

Implementing EU policy at the local level: lessons and challenges

The AQUACROSS EU-level policy analysis identified that sectoral policies support drivers of biodiversity loss, reducing the potential effectiveness of the EU’s environmental policies. A bottom-up policy analysis was subsequently conducted for the eight AQUACROSS case studies, in which we investigated whether the same is occurring at the local level. We undertook an in-depth review of relevant local policies for each case study and the linked effect on drivers of pressures to the local aquatic biodiversity, highlighting gaps and conflicts in each policy framework.

We found that, similarly to the EU level, as aquatic biodiversity declines across Europe, sectoral activities that drive biodiversity loss receive strong policy support at the local level in the shape of funding mechanisms and regulatory instruments. Our analysis suggests that local policy makers promote economic growth without sufficient environmental safeguards. Many of the drivers found in local areas are linked to emerging sectors that are key for local development: agriculture, fisheries, renewable energy or tourism. While these activities are key drivers of the increasing pressures on aquatic biodiversity in Europe, they are directly and indirectly supported by local regulations and European funds. This is one of the reasons why environmental policies in place are comprehensive on a formal level, but do not achieve their ambitious targets in practice. This conflicting policy mix results in sectoral ambitions outweighing environmental ones, thus contributing to the ongoing decline of aquatic biodiversity in Europe.

In AQUACROSS’s Lough Erne case study (see [Case Study: Lough Erne, Ireland](#)), the bottom-up policy analysis showed that the pressure of invasive alien species arriving in the ecosystem through effects of tourism are coherently addressed by a number of local environmental policies (see [Current biodiversity management: Issues](#)). However, several policies and instruments supporting tourism increase the recreational activities in the Lough. For example, the Fermanagh Lakelands Tourism Area Plan aims to increase visits by 17% until 2020, with an emphasis on the need to continue partnerships to enhance water-based recreation. Environmental safeguards are missing to ensure sustainable tourism growth as well as a decline in biodiversity loss by 2020.



Figure: Local policy analysis from Lough Erne, Ireland case study

We suggest that local policy frameworks need to be restructured to simultaneously aim for biodiversity protection and sustainable economic welfare. Ecosystem-based management is proposed as a policy tool to achieve environmental mainstreaming in local policy frameworks that manage aquatic ecosystems and those that affect aquatic ecosystems (i.e. sectoral policies).

Key findings

- **Commercial fisheries/Aquaculture:** Local legislation implementing and supporting the Common Fisheries Policy and Blue Growth Strategy will consequently support the driver of commercial fisheries and hence sustain species extraction, even if a focus lies on sustainability.
- **Agriculture:** A considerable focus on environmental goals to reduce environmental pressures such as nutrient pollution is required of the local implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy to achieve biodiversity targets. However, cross-compliance requirements within the CAP are currently not implemented sufficiently to ensure that nitrogen pressures from farming reach a sustainable level.
- **Renewable Energy:** Is managed locally as an environmental solution (to exit fossil fuel-based energy sources), even though it locally often means that new structure and infrastructure has to be built to support these renewable energies. This has the potential to cause pressures such as hydromorphological changes on the aquatic environment.
- **Tourism:** Is often supported by local policies that mainly focus on increasing economic growth with few environmental safeguards, thereby contributing to the intensification of a range of pressures (e.g., additional nutrient pollution, extraction of species, morphological alterations, invasive alien species) on aquatic ecosystems.

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Further information

This is one of 38 short briefs summarising the key results of the AQUACROSS Project. For more detailed information on the topics covered in this brief, see the following:

- Rouillard et al. (2016) Synergies and Differences between Biodiversity, Nature, Water and Marine Environment EU Policies. Deliverable 2.1, European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation grant agreement No. 642317. ([Deliverable](#) and [Executive Summary](#))
- O'Higgins et al. (2016) Review and analysis of policy data, information requirements and lessons learnt in the context of aquatic ecosystems. Deliverable 2.2, European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation grant agreement No. 642317. ([Deliverable](#))
- Röschel, L. (2018). AQUACROSS Final Conference [presentation: AQUACROSS Policy Review, Lessons learnt from top down and bottom up analysis.](#)



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