Climate change, poverty, water quality, hunger, population growth … Some of the most pressing global challenges can only be effectively addressed if the planet’s oceans are safe, secure, clean and sustainably managed. These imperatives are at the heart of the Blue Bioeconomy.

Oceans cover nearly three-quarters of our planet’s surface and are home to 85% of the planet’s plant life, the bulk of which are microscopic algae. But the ‘big blue’ is under threat from over-exploitation, climate change, acidification, pollution and declining biodiversity.

Finding a ‘sustainable’ balance between our needs today and the future health of this vast marine space is at the heart of Europe’s Blue Bioeconomy initiative and global imperatives that underpin it, such as the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This landmark agreement, ratified by 193 countries including the EU, has been described as a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”. The resulting 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address pressing global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate, water, health, environment, population growth and economic welfare in the understanding that these concerns are all interconnected.

A Joint Communication on International Ocean Governance, issued by Europe’s leaders in response to the SDGs – in particular the need to conserve and sustainably use Earth’s oceans, seas and marine resources
(SDG14) – stresses the importance of conservation and sustainable use of our oceans finally being on the international policy agenda: “The global community must now turn these commitments into action. The EU is fully committed to this goal and its implementation.”

The European Commission produced a well-received paper, entitled ‘Key European Action Supporting the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals’, which lists the 17 themes alongside related EU initiatives. For example, European actions supporting SDG 14 range from sustainable fisheries (e.g. Common Fisheries Policy and Marine Strategy Framework), environmental protection (e.g. Natura 2000, 7th Environmental Action Programme), and research and innovation policy (e.g. Horizon 2020’s Blue Growth), through EU commitments to international conventions like the ‘Law of the Sea’ and International Ocean Governance.

**Three priorities**

The Communication introduces three priority areas for further action: (i) improving the international ocean governance framework; (ii) reducing pressure on oceans and seas, and creating the conditions for a sustainable blue economy; and (iii) strengthening international ocean research and data.

Great foresight, long-term investment and strong collaboration between scientists, policy-makers, industry and everyday users of the planet’s oceans and resources are key to making progress on these priorities. That means working closely through the EU Neighbourhood Policy, and with the Union for the Mediterranean, but also with international partners and regions. It also means reinforcing and respecting the 1995 Barcelona Convention and action plan for protecting the marine environment and coastal regions, as well as investing in research, innovation and skills to make it all happen.

“Ocean management should be based on sound scientific research and knowledge,” notes the Joint Communication, underscoring the importance of research in the vast and complex field, but also the need for better international ocean research and data. Indeed, Europe’s large research and innovation programmes, including Horizon 2020 and its successors, have built and sustained momentum and developments in the blue bioeconomy for many years.

**Handle with care**

For the European Union and nations around the world, the oceans and seas are a source of potential growth and employment – roughly 3.48 million jobs and gross added value of some €147.2 billion a year in the EU – but also a driver of innovation. The stakes are high.

It is here that the Blue Bioeconomy becomes so critical as it finds innovative, fair, science-based solutions to balance present and future needs with efforts to protect the very resources that it draws on for food, feed, transport, energy, new ‘green’ materials, and much more. Innovative solutions in aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotech, ocean energy, seabed mining; backed by greater awareness and surveillance of our oceans and the know-how and planning that goes with that.

Further integration of regional and national efforts at the sea-basin level and other global arrangements affecting the marine environment and biodiversity, but also economic development, trade, fisheries, legal and other international governance issues, are all likely to affect the success of the Blue Bioeconomy going forward.

Sustainable ‘blue’ growth is an investment in the planet’s future and it depends on how well we protect and sustainably manage the resources it provides.

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*More info*
UN Sustainable Development Goals [2]
Key European Action Supporting 2030 Agenda and SDGs [3]
EU Maritime Affairs ‘Blue Growth’ (infographic) [5]
Joint Communication on International Ocean Governance [6]
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OECD Report The Ocean Economy in 2030 [8]
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