

A new way forward for Europe's regional seas

May 10 2013, by Anthony King



As policy for European seas moves towards an ecosystem approach in an effort to achieve environmental sustainability, there is resistance to this shift.

Tim O'Higgins is a [marine biologist](#) in Scotland who has focused on those vital ecosystem services provided by estuarine and coastal waters. He is chief coordinator of the [KnowSeas](#) research project, which is helping European policy reorient itself toward a so-called ecosystem approach. His mission: working out, in practical terms, how to deliver more sustainable seas with the assistance of experts in social science,

economics and biology. Here, O'Higgins tells youris.com about threats to European seas, such as the Mediterranean, northeast Atlantic, Black and Baltic Seas, and about the damage already done. He also shares what is the plan to support change and better management of this essential resource.

What is the current thinking on how we deal with environment protection?

There has been a slight philosophical shift, which came out of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and work of ecological economist Robert Costanza. It changes the focus of the idea of man against nature. It does not simply see humans as damaging the environment nor focus on a need to go back to a pristine state. Instead we recognise the role of people as part of the environment which we live in. This approach places humans back into the environment. It seeks to integrate the social and ecological systems so that they function in a more sustainable way.

What has gone wrong in European conservation of seas?

There has been unsustainable exploitation of our fisheries through the Common Fisheries Policy. Eutrophication is a massive problem, for example. This involves input of nutrients into the marine environment and excessive growth of algae and low oxygen conditions as a result. We have this in the [Baltic Sea](#) and Black Sea particularly, but also the North Sea. It comes from over-use of [fertilisers](#) in agriculture. Another major problem is the arrival of new species, such as the comb jelly in the Black Sea, which together with overfishing contributed to fishing collapse there. Under the project, we have also looked at ocean acidification, which is tied to climate change and affects cold-water coral in the northeast Atlantic, essential fish habitats.

What's different about the approach this project has taken?

We are looking at the various seas in Europe in the context of the [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#), a piece of European legislation which came out in 2008. It obliges all Member States to achieve good environmental status of the seas by 2020. But the problem is it did not really define what good status meant.

It also encouraged member states to take an ecosystem management approach, but did not really define this approach. We've focused on what this means in terms of all these problems in Europe's regional seas. We have a legacy web tool on www.msfd.eu, which should help with implementing an ecosystem approach. We will launch it on European Maritime day in Malta in the middle of May 2013.

What does this ecosystem approach mean in concrete terms?

To date we have had a very sectoral approach. So you have one ministry that is responsible for say fisheries and then another ministry that is responsible for the environment and another for agriculture. The idea now is that we should all be talking to one another so that it is more joined up. We also need to recognise trade-offs between different drivers and welfare changes.

For example, look at the 2000 [Water Framework Directive](#). It concerns rivers and marine environment in Europe. The directive focused on eutrophication and cleaning up water. It took an approach where it said we want to return to a pristine status of a reference condition. But the cost of returning a bay or river to a clean state might outweigh the benefits to be gained. Some eutrophication can lead to more algae, which

means more food for fish and more fish for fishermen and for people to eat. So by spending this money to reduce eutrophication, you are also reducing the fish that can be sustainably caught. Under the ecosystem approach, you need to consider all these kinds of costs and benefits.

What barriers stand in the way of you successfully introducing this new approach?

Taking measures to implement directives costs money. And asking people to do more with the staff they have is an issue, but people are trying to comply. There is a locked in way of doing things that we describe as committed behaviours. And there is institutional inertia. This means people do not necessarily want to set a precedent by doing something new.

For example the European Union has been saying for 20 years that it needs to improve the way we distribute fisheries subsidies. But because of politics and the need for governments to please their constituents to get elected, you end up with committed behaviours and institutional inertia. Building understanding is a first step to getting this new approach adopted.

Provided by Youris.com

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