

Maritime policy and human health: what's the connection?

Oceans and Human Health (OHH) is an emerging concept that provides a lens through which we can explore, understand and better manage the complex interlinkages between marine environmental health and human health and wellbeing.

SOPHIE Policy Brief

Humans derive many benefits to their health and wellbeing from the ocean (e.g. healthy seafood, medicinal compounds, recreation), but the ocean can also pose risks to human health (e.g. pollution, coastal flooding, contaminated seafood). Monitoring and management of marine environmental health and human health are largely the preserve of entirely different disciplines with little overlap or interaction¹. This distinction leads to critical knowledge gaps that inhibit the potential for developing effective policies that could bring about co-beneficial outcomes for both marine environmental health and human health and wellbeing.

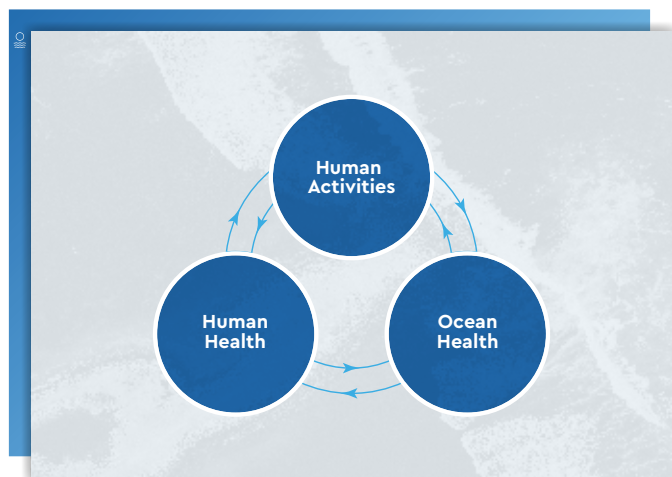


Figure 1 The circular relationship between human health, human activities in the marine environment and ocean health

Oceans and Human Health: the policy gap

Conceptually, it is not difficult to understand the rationale for promoting integrated and interdisciplinary research as key to addressing complex ocean-human health interactions. However, the reasons for translating this knowledge into real-life policy and management practices is less clear. So just why and how should maritime policy take account of human health and wellbeing?

Adopting a 'Health in All Policies' approach

The treaty of Amsterdam² (1997) which amends the EU's founding treaties (as revised by Maastricht) requires that **'a high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all the Union's policies and activities'**. This legal obligation provided the rationale for the concept of Health in All Policies (HiAP). HiAP was proposed as 'a horizontal cross-policy

approach to strengthen the links between health and other policies'³. The strategy recognises that health is also influenced by factors that fall outside of the health sector and thus other sectoral policies can influence health outcomes. Crucially, it also notes that health in turn can have implications for the policy goals and outcomes of other sectoral policies.

In the EU, Member States maintain primary responsibility for health. The role of the EU being to complement national policies for the protection and improvement of human health by ensuring that all EU policies protect and promote human health. Whilst the EU's role in health is limited, it has an important role to play in promoting cooperation and supporting Member State health systems.

Integrating health in maritime policy

With the establishment of the EU Integrated Maritime Policy in 2007, Europe took a significant step forward towards more holistic maritime policy. Moving away from the previously disjointed and sectoral policy framework, the Integrated Maritime Policy⁴ recognized that coastal seas and oceans are one system and that maritime human activities impact on each other and on marine ecosystems in ways that may cause conflict and lead to marine environmental degradation.



While we have legislated to regulate the impacts of human activities on the marine environment, and devised mechanisms to monitor and measure these impacts, we have not fully considered, in turn, the impacts of the marine environment (and marine environmental degradation) on human health. From a policy perspective, Oceans and Human Health seeks to deliver new knowledge and understanding that can help us to close this loop.

¹ European Marine Board, 2013 European Marine Board (2013). Linking Oceans and Human Health: A Strategic Research Priority for Europe. Position paper 19 of the European Marine Board, Ostend, Belgium

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:11997D/TXT>

³ Ståhl T, Wismar M, Ollila E, et al., (eds) Health in All Policies: prospects and potential. Helsinki: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2006.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy_en



surveillance opportunities. It highlights the opportunities that exist within current marine monitoring frameworks to collect relevant data, including also the opportunities of Big Data to explore OHH interactions. It further advises that an ecosystem based approach to management, with recognition of the human component as part of the ecosystem, should, if fully implemented, naturally support healthier environments and healthier populations. Finally [the report makes some recommendations for co-beneficial actions](#) that align protection of marine environmental health with the protection and promotion of human health.

Recommendations

- Promote and support the development of a 'Health in All Policies' (HiAP) approach in marine and maritime policies and their implementation.
- Ensure that the human component of the ecosystem is considered when taking an ecosystem approach to management in the implementation of maritime policy. For example, the development of marine spatial plans provides a real opportunity to operationalize Oceans and Human Health.
- Embed the marine environmental component in the wider study and practice of environment and health.
- Design and implement dedicated Oceans and Human Health management tools and actions.
- Optimise existing marine monitoring actions and data streams to collect OHH relevant data to support future research and evidence-based management.
- Build an integrated architecture for health data in Europe as has been achieved for marine data (EMODnet).
- Increase the support for Oceans and Human Health in research, sectoral and regional cooperation programmes.

The SOPHIE project report *'Human health and EU maritime policy: Closing the loop'*⁵, produced by Seascope Belgium, examined a number of legislative instruments and strategies linked to the EU's Integrated Maritime Policy to assess the extent to which key EU maritime policies or actions, do or can take a Health in All Policies approach. The report highlights the limited consideration of human health within maritime policy. It notes that the EU's Integrated Maritime Policy aims to facilitate growth in the blue economy in a sustainable way that protects ecosystem health and, should, by default, protect that of the human component of the ecosystem. However, if the human health element is to be more fully considered within a maritime context, then [we need to be able to identify Oceans and Human Health interactions that can be measured and monitored in a meaningful way](#).

The report also notes the deficit of any generalized indicators linking the marine environment to human health, thereby inhibiting the establishment of long-term



The Seas Oceans and Public Health in Europe (SOPHIE) project

Seas, Oceans and Public Health in Europe (SOPHIE), a pan-European project, was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme. It brought together different groups (e.g. marine scientists, medical and social scientists, experts from the public health, marine tourism and other fields) and created a platform for these communities to work together to explore the complex interactions between the marine environment and human health and wellbeing.

Visit the SOPHIE website: <https://sophie2020.eu/>

⁵ McMeel, O., Tonné, N. and Calewaert, J.-B. (2019) Human health and EU maritime policy: Closing the loop. H2020 SOPHIE Project. Brussels, Belgium. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.3663620

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