

Empowering the Next Generation of Ocean Professionals: Insights from the first European Marine Board Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP) Network Forum in Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Background

The European Marine Board (EMB) Early Career Ocean Professional (ECOP) Network Forum convened in Santiago de Compostela, Spain on October 8-9, 2023. This inaugural forum brought together 70 ECOPs, with two representatives from each of the EMB's 35 member organisations across Europe (Figure 1). I was honoured to be selected to attend the forum as one of the delegates representing the Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland (MASTS). Having previously gained experience with the science-policy interface through an internship at the European Parliament and my current role as a Marine Fisheries Adviser at JNCC, I was eager to expand my knowledge of the EMB and connect with other early career researchers.

The ECOP Network Forum aimed to introduce this cohort of emerging ocean professionals to the EMB, provide training in science communication and policy engagement, and gather input on future ECOP activities. Over the course of two days, attendees participated in informative sessions, hands-on exercises, and lively discussions focused on strengthening the bridge between science and policymaking.

This report summarizes key insights from the forum while also reflecting on its implications for greater involvement of ECOPs within the EMB. The forum marked an impactful step toward building an active community of young marine researchers equipped to apply their expertise to pressing challenges in the policy arena.



Figure 1 Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOPS) participating at the forum.

Day 1

The first day of the forum focused on introducing ECOPs to the European Marine Board and providing an overview of the policy landscape. To begin, we learned about the structure and mission of the EMB as a platform for advancing marine research and informing policy. To achieve this, the EMB sets up working groups with experts from the member organisations that produce outputs that are shared with policymakers and other relevant stakeholders. These outputs can be position papers, future science briefs, policy briefs and science commentaries. When polled, the vast majority of attendees admitted unfamiliarity with the EMB prior to the forum, despite their institutions' membership.

Next, we were introduced to the current science-policy landscape in Europe by the EMB Executive Director Prof. Sheila Heymans. One of the first slides captivated the feeling of most participants quite well (Figure 2): It's complicated! From my own experience of working in the policy landscape, I find that unravelling the intricacies of the "Acts", "Directives", "Communications", etc. to be a challenge. Most policy initiatives are connected to

other larger pieces of legislation. Untangling this net is a key challenge. After an hour of discussions on the most relevant marine legislation, most of which remains relevant for the UK as this is retained EU law (e.g. Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Birds Directive, Habitats Directive, etc.), we gladly went for lunch.

It's complicated!

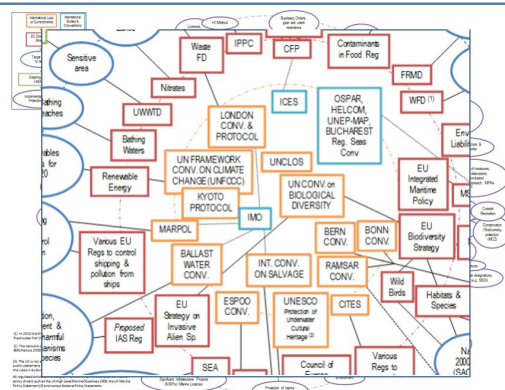


Figure taken from:
 Boyes & Elliott (2014)
 'Marine legislation – The ultimate 'horrendogram': International
 law, European directives & national implementation'
Marine Pollution Bulletin, 86: 39-47

Figure 2 The ultimate ‘horrendogram’: International law, European directives & national implementation

The following sessions were centred on discussing how ECOPs can engage with the policy landscape and how the ECOP network should be used in the future. For most of the participants, 'policy' seemed an abstract concept and engagement within the European policy landscape was limited. A lot of the barriers identified were centred on the fact that ECR contributions to policy work are very limited and often more senior researchers are preferred. This trend appears to be prevalent, even though ECRs often possess a more comprehensive understanding of the relevant literature. Another issue in terms of engagement with the EMB was the difficulty in communication between the delegates of the member organisation and the researchers. In the example of MASTS, 18 organisations are members, making effective communication a challenge. One of the main take-home messages was the importance of having ECOP representatives at each member organisation to improve communication between researchers, ECOPs, delegates and the EMB. In addition, the support for improving ECOP engagement within the EMB was seen as vital for ensuring ECRs can engage with the policy landscape.

The EMB feeds its outputs (e.g. policy briefs) into a network of policy stakeholders, such as the European Commission and European Parliament, however, promoting EMB outputs at a national scale is largely down to the member organisations. MASTS has a special role within the EMB as a consortium from a non-EU country, although there are also Norwegian and Turkish members. In this regard, the role of MASTS in sharing EMB outputs with regional and national stakeholders is essential, such as Scottish Government (e.g. Marine Directorate of the Scottish Government) and UK Government (e.g. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs).

Day 2

After an evening of networking and enjoying Galician folk music, the next day of the forum started with a presentation on 'how to make your science more policy friendly and impactful'. This excellent presentation by Laura Secorun, founder of ONA, highlighted how our research is often ignored as scientists find it difficult to engage with stakeholders outside of academia. Some of the key messages I noted from the presentation were to be platform specific, be aware of trends and be strategic. A lot of the research we are involved in is relevant to a specific area of policy. Identifying this area and the key stakeholders and communicating our results in an effective format is key. Some of the common mistakes are not asking for feedback, not staying on top of political news and confusing people into inaction.

The remainder of the day was spent on two exercises aimed at training us in the science-policy interface. First, we were tasked with creating a policy brief from a selected paper on Blue Carbon. As my research project is looking at the role of seaweed in Blue Carbon, I didn't have much difficulty familiarising myself with the science. Our main take-home message was centred on recommending policymakers focus on actionable ecosystems for



restoration/protection (e.g. mangroves, tidal marshes and seagrasses) and invest in research into areas that contain substantial knowledge gaps, such as the role of macroalgae, tidal flats and marine sediments.

For the second exercise, we were tasked with answering the 2021 public consultation of the review of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). This exercise proved more challenging as most participants had not been acquainted with the MSFD and the associated Good Environmental Status (GES) descriptors. Ultimately, the exercise was useful to gain a better understanding of the challenges of the MSFD. The idea behind the MSFD was deemed positive, however, Member State implementation was considered a challenge with some countries providing insufficient funding for collecting the necessary data to assess GES.

Conclusions

The European Marine Board Early Career Ocean Professional Network Forum marked an important step in engaging and empowering emerging ocean researchers in contributing to the policy landscape. Over two days, the event successfully fostered connections between 70 ECOPs while providing invaluable training and insights into the EMB's critical mission. Key takeaways include the need to enhance communication channels between ECOPs, member organisation delegates, and the EMB leadership. Strategic participation of ECOP representatives within member organisations could strengthen these links.

The forum built foundational skills for translating scientific expertise into evidence-based policy recommendations. It also illuminated pathways for ECOPs to apply their knowledge to European and national marine governance. I look forward to contributing to the forum's forthcoming output report and hope to see it formally endorsed by the EMB, cementing further support for ECOP engagement.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to MASTS for their support and funding of this initiative. In addition, I thank the European Marine Board for backing this impactful ECOP Network Forum, as well as the EMB Young Ambassadors whose dedication was instrumental to its success. The connections forged and lessons learned will stay with me as I continue navigating the science-policy interface. By investing in the next generation, the EMB has enriched an emerging community of ocean professionals equipped to drive positive change through policy engagement.