

European Marine Board ECOP Forum – Michelle Frost (ENU)

As an Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP), engaging with policy can be daunting, and it is often difficult to know where or how to contribute in a meaningful way. The EMB's first ECOP forum provided a fantastic opportunity to discuss barriers to ECOPs wanting to engage with policy, addressed some of the most impactful ways ECOPs can engage with policy and provided an opportunity to network with other ECOPs across EMB institutions.

We identified a number of barriers hindering ECOPs from engaging with policy, but the main challenges were around high entry level (e.g., very specific language and background), hierarchical nature of science and policy (i.e., policy makers seem inaccessible to ECOPs), little time and home institutions placing low value on ECOPs engagement with policy. However, ECOPs want to be included in the discussion! We often do not get the opportunity to be involved in this type of forum (or conference) or the conversations around how marine policy should progress. There was a feeling of increasing frustration: while marine and climate challenges continue to grow, political urgency does not. Part of our frustration stems from not being a part of the policy landscape and, thus, not understanding how best to engage with it. It was clear that, given the opportunity, ECOPs can and will engage, as well as bring new perspectives and ideas on how to tackle existing and emerging marine challenges.

As ECOPs, we seem to have a different idea of the way forward to address marine challenges, wanting to work more collaboratively, not just between institutions, but with a “whole of society” approach (e.g., through citizen science, working alongside marginalised and coastal communities and including underrepresented groups) to promote engagement between science and policy. This was an important topic to ECOPs and was discussed many times throughout the 2-day forum, but we felt like there was little appetite from policymakers to be truly inclusive and it also appeared low on the EMB agenda (e.g., no diversity in keynote conference speakers and EMB board members low number of votes ($n = 2$) to create a working group on Community Empowerment to tackle marine challenges, despite being told 44 ECOP members had chosen this topic). We discussed that true ecosystem approaches to management MUST include all activities and marine stakeholders to be truly effective.

We were also concerned with identifying new and engaging ways of communicating our research to policy makers, including working with artists, theatre and the blue humanities. Many ECOPs at the forum were already well-versed in public outreach (e.g., through theatre, dance and art), but we were uncertain how these alternative methods of communication would be received by policy makers. However, it was highlighted that politicians (and policy makers) care about opinion and voters; therefore, public outreach matters. Simply presenting facts and data does not resonate with the public, so better ways of communicating our science are needed.

The EMB Young Ambassadors organised two group exercises around how ECOPs can engage with science-policy frameworks. The first exercise was on creating policy briefs to communicate our science, which provided a platform for interesting discussions around what information should be communicated in a policy brief and how. There was debate on why policy makers are not interested in the details of research, but rather the broad take-home messages that can inform policy. The second exercise was on how to respond to public consultations, which led to discussion around why most ECOPs (and the public) do not know when public consultations are open, where to find them or how to respond to them. These exercises were thought-provoking, particularly given the diversity within groups that led to discussions and ideas that we would not have considered alone (or within groups from a similar background), again highlighting the value of diversity and cross-disciplinarity.