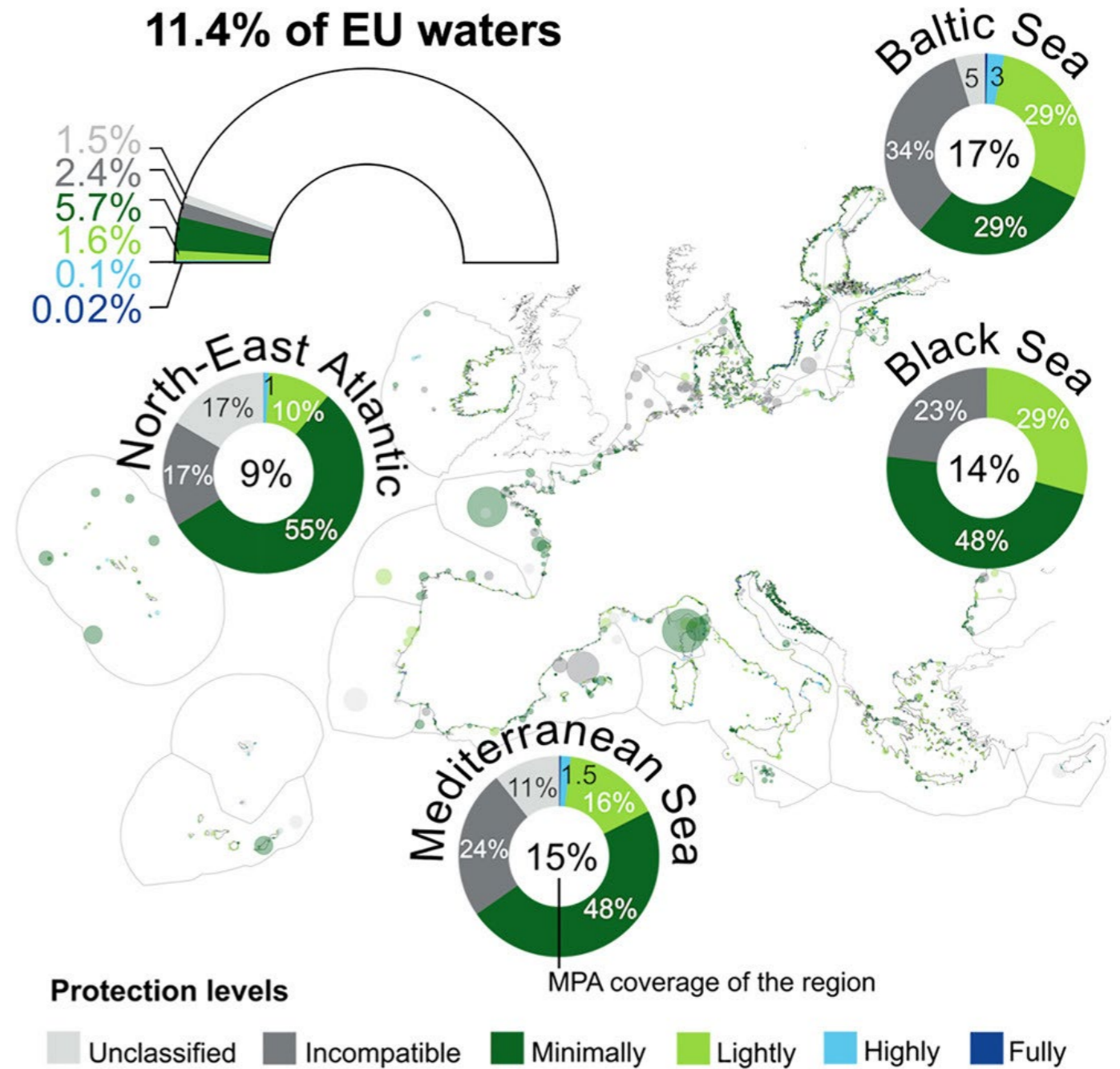
That figure has increased since 2023, as more designations have been made by EU Member States, and is currently estimated by the recognised MPA tracker Skytruth at 17.5 per cent, with only 0.1 per cent fully or highly protected – still far from the 30 per cent needed to achieve the CBD objective<sup>12</sup>

The other important figure to consider is the **percentage of EU MPAs which are effectively managed, including the percentage of EU MPAs**

**which are under strict protection** – since only areas which have a proper management plan in place and where destructive activities are banned would be effective at conserving and restoring marine life. Here, the EU is lagging even more behind its commitments. A recent study demonstrated for example that **86 per cent of “EU waters covered by MPAs showed light, minimal or no protection from the most harmful human activities, such as dredging, mining, or the most damaging fishing gears”**.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>See: [SkyTruth 30x30](#).

<sup>13</sup>See Juliette Aminian-Biquet, Sašo Gorjanc, Jennifer Sletten, Timothé Vincent, Anastasiya Laznya, Nataša Vaidianu, Joachim Claudet, Juliette Young, Barbara Horta e Costa, Over 80% of the European Union’s marine protected area only marginally regulates human activities, One Earth, Volume 7, Issue 9, 2024, pp. 1614-1629, ISSN 2590-3322, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2024.07.010>.



Source: Over 80per cent of the European Union’s marine protected area only marginally regulates human activities - ScienceDirect (data collated up to 2022)<sup>14</sup>

In the same vein, the European Environment Agency indicated in 2024 that “The objective of effective management is therefore not reached, and in addition the EU is still very far from achieving its objective of 10 per cent of strict ocean protection.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Aminian-Bouquet et al. (2024) One Earth 7(9), pp. 1614-1629.

<sup>15</sup>See: [Healthy seas, thriving fisheries: transitioning to an environmentally sustainable sector | Publications | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#).

## 5. Recommendations:

As of 2026, the EU is not on track to designate 30 per cent of its waters as MPAs and, more crucially, to strictly protect 10 per cent and to effectively manage MPAs, by 2030. To change that course, it is recommended:

- **For all EU decision-makers**, to make the 30 by 30, 10 per cent strict protection and effective management objectives legally-binding and enforceable through their inclusion in the upcoming EU Ocean Act;<sup>16</sup>
- **For EU Member States**, to actively designate more MPAs, aiming for 30 per cent of their EEZ, and adopt effective management measures in these areas, including by implementing the 10 per cent strict protection objective and their obligations under the Nature Restoration Regulation;
- **For the European Commission**, to take action, including legal action, against EU Member States which fail to implement measures in MPAs to protect sensitive habitats and species at sea under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>A proposal for a European Ocean Act will be published in December 2026 under the umbrella of the EU Ocean Pact: [The European Ocean Pact - Oceans and fisheries - European Commission](#)

<sup>17</sup>See for example: UNOC countdown: Fresh legal challenge over untackled bottom-trawling in EU Marine Protected Areas | ClientEarth and Environmental Justice Foundation | EU faces legal complaint as...



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Photo Ocean Image Bank, Emilie Ledwidge

