

Message from Berlin

Conclusions of the chairpersons of the International Conference on Prevention and Management of Marine Litter in European Seas, held in Berlin, Germany, 10 – 12 April 2013

The International Conference on Prevention and Management of Marine Litter in European Seas was held in Berlin, Germany, 10 – 12 April 2013. The Conference participants, which included a wide array of stakeholders, government representatives, businesses and regional organisations, analysed the issues at stake, reviewed current efforts and suggested ways forward in order to address marine litter.

Problem statement

In particular, the conference participants:

- recognised that marine litter is a growing global environmental issue, as highlighted at the Rio + 20 UN Sustainable Development Conference,
- noted with alarm the growing evidence of the harmful effects of marine litter on wildlife and habitats and on marine biodiversity and environment,
- expressed concern at the increasing threat from marine litter to human health and safety, ecosystem services, and sustainable livelihoods,
- considered the high associated costs especially for sectors such as tourism and recreational activities, shipping and fishing,
- recognised that different materials, mostly plastics which are highly persistent and remain in the environment for centuries, constitute marine litter, which stems from land and sea based sources,
- underlined with particular concern the problem of micro-plastics, which are ubiquitous and, whether introduced directly or due to degradation of macro litter items, reach even the most remote areas and release harmful chemical substances which may contaminate the food chain,
- recognised the need to better understand regional specificities as well as the sources, amounts, pathways, distribution trends, nature and impacts of marine litter, including microplastics.

Current efforts

The participants recognised and welcomed the many efforts currently on-going at all levels and by a wide range of actors, to address marine litter and especially:

- reaffirmed the commitment of the Rio+20 UN Sustainable Development Conference “to take action to, by 2025, based on collected scientific data, achieve significant reductions in marine debris to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment”,
- recognized the importance of international mechanisms, such as MARPOL and UNEP,
- welcomed the Honolulu Commitment and Strategy adopted by the participants attending the 5th International Marine Debris Conference held in Honolulu, Hawaii, 20-25 March 2011,
- welcomed efforts made under each of the Conventions for Europe’s Regional Seas to prevent and reduce marine litter such as developing dedicated Regional Action Plans in order to contribute to the Honolulu Strategy,
- welcomed efforts made by EU Member States to address marine litter as part of their implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and to achieve or maintain good environment status in the marine environment,
- acknowledged the many initiatives developed and implemented by the different stakeholders such as environmental NGOs, local governments and communities, the private sector, consumer organizations and research institutes to tackle the problem of marine litter.

Key principles

The conference participants emphasised that a number of key principles should guide action to address marine litter, in particular:

- the precautionary principle, that measures must not be postponed in the light of scientific uncertainties, because there is already sufficient knowledge available to develop priorities, target actions and implement solutions,
- the polluter-pays principle, the principle according to which those causing pollution should bear the cost to which it gives rise,
- the prevention at source principle, as avoiding waste and preventing waste from entering the (aquatic) environment is more cost-effective and efficient than cleaning up marine litter.

Priority actions

Finally, participants considered taking a number of priority actions contributing to the Rio +20 target, to regional action, to national measures, and to the EU quantitative reduction target under development, noting these would also constitute stepping stones towards achieving the goal of reaching Good Environmental Status for Europe's regional seas, such as:

1. Fully implementing relevant EU legislation, such as the Waste legislation, the Water Framework Directive and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and addressing the problem of plastic waste as part of the planned review of EU waste policy and legislation. This includes developing an integrated waste management infrastructure that supports waste prevention, collection, recycling and energy recovery and applying the waste hierarchy.
2. Promoting the green economy through increased resource efficiency facilitating sustainable consumption and production patterns, including improving life-cycle design, high quality recycling and sustainable packaging, encouraging extended producer responsibility and environmentally responsible fishing and maritime transport practices such as adequate port reception facilities.
3. Improving our scientific understanding of the sources, amounts, pathways, distribution, trends, nature and impacts of marine litter, including the effects of micro-plastics and their additives and absorbed substances, on marine biodiversity and public health and identifying ways to better coordinate and improve marine litter data collection, including with a view to establish an EU baseline.
4. Developing ambitious targets to reduce marine litter at all relevant levels, giving priority to sources of marine litter with the strongest impact, such as for example microbeads or plastic bags.
5. Contributing to raising awareness on marine litter at all levels and facilitating initiatives preventing waste from entering the (aquatic) environment while putting emphasis on addressing the complex multi-sector issues surrounding littering behaviour and building the notion of waste as a resource.
6. Initiating and further developing Regional Action Plans on marine litter for the regional seas of Europe.
7. Collaborating with global, regional and sub-regional organisations, to address the transboundary aspects of marine litter and enhance the effectiveness of multilateral initiatives aimed at preventing, reducing and managing marine litter.
8. Encouraging financial support for actions (including environmentally friendly cleaning actions) that contribute to the reduction of marine litter and its impact on the environment.
9. Sharing expertise to prevent, reduce and manage marine litter in particular through contributing to the conference follow up by providing further information on best practices and new initiatives collected in the Marine Litter Toolbox.
10. Participating in networks of stakeholders committed to take action to prevent, reduce and manage marine litter in Europe's four regional seas in an environmentally sustainable manner.