

## The integration of nature conservation into the marine spatial planning process

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Keywords: marine spatial planning, nature conservation

### Abstract

Nature conservation at sea is not a new policy. Its drivers can be found in international (CBD, 1992) and regional law (Helsinki Convention, 1992; OSPAR, 1992, NATURA 2000 EU). Part of nature conservation at sea, in particular habitat protection, can be achieved by designating MPAs. MPA initiatives are mostly perceived as potentially limiting other users and give rise to resistance from them. Precisely this resistance by a coalition of other users resulted in the designation of marine protected areas (MPAs) without additional measures of protection and often a lack of a broadly balanced stakeholder participation and public support. As a compromise most of those MPA's are not well managed or have no management plan at all, or they are too small in scale or lack interconnectivity with other MPAs, resulting in an inadequate habitat protection. At least that was the case in Belgium in the past.

Marine spatial planning (MSP), in terms of zoning and as a process, can help to reduce this conflict model and provide new opportunities

to improve nature conservation. In fact nature conservation objectives and offshore renewable energy projects have been the drivers for the initial marine spatial planning (MSP) initiatives in northern Europe. They are both new entrants at sea that are supposed to come in conflict with traditional users for reducing their traditional use of space, such as for fisheries and shipping. The fact that nature conservation is not the only one claiming relative large areas at sea has shifted the focus of resistance, increased other stakeholder interests and in particular increased public interest for a broader support of the integration of all activities at sea. Precisely this broader support by other stakeholders and the public is an important element of the MSP process, together with a better transparency, the integration of scientific data, the development of a long term vision, increased attention to monitoring and a correct implementation and enforcement of the marine spatial plan. MSP requires forward looking, a better balancing of interests and long term decisions with the potential to adapt to new situations by a transparent process. One can argue that MSP has the potential to contribute to the extension of MPAs, their transboundary interconnectivity and an increased attention for developing MPA management initiatives (such as restrictions to certain fisheries techniques, the exclusion of fixed activities or activities detrimental for habitats). Under certain conditions, offshore wind farm projects can enhance nature protection, even better than existing MPAs that lack management plans or user restrictions. Ten

years of Belgian MSP will be presented as an example of these new developments and its contribution to nature nature conservation.