

# The North Sea in Belgium

High time to live up  
to the opportunities



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## 1. A race for free space

About one tenth of the Belgian territory, i.e. 3457 km<sup>2</sup>, can be found at sea. The Belgian part of the North Sea **plays an important role in national economic prosperity** since the turnover in the marine/maritime sector amounts to nearly 15 billion EUR<sup>1</sup>. The North Sea is also valued for its **natural beauty** and welcomes over 20 million day trippers per year<sup>2</sup>.

However, fast technological progress, changing social priorities and new economic opportunities continue to put pressure on the space available. Free space continues to shrink and this calls for a **future-oriented and pro-active North Sea policy** from our government tailored to the adjacent densely populated coastal areas, the Western Scheldt, and the surrounding marine areas of the neighbouring countries.

Throughout the world, **integrated marine spatial planning** is acknowledged as being a concrete way to bring about a visionary policy. This position paper shows why even Belgium is in urgent need hereof and which steps can give the initial impetus.

*Integrated marine spatial planning is a public process which analyses and organises the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities at sea in order to comply with the economic, ecological and social objectives stated in policy decisions.*

## 2. Action is needed, now!

Marine spatial planning is considered to be one of the cornerstones of the European Integrated Marine Policy<sup>3</sup>. Contrary to our neighbouring countries and the other member states, **Belgium does not focus** on marine spatial planning. As a consequence, many opportunities have been lost.

Integrated marine spatial planning is a concrete way to aim at the postulated **economic, social and ecological** objectives laid down for the Belgian part of the North Sea. It furthermore entails some **unique opportunities**:

1. Creating a **long-term** vision results in core users (ports, extraction, tourism, renewable energy) which are fully contributing to a competitive economy without endangering natural resources.
2. A **spatial and temporal harmony** and a reflection of all users result in a transparent assessment of the different needs in an open, cross-sector way while **respecting the strength** of the ecosystem.
3. It offers an **efficient framework** to **integrate** ample **scientific and other available** information in the policy and decision-making processes.
4. An integrated planning which clearly defines a number of functions brings about an increase of **legal certainty, clarity and transparency**, which in turn saves the government, the investors and the operators money.
5. Since it focuses on gaps and opportunities, it is a **way to harmonize** the different competent **bodies** and their legislative, licensing and concession procedures.
6. An integrated marine spatial planning results: in **solving uncertainties** in the short term which sectors, stakeholders and local authorities are confronted with today and in creating a **more attractive investment climate** for national and international investors.
7. By providing a **monitoring and evaluation system**, the policy can be used in a **flexible way** and it can be fine-tuned if necessary.
8. This process enables to harmonize the use of the space available and to manage it **across the borders**. In other words, it avoids conflicting policy options in cross-border territories and brings about synergy.
9. An integrated marine spatial planning supports an **eco-system-oriented management approach**. It results in promoting sustainable sea management, common good protection and a growth in several marine sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasability study Flanders Marine – State of the art (2010), study performed by WES, acting upon instructions from RESOC Oostende

<sup>2</sup> Kust Indicatoren Toeristisch Statistisch –Westtoer

<sup>3</sup> Communication from the Commission “An Integrated Maritime Policy for The European Union”, COM(2007) 575 final of 10.10.2007 and SEC(2007) 1278 of 10.10.2007

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## 3. The restrictions of the 2005 North Sea Master Plan

In 2005, **Belgium was among the first countries** in Europe to set up a spatial planning for the North Sea and to implement it. The 'North Sea Master Plan' threw a light on the zones for wind energy and the delimited areas for sand extraction and the areas for the Habitats and Birds Directives<sup>4</sup>.

However, the Master Plan is:

1. **A static plan:** It does not include a procedure to adjust itself to the changing environment or to respond to the future social, ecological or economic challenges<sup>5</sup>. Just think of the new opportunities in tidal power or biomass at sea, blue biotechnology, coastal defences, recreation and areas for scientific research.
2. **No guaranteed protection of natural values:** The measures which are part of Natura 2000 only offer little effective protection of the natural values. This gives rise to important challenges to aim at the formally postulated natural objectives.
3. **Not tailored to the neighbouring countries:** The Belgian part of the North Sea is an integrated part of the regional North Sea which requires that activities or new developments are looked at in a broader perspective. The Netherlands, the UK and France all started to develop an integrated marine spatial planning on the basis of their priorities<sup>6</sup>.
4. **Not future-oriented:** The current plan is not or only little future-oriented. The 'North Sea Master Plan' does not offer a sufficient basis to prevent that spatial delimitations and the assessment between user functions and purposes is done on an individual and ad hoc basis.

This approach is not very functional and it entails a cost increase in the long term since it lacks vision, uniform procedures and a centralized licensing policy. It also gives rise to a growing concern about the conservation of the unique qualities of the marine environment<sup>7</sup>. Such a situation also involves an increase of the investment risks, extra planning costs, and a loss of economic profitability for the industry.

Approving a number of user zones is not an outcome as such in the spatial planning process. An area with a wide variety of functions requires **continuous refinements and adjustments**, and policy vigilance.

An integrated marine spatial planning aims at **making the most of the opportunities at hand**, at including new perspectives within economic sectors and at establishing priorities on the basis of scientific insights<sup>8</sup>.

## 4. A step-by-step approach towards an integrated marine spatial planning

Throughout the world, integrated marine spatial planning is growing. In Belgium, **several interest groups** stress that an integrated marine spatial planning is needed for the **future management of the North Sea**<sup>9</sup>.

The way how this should be done is open to discussion. UNESCO identifies 10 steps to set up an integrated marine spatial planning which, when implemented, would enable us to answer the most crucial questions on the current situation, the future situation and the way towards the latter<sup>10</sup>.

Four preparatory questions are crucial before starting the implementation of an integrated marine spatial planning process (cf. illustration).

Given the **available knowledge** and the pioneering work of the past few years, an integrated marine spatial planning for the Belgian part of the North Sea requires little more than a reinterpretation and an update of the existing information and its organisation in a planning process that enables a concrete implementation.

Setting up an integrated vision is not just determining for the current legislature, it also **determines the future of the North Sea**. That way, Belgium can once again be among the leaders when it comes to marine management and serve as an example for the concrete implementation of the Integrated Marine Policy<sup>11</sup> and the European framework directive on Marine Strategy<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Plasman C, Van Hessche U. Duurzaam beheer van de Noordzee. *Argus Milieumagazine* 2004[3]:4-7.

<sup>5</sup> Douvere F, Maes F, Vanhulle A and Schrijvers J. 2007 *The role of marine spatial planning in sea use management: The Belgian case*. *Marine Policy* 31:182-191

<sup>6</sup> *Integraal Beheerplan Noordzee 2015*, Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, 2005 [http://www.noordzeeloket.nl/Images/2\\_1288\\_tcm14-1575.pdf](http://www.noordzeeloket.nl/Images/2_1288_tcm14-1575.pdf); *Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009* - approved 12.11.2009; *Blue Book, A National Strategy for the sea and oceans for France (2009)*

<sup>7</sup> *The Role of Marine Spatial Planning in Implementing Ecosystem-based, Sea Use Management*. Fanny Douvere (2008), *Marine Policy* Vol 32-5, pp762-771

<sup>8</sup> *State of the sea na 4 jaar Belgisch Noordzeebeleid*, ARGUSmilieumagazine, Peter Bossu en Cathy Plasman, jg. 5 - nr.4, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *Natuurpunt Kappa plan* [http://www.natuurpunt.be/uploads/natuurbehoud/natuurbeleid/documenten/syllabus\\_kappasymposium\\_kwg.pdf](http://www.natuurpunt.be/uploads/natuurbehoud/natuurbeleid/documenten/syllabus_kappasymposium_kwg.pdf); *Vlaamse Baaieren* <http://www.vlaamsebaaien.com>; DOC 52 2225/024 - 25 November 2009 - *Algemene Beleidsnota Marien Milieu*

<sup>10</sup> Ehler, Charles, and Fanny Douvere. *Marine Spatial Planning: a step-by-step approach toward ecosystem-based management*. Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and Man and the Biosphere Programme. IOC Manual and Guides No. 53, ICAM Dossier No. 6. Paris: UNESCO. 2009 (English).

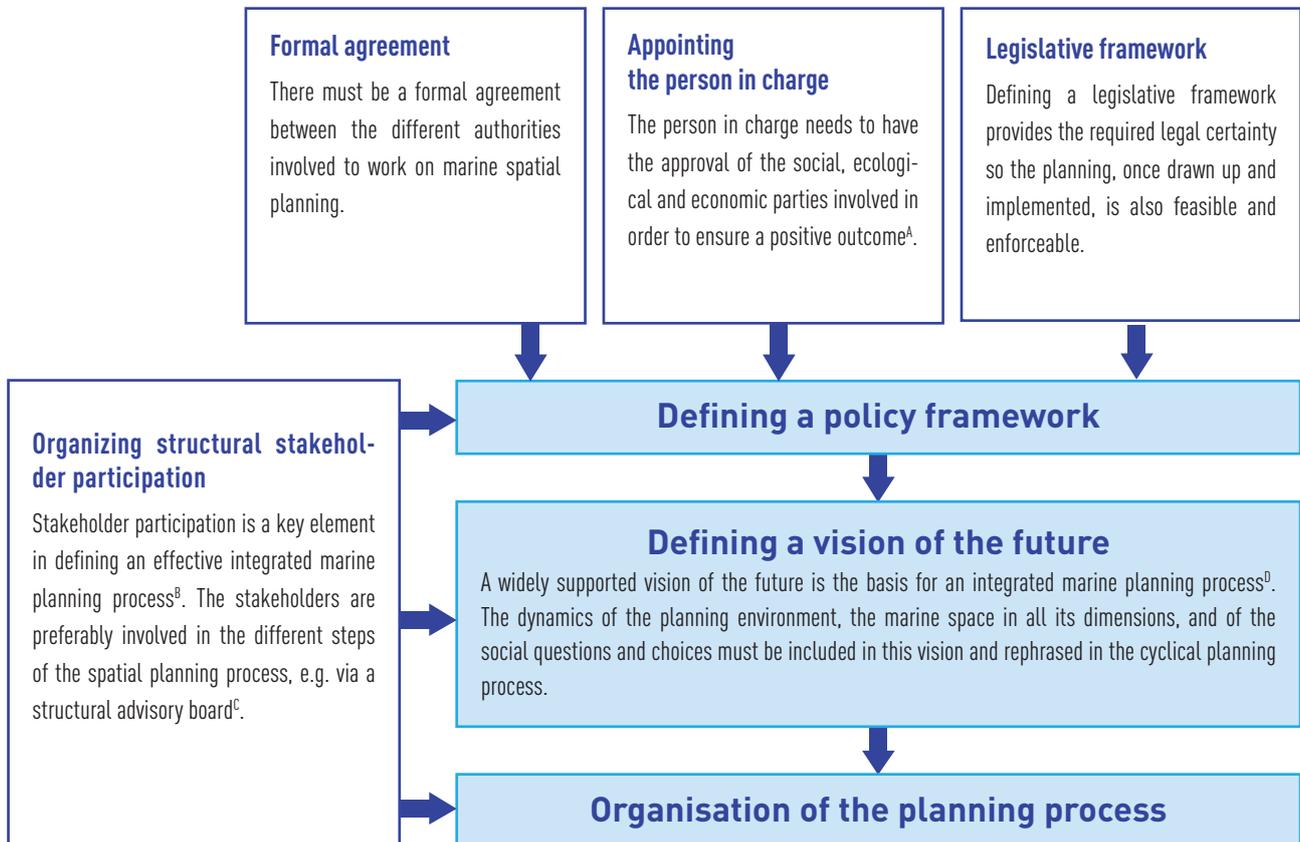
<sup>11</sup> *Communication from the Commission "An Integrated Maritime Policy for The European Union"*, COM(2007) 575 final of 10.10.2007 and SEC(2007) 1278 of 10.10.2007

<sup>12</sup> *Directive 2008/56/EG of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive)*

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### Illustration 1

A diagram of the preparatory steps for the implementation of an integrated marine spatial planning



<sup>A</sup> Geldof, C., Janssens, N. (2010). *Maritieme ruimtelijke planning: Kritische visievorming en het belang van de commons*. In *Ruimte & Maatschappij*, jrg 1 nr3, uitg Garant (issn 2032-8421), pp20-39.

<sup>B</sup> Ehler, Charles, and Fanny Douvere. *Marine Spatial Planning: a step-by-step approach toward ecosystem-based management*. Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and Man and the Biosphere Programme. IOC Manual and Guides No. 53, ICAM Dossier No. 6. Paris: UNESCO, 2009 (English).

<sup>C</sup> F., Douvere, et al. *The Role of Spatial Planning in Sea Use Management: The Belgian Case*. *Marine Policy*, 31, 2007, pp. 182-191

<sup>D</sup> *Evaluatie van de socio-economische adviesstructuren met betrekking tot het mariene milieu (2010)*. Lin Van Poucke en An Cliquet. A study performed by Maritime Institute, University of Ghent acting upon instructions from FPS Environment

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*\* All positions in the current position paper and its annexes are the strict personal positions of the authors.*