Thematic strategy on the marine environment

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PURPOSE : presentation of a thematic strategy on the protection and conservation of the marine environment.

CONTEXT : Oceans and seas provide 99% of the available living space on the planet, cover 71% of the Earth's surface and contain 90% of the biosphere and consequently contain more biological diversity than terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. Marine ecosystems play a key role in climate and weather patterns. Indispensable to life itself, the marine environment is also a great contributor to economic prosperity, social well-being and quality of life.

However, the marine environment is under significant pressure. The pace of degradation of its biodiversity, the level of contamination by dangerous substances and the emerging consequences of climate change are some of the most visible warning signals. The current deterioration of the marine environment and the associated erosion of its ecological capital jeopardises the generation of wealth and employment opportunities derived from Europe's oceans and seas. If not addressed, this will undermine the capacity of the EU maritime cluster to make a strong contribution to the Lisbon agenda.

Economic activities that directly depend on the quality of the marine environment would be particularly affected. The key sector of tourism would be severely hit. As regards fisheries, the loss of income from over-fishing of cod alone in the North Sea and Baltic Sea was estimated to reach EUR 400 million in 2002.

The development of a Thematic Strategy for the protection and conservation of the marine environment is a result of the commitment EU's 6th Environment Action Programme. While the Strategy is primarily focused on the protection of the regional seas bordered by EU countries, it also takes into account the international dimension in recognition of the importance of reducing the EU's footprint in marine areas in other parts of the world, including the High Seas.

CONTENT : the objective of the Strategy is to protect and restore Europe's oceans and seas and ensure

that human activities are carried out in a sustainable manner so that current and futuregenerations enjoy and benefit from biologically diverse and dynamic oceans and seas that are safe, clean, healthy and productive.

If the EU is to achieve this ambitious objective, a new approach and principles to inform the design and implementation of a future EU strategy will be required, encompassing:

- a dual EU/regional approachsetting at EU level common co-operation and approaches among Member States and third countries bordering EU oceans and seas, but leaving the planning and execution of measures to the regional level to take into account the diversity of conditions, problems and needs of marine regions requiring tailor-made solutions.

- aknowledge-based approach, in order to achieve informed policy-making.

- an ecosystem-based approach**,** whereby human activities affecting the marine environment will be managed in an integrated manner promoting conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way of oceans and seas.

- a co-operative approach, providing for broad engagement with all relevant stakeholders and enhancing co-operation with existing regional seas conventions.

The Commission considers that in order to achieve the objective of the Strategy a binding legal commitment is required. It proposes a Marine Strategy Directive, ambitious in its scope but not overly prescriptive in its tools.

In developing improved co-ordination in relation to environmental issues, the Strategy will deliver the environmental pillar of the future Maritime Policy. It will be reviewed in 2010 and feed into the final evaluation of the 6th Environmental Action Programme.