



Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius
Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries
Rue de la Loi, 200
1049 Brussels, Belgium

New OSPAR Report demonstrates urgent need to address fisheries impacts on ecosystems

Brussels, October 17, 2023

Dear Commissioner,

The Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (the “OSPAR Convention”), of which the European Union is a contracting party, recently published its latest Quality Status Report (QSR 2023) on the environmental status of the Northeast Atlantic. The report paints a worrying picture of ongoing, system-wide deterioration of the marine environment in the Northeast Atlantic, while also highlighting some minimal signs of improvement.

Synthesising more than 120 assessments, this state-of-the-art report evaluates ecosystem health and the effectiveness of management measures in all of the subject areas covered by the Convention. It is central to assessing progress towards OSPAR’s vision of “a clean, healthy and biologically diverse Northeast Atlantic Ocean, which is productive, used sustainably and resilient to climate change and ocean acidification”.

Although the QSR 2023 covers all of the important pressures that influence the health of the marine ecosystems of the North-East Atlantic, we would like to highlight its conclusions regarding the impacts of fishing activities and related management measures. The report shows that several negative trends are predominantly driven by fishing pressure, including the decline in the typical length of fish, the modification of the age structure of fish populations, the concerning state of food webs, and the ongoing dire status of seabird breeding (in part linked to reduction in their prey from fishing).

While the QSR 2023 recognises that fish populations in the OSPAR Maritime Area are increasingly being fished according to the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) objective, it recommends that decision-makers make progress on improving the understanding of how fishing at this level influences the health of the ecosystem, for example through its impacts on the functioning of food webs or through the bycatch of marine mammals, birds and protected fish species. The report also concludes that there is a need to understand the impact of trends such as climate change on fish stocks and the ecosystem.

To address the findings of the QSR 2023, the 23 non-governmental organisations, signatories of this letter, strongly encourage you, alongside your counterparts of other coastal states, to hasten efforts to implement an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. This includes:

- **agreeing ecological objectives for Northeast-Atlantic fisheries alongside the traditional objective of maximising catches**
- **adopting new ecosystem-focused reference points, and**
- **developing new spatial protections for vulnerable species and habitats, and effectively implementing the existing ones, including Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).**

Using an ecosystem perspective to manage fisheries, based on the latest science and management tools, provides a path to build resilient and productive fisheries, and at the same time to improve the status of biodiversity and the health of the ecosystems of the Northeast Atlantic.

We are available to discuss these issues further with you and thus request a meeting, at a date of your preference.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Clayton, Project Director, *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

Gonçalo Carvalho, Executive Coordinator, *Sciaena*

Tobias Troll, Marine Policy Director, *Seas at Risk*

Anais Berthier, Head of Brussels Office, *Client Earth*

Pascale Moehrle, Executive Director and Vice-President, *Oceana in Europe*

Katie-jo Luxton, Executive Director, Global Conservation, *RSPB*

Ariel Brunner, Regional Director, *BirdLife Europe and Central Asia*

Egon Østergaard, Chairman, *Dansk Ornitologisk Forening - BirdLife Denmark*

Hólmfríður Arnadóttir, General Manager, *Fuglavernd - BirdLife Iceland*

Kjetil Aa. Solbakken, Secretary General, *BirdLife Norway*

Steve Trent, CEO, *Environmental Justice Foundation*

Þorgerður María Þorbjarnardóttir, Chairperson, *Landvernd*

Iris Ziegler, International Cooperation, *Shark Project*

Alex Hofford, Marine Wildlife Campaigner and Trustee, *Shark Guardian*

Oonagh Duggan, Head of Advocacy, *Birdwatch Ireland*

Grace Carr, Marine Advocacy Officer, *Irish Wildlife Trusts*

Cathrine P. Schirmer, Chief advisor, marine and fisheries policy, *Danish Conservation Society*

Cecilia del Castillo Moro, Marine Division Coordinator, *Ecologistas en Acción*

Serena Rivero, Marine ecologist and project lead, *The North Sea Foundation*

Truls Gulowsen, Chair, *Naturvernforbundet (Friends of the Earth Norway)*

Gytis Blaževičius, Deputy Chair, *Natur og Ungdom (Young Friends of the Earth Norway)*

Christian Steel, Secretary General, *Sabima (Norway)*

Sara Söderström, Policy officer, *the Fisheries Secretariat*