

EU is playing its part to protect our oceans

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Opinion

With €7bn in pledges, the EU is on course to deliver as a global ocean leader, writes Karmenu Vella.



Karmenu Vella | *Photo credit: Natalie Hill*

On 5-6 October the European Union hosted the 'Our Ocean' Conference in my home country, Malta.

Our aim was to match the €5bn in commitments secured at the 2016 edition of the conference, held in Washington D.C. In fact, we exceeded this target by a full 40 per cent with over €7bn in commitments received.

Participants also announced the creation of new marine protected areas spanning more than 2.5 million km², or more than half the size of the entire EU.

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It was a truly spectacular result and one that was in large part due to the skill and dedication of hundreds of European Institution staff and representatives.

These European ocean champions dedicating a full 12 months to encouraging representatives from 112 countries to attend, getting the organisation of the conference to spectacular levels and ensuring a global audience and press interest of the highest standard.

In doing so, they managed to secure 400 commitments from nearly 1000 representatives of international institutions, governments, business, NGOs, foundations and research institutes. I am very proud that, in the effort to persuade the world just how important our ocean is to the long-term future of the planet, the EU truly stepped up.

The European Commission itself announced over €550m of EU-funded initiatives in 36 commitments to tackle global oceans challenges, while the EU's overall commitments, including the European Investment Bank, and its member states, amounted to over € 2.8bn.

We were able to follow the golden rule that makes the 'Our Ocean' conference so special. Namely that people come not just to speak, but to commit. Creating this level of prestige, and indeed positive pressure, means that there is an expectation to deliver.

I would like to thank former US Secretary of State John Kerry for initiating the Our Ocean process and for introducing this emphasis on delivery from the 'get go'.

The European Parliament was well represented at Our Ocean. Representatives from the Parliament's environment and fisheries committees reinforced our overall message of the EU's 'joined up thinking'.

By this, I mean the strong links between the commitments made in the six areas, and the strongly proactive legislative agenda we have crafted.

One dimension that the EU was able to develop, through clear positioning was the active - and enthusiastic - participation of the private sector.

The Conference attracted commitments from Airbus, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, PepsiCo, Marks & Spencer, Carrefour, Royal Caribbean Cruises, AXA, Sky to name only some of the blue chip companies attending.

The commitments they, and others, made were subject to a thorough selection process. Verifying quality and substance was a cross-services exercise within the Commission.

Commitments were made to strengthen the fight against marine pollution, create and manage marine

protected areas, reinforce the security of the oceans, foster blue economy initiatives and sustainable fisheries and intensify the EU's efforts against climate change, in line with the Paris agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals under Agenda 2030.

Such commitments are matched in our agenda: The Commission will soon table proposals on an EU strategy for plastics, as part of our push to make the economy more 'circular'.

Our efforts to do so must include ways of identifying new methods of design, of reuse and of recycling.

Reconsidering how we use plastic in society will mean less plastic waste flowing into the seas. Our resolve in tackling marine pollution is due also to obligations to protect marine biodiversity.

This will be one of the major international challenges in 2018 as we continue to support the launch of negotiations for a UN agreement on how to protect biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction.

Protecting our biodiversity means we also protect our fish stocks. Sustainable fishing, at home and abroad, is a fundamental part of our ocean agenda.

Our commitments to 2020 targets for the common fisheries policy domestically, and our influence in the fight against illegal fishing globally remain resolute.

On ocean energy, the EU once again showed that home-grown innovation, can, with the right support, can create opportunities for global markets. I truly hope that European companies will be able to export the benefits of wave, tidal and ocean thermal energy around the globe.

In summary, the European Union was asked to play its role as a global ocean champion. That it was able to do so is down to our ability to cooperate.

Whether it is between member states, between institutions, across public and private sector divides, or among stakeholders, the EU showed our ability to lead globally by working together. I am confident that we can build on this progress as we keep promoting the vital role our ocean will play in sustainably developing our blue planet.

About the author

Karmenu Vella is European environment, maritime affairs and fisheries Commissioner

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