

A picture is worth a thousand words: the European Atlas of the Seas

Vittorio Barale

European Commission, Joint Research Centre (EU), vittorio.barale@jrc.ec.europa.eu

The European Atlas of the Seas – originally foreseen by the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) of the European Union (EU) as a simple public-oriented education and communication tool – today represents an experiment of knowledge brokerage in the marine world, mediating between the research domain and a varied group of practitioners, in need of using specialized information. The overall idea is to convert complex scientific data about coasts, seas and oceans into graphical form, so that non-specialists may access (and fuse) available products, without having to transfer or process large amounts of data, tasks that may require unavailable *ad hoc* technical skills. This may have a particular positive effect on EU rules and strategies related to marine/maritime matters, when the Atlas beneficiaries are policy-makers.

Examples of research innovations set for policy support are those linked to fisheries and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP). In the first case, the Atlas' maps and charts are offering a new integrated approach to fisheries research results, previously available only in lengthy reports, aiming to

improve data display and analysis and to monitor progress of policy implementation. In the second, the Atlas' EU-wide thematic map collection delivers a common baseline that can help EU Member States getting started on the MSP Directive requirements. As this is widely seen as a pre-requisite for Blue Growth, future research extending current projects results and facilitating MSP applications will help combine protection and sustainable use of the European Seas' ecosystem resources.

The Atlas is poised to become an advanced visualization and mapping tool, in the framework of the current effort to simplify and streamline the plethora of Marine Information Systems available online. The many initiatives in this field, either dealing with a holistic view of the sea or with specific maritime sectors, are a symptom of an unanswered requirement by a wide user community. Most initiatives would benefit from a unifying element, such as the Atlas is becoming, to ensure substantial savings in organizing and delivering data, and giving a second life to past scientific projects. Ultimately, the Atlas aims to help policy-makers cope with the incumbent data, information and knowledge overload, providing expertise in the use of modern, analytical tools.

The EU Atlas of the Seas is available at http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/atlas/index_en.htm.

