



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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Commissioner Karmenu Vella
European Commission, Environment DG
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels

Commisioner João Aguiar Machado
European Commission, MARE DG
Rue Joseph II 99 / Josef II-straat 99
1000 Brussels

Dear Commissioners,

Globally, fish provide more than 1.5 billion people with almost 20% of their average per capita intake of animal protein. To meet the needs of the predicted human population of 2050, a 50% increase in current supply of protein from fish and aquatic invertebrates will be required. Solutions require innovative thinking and solid science.

The European Commission, DG MARE and DG Environment have made substantial progress on nature, sustainable fishing and oceans, moving towards a comprehensive implementation of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, and integrating these individual policies into the wider and medium-term perspective of the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, the mid-term review of the EU diversity strategy highlighted the need for greater effort by Member States on implementation to halt biodiversity loss by 2020.

Biodiversity and ecosystem service loss in our European oceans is widespread. The CFP, the MSFD, the Habitats directive and the WFD have been critical tools in reducing the rates of loss, but the European economy cannot afford further deterioration of the nature and biodiversity sector, which generates one in six jobs in the EU and contributes to European citizens' welfare.

Seagrass ecosystems are a critical part of Europe's marine biodiversity. These plants that are adapted to life underwater (*Zostera*, *Posidonia* and *Cymodocea* sp) create vast undersea meadows that provide a solid foundation upon which biodiversity can flourish. But evidence suggests that they remain under threat and are being lost all around the European continent.

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We are a team of researchers from Swansea, Cardiff and Stockholm Universities that have conducted a unique global analysis of the role that seagrass meadows play in supporting fisheries productivity and food security. This work provides the EC and the Member States with vital new information to assist in policy development for the concurrent protection of biodiversity and food security.

The research was published on 21st May in the journal Conservation Letters (Open Access). The major conclusion of which is that the significant role that seagrass meadows play in supporting fisheries productivity and food security across the globe is not adequately reflected in the decisions made by authorities with statutory responsibility for their management and protection.

In the research paper we present the case for why seagrass meadows need targeted policy to recognise and protect their role in supporting fisheries production and associated food security. The major points of which are:

- 1.** Seagrass meadows provide valuable nursery habitat to over 1/5th of the world's largest 25 fisheries. Importantly for Europe this includes the Atlantic Cod and the Atlantic Herring, two of the continents biggest fisheries.
- 2.** In complex small-scale fisheries from around the world (poorly represented in fisheries statistics) many of those in proximity to seagrass are supported to a large degree by these habitats. This includes many locations in the EU.
- 3.** Intertidal fishing activity in seagrass is a global phenomenon, often directly supporting human livelihoods. This has been documented all around Europe.

Our study demonstrates that seagrasses should be recognized and managed to maintain and maximise their role in global fisheries production. The chasm that exists between coastal habitat conservation and fisheries management needs to be filled to maximise the chances of seagrass meadows supporting fisheries, so that they can continue to support human wellbeing.

The research identified many opportunities that could be drawn out of current policy and legislation. It recognised that the Common Fisheries Policy (CAP), the habitats directive and the Water Framework directive are key to conserving and restoring seagrass across Europe. But the work importantly recognises fisheries and nature conservation policy in Europe have not always been fully and consistently aligned and the paper highlights the need for more joined up thinking between key policies and directives.

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New policies are needed that directly support seagrass conservation and restoration to enhance fisheries. In doing so these could also provide strong incentives to expand conservation of these habitats for other reasons such as carbon sequestration. Our work also highlights the need to foster R&I in more fully understanding the links between coastal biodiversity and our ocean basin scale fisheries productivity.

Finally, the EC and the Member States should implement mechanisms to avoid further loss and degradation of seagrass throughout Europe in order to support sustainable productive fisheries in to the future.

Yours sincerely,

Three handwritten signatures in black ink are displayed on a light yellow background. The first signature is on the left, the second is in the middle, and the third is on the right, followed by the printed name "Leanne Cullen-Unsworth." in a black, sans-serif font.

Dr Richard Unsworth FRSB, Dr Lina Mtwana Nordlund, Dr Leanne Cullen-Unsworth

Cc: Oceana Europe, Blue Planet Society, WWF Europe, Seas at Risk, UK Government (DEFRA), Marine Conservation Society, Greenpeace

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