

EBI response to Call for Evidence – European Ocean Act

European Boating Industry (EBI) represents Europe’s recreational boating and nautical tourism ecosystem, including boatbuilders, equipment manufacturers, marinas and service providers. Access to coasts and waters is a core condition for citizens’ participation in water-based activities such as boating and watersports as well for the sector’s competitiveness, and it should be treated accordingly in the revision of the maritime spatial planning framework and the development of the European Ocean Act.

Around 48 million people undertake watersports each year and there are over 6.5 million boats in European waters, the vast majority small craft under 8 metres. Boating offers leisure and tourism opportunities, supports physical and mental wellbeing, and encourages a better understanding of Europe’s seas, strengthening ocean literacy and environmental awareness through direct experience. Access to coasts and waters is also a strategic and competitive necessity for the sector. Europe remains the world’s first nautical tourism destination and the leading global exporter of recreational boats (over 60% of global exports), supported by at least 32,000 businesses and 280,000 direct jobs, predominantly in SMEs and often based in peripheral coastal areas, and generating a yearly revenue of €45b in Europe. Access needs therefore relate to boaters (private and charter), watersports users, marinas and yards, and must be considered alongside other growing demands for sea space.

Several features of the current Maritime Spatial Planning Directive work well and should be preserved in the Ocean Act. Where implementation is effective, maritime spatial planning functions as a strategic tool that frames long-term choices, supports sustainability at sea and provides greater predictability for multiple sectors. Some national plans already use workable concepts for “tourism and recreation” that reflect the reality of boating and watersports, for example by grouping together sailing, angling, surfing, powerboating, snorkelling, water skiing, coastal walking, sea swimming and broader “outdoor life”. In addition, practical spatial solutions can help maintain nearshore access, such as the Belgian proposed approach of establishing a six-nautical-mile clear coastal zone where no new fixed structures may be installed, supporting recreational boating while also protecting other coastal interests.

EBI sees clear areas where the legal framework and its implementation can be improved, in line with the Ocean Act’s objectives to modernise maritime spatial planning, strengthen cross-sector coordination and develop a more organised sea-basin approach.

1. Access to the sea for citizens should be treated as a primary objective within maritime spatial planning. This is increasingly important in the context of spatial squeeze and expanding competing uses. This should also be ensured across borders to make sure navigation lanes and access to sea space are protected.
2. The revised framework should introduce a clearer and more consistent category of “recreational and sporting activities”, in addition to tourism, to reflect the specific spatial patterns of leisure navigation, watersports and the associated infrastructure needs of marinas and yards.

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3. Maritime spatial plans should more consistently be used for forward-looking strategic planning for all sectors, including identifying missing links and infrastructure requirements, rather than focusing narrowly on allocating space ex post. Alignment with other EU strategies and other ocean related legislation should be prioritised, in order to reduce burden for SMEs (e.g. EU Tourism Strategy, Industrial Maritime Strategy). Competitiveness of the recreational tourism sector should be prioritised by avoiding imposing new obligations, by improving existing legislation coherence.
4. EU-wide coordination should be strengthened so that each sector can prosper through better cross-border and sea-basin collaboration, improved governance of trade-offs and a clearer approach to coexistence in constrained areas, while also responding to climate adaptation needs and new policy demands.
5. A recurring implementation challenge is ensuring that all relevant sectors are genuinely present in decision-making structures. Representation is not always guaranteed for SME-focused industries, yet it is essential for balanced outcomes and workable solutions on issues such as free navigation, access constraints around fixed installations and the design of any no-motor or restricted zones. Simplification and reduced administrative burden should be a guiding principle of the Ocean Act's revision process, particularly for SMEs, while ensuring that the framework remains effective as a mediation and governance tool for trade-offs.

Finally, EBI supports the Ocean Act's intention to improve the governance of ocean observation and streamline reporting through more standardised approaches and digital tools. The boating sector is increasingly contributing to marine knowledge and citizen science and can support the development of more comprehensive, evidence-based governance and observation systems, provided that requirements are proportionate and designed with end users in mind. We look forward to being involved in the development of the Ocean Act (including via MSFD-NAVI).