

Building a sustainable Mediterranean maritime economy

The lives and cultures of the peoples living on the shores of the Mediterranean – to the south and to the north, and on the countless islands – have been always strongly linked and influenced by their common maritime heritage. Today, this 'sea between the lands', at the cross-roads of three continents, remains the scene of an intense and vital maritime economy. The Mediterranean is an important source of employment for those who live along its shores. In fact, it is home to over 450 ports and terminals. It is also one of the world's major waterways for sea-borne transport, with a quarter of the world's seaborne oil traffic transiting through the Mediterranean.

Yet for all that, the outlook is not uniformly positive. There are signs of serious deterioration of the Mediterranean marine environment. Overfishing and coastal degradation require urgent redress if the damage is not to become irreversible. Rapidly growing maritime traffic only heightens the need for safer and more sustainable shipping routes. Climate change is likely to have serious economic and social consequences, which call for effective responses. Everywhere we look, we see that we need new tools to deal with new realities.

A holistic maritime approach for the Mediterranean

The more precisely we can identify threats, the more easily we can imagine solutions, and the stronger should be our motivation to work together to implement them. The key to successful action on all these issues is to establish an all-encompassing, holistic maritime strategy for the Mediterranean.

The core goal of the EU Integrated Maritime Policy is to achieve better maritime governance of our oceans and seas, both within national, regional and sub-regional contexts. It follows that we need to put in place mechanisms and tools that will foster maritime prosperity throughout the Mediterranean basin. We recognise that is essential, therefore, to strengthen dialogue and co-operation on maritime affairs with our Mediterranean partners.

Without more integrated planning and management, it will be increasingly difficult for States to rise to the challenge of growing competition for maritime space in coastal areas. We also believe that sound science and stakeholder input should be basis of our policies. The development of more sustainable practices and technologies hinges on this. That is why it is of pivotal importance that States actively engage in applying guidelines from the European Commission's Roadmap on Maritime Spatial Planning. The whole thrust of this policy is aimed at replacing short-term, uncoordinated and sector-specific measures by a broader view encompassing a more strategic and ecosystem-based approach.

The role Europe cannot circumvent

It is in this context that the European Commission has just adopted a strategy for an Integrated Maritime Policy in the Mediterranean, which can ensure better maritime governance throughout this sea basin. Although only seven of the coastal States

around the Mediterranean are EU Member States, it is clear that Europe has a crucial role to play in the political, economic and social prosperity of the region. I sincerely hope that our Mediterranean partners, will also fully embrace the new era of opportunity that an integrated approach can usher in.

That is why we intend setting up, among other things in the context of this initiative, an ad hoc working group at sea basin-level, that is, including all coastal states, in order to engage them further in the making of the Integrated Maritime Policy and exchange best practices and know-how, as well as launching an economic study on the establishment of maritime zones in the Mediterranean, so as to provide insight into the likely costs and benefits. Moreover, a major cross-thematic research effort will be undertaken under the EU's 7th Framework Programme to integrate knowledge of the Mediterranean Sea through major topics of marine and maritime relevance, such as climate change, or the impact of human activities on coastal and marine ecosystems.

The task we have set ourselves is difficult but not insurmountable. We believe it is in the interest of all stakeholders, States and citizens alike, to benefit from this new, but logical, approach. Ultimately, a sustainable Mediterranean maritime economy is good news for all those who, directly and indirectly, depend upon this Sea.

Joe BORG,
Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries