Protection of marine environment: sustainable use of the seas, conservation of ecosystems

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PURPOSE : to present a new approach to protect and conserve marine ecosystems and promote sustainable use of marine resources. CONTENT : under the terms of the sixth Environment Action Programme (EAP) the EU recognises the need for a thematic strategy when facing the dual challenges of protecting and conserving the marine environment. The EAP has long since acknowledged the many threats facing the marine environment. These threats include loss or degradation of biodiversity and changes in its structure, loss of habitat, contamination by dangerous substances and nutrients and the possible future effects of climate change. The main culprits contributing to these threats are commercial fishing, oil and gas exploration, shipping, waterborne and atmospheric deposition of dangerous substances and nutrients, waste dumping and the physical degradation of the habitat due to dredging and extraction of sand and gravel. Those regulations, which do or could protect the marine environment do so through a quagmire of international, national and regional bodies. Indeed, the EU has a number of measures in place to try and protect the marine environment. However, the institutional and legal complexity of any such marine measures is one of the main challenges confronting a fresh EU strategy. This present Commission Communication adopts a pragmatic approach and claims to be action and sector oriented in order to describe the complexity of the task at hand. It is intended to ultimately establish the foundation upon which a thematic strategy can be built. When reviewing the existing legislative landscape the Communication offers a comprehensive list of the challenges with accompanying points on the measures currently in place. The headings are as follows: - Biodiversity Decline and Habitat Protection. The most significant policies and actions within the EU are the Habitat and Birds Directives, the CFP, CAP and the Biodiversity Action Plans. - Hazardous Substances. EU measures for controlling pollution and hazardous substances include the IPPC, the Water Framework Directive and the New Chemical Policy. - Eutrophication. The main EU instruments to combat eutrophication are the Nitrates Directive, the Urban Wastewater Directive the Water Framework Directive and the CAP. - Chronic Oil Pollution. The IPPC and EIA Directives would apply to chronic oil pollution. Nevertheless, no specific EU policy or legislation addressing the offshore oil and gas industry currently exists. - Contamination with Radionuclides. A global moratorium on the dumping at seas of radioactive waste currently exists. - Health and Environment. The main pieces of EU legislation controlling microbiological pollution are the Bathing Water Directive and Urban Wastewater Directive. - Maritime Transport. Community legislation in the field is extensive and highly regulated though it is inevitably often related to legislation adopted at the global level. Having listed the existing regulatory measures in place the Communication goes on to recognise that a major problem for future policies is the lack of basic information relating to themarine environment. A problem confounded by a fragmented monitoring strategy. Bearing this in mind the Commission proposes a number of objectives, which given time, should help alleviate the current fragmentation in a coherent marine policy. Importantly, the overall objective should be to promote the sustainable use of the seas and conservation of marine ecosystems, including seabeds, estuarine and coastal areas, with particular attention given to sites holding a high biodiversity value. The Commission lists fourteen objectives with a further twenty-three action lines proposed. The Commission recognises that its policy proposals are both ambitious and pragmatic. Yet, it is the publication of this document, which marks the first step in the development of an overarching EU marine strategy. On a final note, the Commission hopes that this is but a starting point for a marine strategy which can be developed in an open and collaborative process involving the Community institutions, relevant regional organisation and other stakeholders.