

REGIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR BENTHIC HABITATS (RAP-BENTHIC) PHASE ONE

Why is this important?

Healthy benthic habitats are a crucial element of productive and biologically diverse marine ecosystems. Many benthic habitats within the OSPAR maritime area are under threat from various pressures. These include physical disturbance, modification of substrate or loss (such as abrasion by bottom trawling, sediment extraction or man-made structures) and chemical (by nutrients enrichment or contaminants) and biological impacts (e.g., spread of non-indigenous species or native species exploitation). The impact of these pressures is not uniform, and thus the state of benthic habitats and the level of threat varies across the OSPAR Regions.

Benthic habitats are also challenging to manage. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of measures to improve the status of benthic habitats due to the multiple activities and pressures involved. In addition, measures designed to help benthic habitats recover can take a long time to become evident. However, the lack of clear signs of improvement, as reported in OSPAR's Quality Status Report 2023, suggests that current measures have been inadequate or ineffective.

What is OSPAR doing?

OSPAR is adopting phase one of a Regional Action Plan for Benthic Habitats (RAP-Benthic). Phase one aims to collect and provide the evidence needed to support the development of measures to improve the condition of benthic habitats and includes actions relating to offshore wind and bottom contact fisheries. During 2025 and 2026, OSPAR will take forward the phase one actions and continue developing the RAP-Benthic phase two, building on previous and ongoing national and regional work to add further actions. This will complete an OSPAR RAP Benthic that supports protection and restoration efforts at a regional scale.

Successful delivery of the RAP-Benthic will involve collaborating with the wide range of national and regional organisations with responsibility for managing activities that have the potential to impact on the seafloor.

How will this benefit the North-East Atlantic?

The RAP-Benthic will provide tools and knowledge for the conservation of benthic areas of high ecological value, and for the recovery of benthic habitats adversely affected by human activities within the North-East Atlantic. The RAP will strengthen and support national and regional management of benthic habitats. It will support OSPAR Contracting Parties to deliver the objectives of the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy (NEAES) 2030 and, for those Contracting Parties that are EU Member States, their obligations under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive and Nature Restoration Regulation.

Specifically, the RAP-Benthic will contribute to the achievement of OSPAR's objectives to:

- take action to prevent or reduce pressures so that benthic habitats can recover;
- protect and conserve biodiversity; and
- restore degraded benthic habitats, safeguarding the structure and functions of the seabed and marine ecosystems.

For more information,
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