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

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Laura GONZÁLEZ ÁLVAREZ (EUL/NGL, E) on the Commission communication entitled "Towards a strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment". The committee supported the need for a coherent, harmonised European Marine Strategy, but noted that some of the objectives were too vaguely formulated and that the time-frame was not ambitious enough. It also pointed out that the lack of a complete information base must not be used to prevent appropriate precautionary action especially where there is clear evidence of significant decline in biodiversity. The Commission was urged to bring forward as soon as possible a thematic strategy on the marine environment based on the following elements: - the precautionary principle; - the concept of sustainability including establishing benchmarks for protection and conservation objectives as well as for action targets; - a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), in order to integrate environmental and biodiversity considerations into mainstream decision-making; - an integrated approach to address threats caused by all human activities impacting the marine environment; - an integrated approach regarding coastal and offshore marine management; and - a regional approach taking into account regional diversities as regards ecological characteristics, threats as well as socio-economic aspects. The report also called on the EU to take a decision to join the Arctic Council (whose current members are the USA, Canada, Iceland, Norway and Russia and, among the EU Member States, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) on the grounds that this would promote a shared Euro-Atlantic understanding of environmental problems and give the EU a significant forum for environmental protection in the northern seas. Amongst its other recommendations, the committee said that fisheries and their environmental impact should be examined in more detail by the strategy. It pointed out that fishing was the single most influential human activity on marine ecosystems, and that overfishing was the principal factor damaging the ecosystems upon which fisheries and other marine flora and fauna depend. It believed, therefore, that the balance between fish stocks, fishing effort and the marine environment must be restored and that the maximum sustainable yield should be defined in terms of stock sustainability rather than economic sustainability.