



TWENTY QUESTIONS ON OSPAR

1. *What is OSPAR?*



OSPAR is the mechanism by which fifteen Governments of the western coasts and

catchments of Europe¹, together with the European Community, cooperate to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. It started in 1972 with the Oslo Convention against dumping. It was broadened to cover land-based sources and the offshore industry by the Paris Convention of 1974.

These two conventions were unified, up-dated and extended by the 1992 OSPAR Convention. The new annex on biodiversity and ecosystems was adopted in 1998 to cover non-polluting human activities that can adversely affect the sea.

2. *What can OSPAR bring to Contracting Parties?*

Since 1972, OSPAR has worked to identify the threats to the marine environment, and has organised, across its region, programmes and measures to ensure effective national action to combat them. In doing so, it has pioneered ways of ensuring monitoring and assessment of the quality status of the seas, of setting internationally agreed goals and of checking that the

¹ Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom. Finland is not on the western coasts of Europe, but some of its rivers flow to the Barents Sea, and historically it was involved in the efforts to control the dumping of hazardous waste in the Atlantic and the North Sea.

participating Governments are delivering what is needed. This proven record of success makes it a vital partner in further efforts to improve the protection of the North-East Atlantic.

3. *What does OSPAR think are the main threats to the marine environment?*

In 2000, OSPAR published a Quality Status Report on the North-East Atlantic and its five sub-regions. This was based on six years scientific work on monitoring and assessment, supported by monitoring over a much longer period. This identified the impact of fisheries and the continuation of work to combat hazardous substances as the most important issues. The impact of climate change is crucial, but requires action on a global scale. Other important issues are protection of biodiversity, combating eutrophication and further substantial and progressive reductions in inputs of radioactive substances. Regionally, other important issues are specific hazardous substances, the offshore oil and gas industry, mariculture and coastal development.

4. *Why does OSPAR think that the ecosystem approach is important?*

The sea is a very dynamic environment. Sea currents move inputs over long distances. Many sea creatures also travel



widely. Effects are often felt thousands of kilometres from their sources.

Adverse impacts are often the result of a mix of causes. For example, high levels of PCBs in porpoises can be caused by over-fishing making them change their diet to bottom-living animals that have been heavily polluted. Drops in seabird populations can be caused by high levels of fishing for their prey during the breeding season. It is therefore essential to look

- at what grows where, what eats what and where and how sea creatures breed and reproduce,

- at the interactions between the physical environment and the creatures that live in the sea,

- at the way the critical process of the sea's ecosystems work, and

- at how the different human activities will impact across those ecosystems.

The sea cannot therefore be cut up into compartments. An effective strategy must address it as a whole – from the mid-ocean to boundary between salt-water and freshwater.

5. *What is OSPAR doing to apply the ecosystem approach?*

OSPAR has first developed, and is implementing, a suite of five thematic strategies to address the main threats that it has identified within its competence (the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Strategy, the Eutrophication Strategy, the Hazardous Substances Strategy, the Offshore Industry Strategy and the Radioactive Substances Strategy), together with a Strategy for the Joint Assessment and Monitoring Programme, which assesses the status of the marine environment and follows up implementation of the strategies and the resulting benefits to the marine environment. As OSPAR has described², these six strategies fit together to underpin the ecosystem approach.

Secondly, the ecosystem approach requires a method to evaluate whether an ecosystem as a whole is healthy and sustainable. Following-up work by the 2002 Fifth North Sea Conference, OSPAR is implementing a system of

² In the 2003 Joint Statement by the Baltic Sea Protection (Helsinki) Commission and the OSPAR Commission "Towards an ecosystem approach to the management of human activities".

ecological quality objectives (EcoQOs) for the North Sea, which will in due course be extended to other regions. These EcoQOs measure, in quantified terms, progress on a selection of issues. These measures define an envelope within which the marine environment will be known to be healthy and sustainable.

6. What is OSPAR doing to protect marine biodiversity?

The biological diversity of the seas will mainly be protected by keeping the combined impacts of all human activities at a level which allows our seas to remain healthy and sustainable. The whole suite of OSPAR strategies and other actions is therefore essential to protect marine biodiversity. In addition, OSPAR has two lines of action focused on areas of particular concern.

First, the Texel/Faial criteria have been laid down to identify the marine species and habitats that are threatened and/or declining. On this basis, OSPAR has so far identified four species of marine mammals, two species of marine reptiles, thirteen species of fish, five species of seabirds and five species of marine molluscs that are threatened and/or declining in one or more of the sub-regions. These are now being studied to identify what extra international action is needed to protect them.

Secondly, OSPAR is committed to setting up an ecologically coherent network of well-managed marine protected areas³. Agreement has been reached on how to select these areas, and on a common approach to managing them. In the first stage up to 2006, [78] sites have been nominated as marine protected areas. By 2010, the necessary steps will be taken to complete the network and set up and

implement their management plans.

7. What is OSPAR doing about the environmental impact of fisheries?

In 2000, OSPAR identified the environmental impact of fisheries as one of the two most important issues for the future of the marine environment. When OSPAR was set up, the Contracting Parties decided that questions of fisheries management are appropriately regulated under international and regional agreements dealing specifically with such questions. Nevertheless, OSPAR is authorised to draw such



authorities.

OSPAR regularly considers the environmental impact of fisheries, and has drawn various issues to the attention of the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, the European Commission and the Icelandic and Norwegian Fisheries Ministries. OSPAR has also included the spawning biomass of commercial fish stocks, the bycatch of harbour porpoises and the interrelation between sand-eel fisheries and kittiwake population in the EcoQO system for the North Sea as measures of overall health and sustainability.

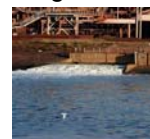
8. What is OSPAR doing about eutrophication?

Eutrophication is the enrichment of water by plant nutrients (nitrogen and, to a lesser extent, phosphorus), leading to a disturbance in the ecosystem balance. Such disturbance often occurs through the excess growth of algae. Once the algae die, they rot. This can use up all the available oxygen in the water, thus killing the fish. This problem has been serious in some parts of the OSPAR area. The OSPAR Strategy on Eutrophication aims to identify

the problem areas and potential problem area, through the agreed Common Procedure, which was applied for the first time in 2003 and will be carried out again in 2008. The first step in the problem areas is to implement the existing instruments, including the OSPAR Recommendations for 50% reductions in nutrient inputs from human sources into problem areas and the EC Nitrates and Urban Waste Water Directives. In addition, the source and target approaches will identify and tackle major sources, and set target EcoQOs (as part of the EcoQO system) to show what we need to achieve.

9. What is OSPAR doing about threats from hazardous substances?

The long-term aim of the OSPAR Hazardous Substances Strategy is to achieve concentrations in the marine environment near background values for naturally occurring substances and close to zero for man-made synthetic substances. More specifically, the goal is to make every endeavour to move towards the target of the cessation of discharges, emissions and losses of hazardous substances by the year 2020.



To focus these efforts, OSPAR reviewed all the chemicals that are known to be on the market and examined their persistence, bioaccumulativeness and toxicity (PBT) against cut-off levels. Forty-three substances and groups of chemicals on which action is a priority for the marine environment have been selected and prioritised. Work continues to identify the other substances to which the cessation target should apply. Fourteen of the priority chemicals have proved on examination to present no immediate threat. For the other twenty-nine, detailed studies

³ This is a joint enterprise with the Helsinki Commission.

have been prepared⁴ showing their properties, the sources of pollution which may affect the marine environment, the main pathways to the marine environment and their loads, the mechanisms of the adverse effects on seas, and existing obligations and possible measures. In the light of these studies, appropriate actions are being taken. At the same time, monitoring strategies have been developed to chart progress towards the cessation target for each substance.

10. What is OSPAR doing about radioactive substances?

The long-term aim of the OSPAR Radioactive Substances Strategy is to achieve concentrations in the marine environment near background values for naturally occurring radioactive substances and close to zero for artificial radioactive substances, taking into account legitimate uses of the sea, technical feasibility and radiological impacts on man and biota. The time-frame is that by the year 2020, discharges, emissions and losses of radioactive substances should be reduced to levels where the additional concentrations in the marine environment above historic levels, resulting from such discharges, emissions and losses, are close to zero.

The implementation plan to achieve this requires all the OSPAR States to submit national plans showing how the elimination or reduction of discharges of radioactive substances from both nuclear and non-nuclear sources will be achieved to meet the 2020 goal. In 2006, OSPAR has produced the first periodic evaluation of progress. As part of the implementation, there is now reporting on discharges from the major non-nuclear sources – which can be of the same order of significance as nuclear sources – and monitoring of the

concentrations in the marine environments.

11. What is OSPAR doing about the offshore oil and gas industry?

The objective of the OSPAR Offshore Industry Strategy is to prevent and eliminate pollution from that industry, to safeguard human health and conserve marine ecosystems, and to restore marine areas which have been adversely affected. To deliver this objective, OSPAR has agreed limits on discharges of oil from offshore installation and a programme to reduce them, controls on the use and discharge offshore of chemicals,



controls on air emissions and flaring, bans on the use of harmful drilling muds, bans on the dumping of

most disused offshore installations and a way to deal with old cuttings piles.

12. What is OSPAR doing about pollution from shipping?

The international rules and standards to protect the sea against pollution from shipping are laid down at the global level by the International Maritime Organization, since ships move world-wide. In the North Sea area, action on surveillance and response in this field lies with OSPAR's sister organisation, the Bonn Agreement⁵. This organises cooperation to prevent and mitigate pollution from shipping disasters, including joint training exercises. It also organises aerial surveillance to identify illegal discharges from ships and offshore installations. OSPAR also works on marine litter from ships and supports the North Sea Network of Investigators and Prosecutors in their collaboration on maritime pollution offences.

13. What is OSPAR doing about other human activities that threaten the marine environment?

Under the Biodiversity and Ecosystems Strategy, OSPAR is reviewing all the other main human activities that impact on the marine environment: sand and gravel extraction; dredging for navigation; exploration for oil, gas and solid minerals; constructions in the sea (especially offshore wind-farms);



cables and pipelines; introduction of alien species; land reclamation; and tourism and

recreational activities. Where additional international measures are needed, OSPAR will take the necessary initiatives. For example, guidance on wind-farms has been agreed.

14. What is OSPAR doing about planning the marine environment?

Planning the marine areas under their jurisdiction is a matter for coastal States, subject to international obligations and commitments. OSPAR has started a programme to help develop marine spatial management, through exchanges of information and good practice, by considering transboundary and cumulative impacts of marine developments, and by helping people to find out what is happening in foreign States.

15. How does OSPAR work?

OSPAR is a mechanism to help Governments to cooperate. Meetings between the experts from the different countries are the essential means to take issues forward. "Lead countries" take the responsibility for developing thinking and proposals, which are examined collectively, before being approved by the annual meeting of the OSPAR Commission. The OSPAR Secretariat

⁴ One study has still to be completed.

⁵ The Bonn Agreement does not include Finland, Iceland, Portugal and Spain, and does not cover France south of Cape Finistere.

supports and organises these processes.

16. *How does OSPAR check that countries are doing what they say they will?*

The OSPAR Convention requires the Contracting Parties to report on what they have done to implement their obligations and commitments, and requires the OSPAR Commission to evaluate what has been achieved. All OSPAR programmes and measures include arrangements for these reports. Under the lead of the lead country, these reports are assessed, and an overview is published.

17. *How does OSPAR involve stakeholders?*

OSPAR involves three main communities of stakeholders in its work: industry, the environmental interest groups and the marine science community. Practically all the industries relevant to OSPAR's work are represented by European observer organisations. A wide range of international environmental interest groups (including Birdlife International, Greenpeace, Robin des Bois, Seas at Risk, Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)) are also observers. These observers receive all the documents produced by OSPAR (except those that are financial or managerial), and can circulate their own documents for OSPAR meetings and take a full part in discussions at meetings. The decisions, of course, remain a matter for the Contracting Parties.

OSPAR's work has always been based on the best available scientific advice. This is obtained both by the participation of national marine science experts in OSPAR meetings, and under a memorandum of understanding with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, the specialist international body for marine science in the North Atlantic.

18. *How much does OSPAR cost?*

The direct costs of the OSPAR Secretariat are a little over £1 000 000 sterling a year. This is borne by the Contracting Parties. In addition, the Contracting Parties contribute several times this amount in kind, by undertaking marine monitoring, by bearing the costs of participating in meetings, by providing expert investigations and reports, by conducting research and by promoting interest in the marine environment.

19. *What has OSPAR achieved?*

In 2005, OSPAR completed scientific assessments of the results of its monitoring over the past decade and more. For inputs to the sea through rivers, and from direct discharges in 1990 – 2002, there were widespread and substantial reductions in inputs of heavy metals (cadmium, mercury and lead). There were also some significant reductions in inputs of plant nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus), but these were less consistent. The assessment of airborne inputs showed that there have been statistically significant downward trends in direct atmospheric inputs of all the contaminants monitored. Direct atmospheric inputs of contaminants remain important, since they account for up to half the total inputs from land of some heavy metals and up to about a third of those of nitrogen. Shipping also remains a significant source of airborne inputs of nitrogen.

The assessment of concentrations of pollutants in the marine environment shows widespread downward trends in the concentrations of hazardous substances in the North-East Atlantic. Nevertheless, the majority of measurements show that concentrations of both naturally occurring and man-made contaminants remain above long-term targets.

Overall, in the careful language of scientists, these assessments show that “the work of OSPAR is having a substantial beneficial effect on the quality of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic”.

20. *What is the future of OSPAR?*

For more than a generation, OSPAR has developed new ways of tackling the problems of the marine environment. The strategies adopted in 1998 set targets for another generation, up to 2020. Innovation, based on the best available science, will enable OSPAR to continue this work. OSPAR can therefore make a major contribution to the work of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive in protecting Europe's rich marine heritage.

Contact:

Audrey Baconnais-Rosez

**OSPAR Secretariat
New Court
48 Carey Street
London WC2A 2JQ**

Tel: 00 44(0) 20 7430 5207

Fax: 00 44(0) 20 7430 5225

Website: <http://www.ospar.org>

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