

24 May 2024

Contribution of the Council of Europe to the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on oceans and the law of the sea

The Council of Europe's Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats ([Bern Convention](#)) is an international legal reference instrument in the field of nature conservation which enables cooperation and coordination across borders, and contributes to building bridges between science and citizens, and uniting governments and society at large in a common endeavour: strengthening the conservation of wild flora and fauna and natural habitats in Europe, including oceans and seas.

An important achievement in 2023 was the adoption of [Strategic Plan](#) for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030, which complements the Vision for the Bern Convention to 2030 adopted in 2021. It is led by the slogan "Healthy nature for healthy people" stating that, by 2030, declines in biodiversity would be halted leading to recovery of wildlife and habitats, improving the lives of people and contributing to the health of the planet. The vision's first goal relates to marine areas: "The area, connectivity, integrity and resilience of natural and semi-natural ecosystems is increased, including through protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures covering at least 30% of the land and of the sea areas."

Further, the Bern Convention's [case-file system](#) is a unique monitoring tool which allows NGOs or private citizens to submit complaints for possible breaches of the Bern Convention by countries that have ratified the Convention. A number of these case-files relate to marine species and coastal water management, notably cases concerning marine turtles.

The Standing Committee of the Bern Convention conducts a number of activities directly related to seas and oceans. Since 2007, a group of experts has examined all types of issues relating to biodiversity and climate change, including in marine environments.¹ In 2009, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention also set up a Group of Experts on Island Biodiversity in Europe, which has drawn up a Charter on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity in European Islands.² The conservation scheme for migrating sea turtles in the Mediterranean is another topic addressed by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention. In this context, it adopted in December 2023 a [Guidance tool](#) on the conservation of sea turtles nesting sites.

Another species-specific initiative under the Bern Convention is the [pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons](#). Sturgeons are excellent flagship species for ecologically healthy rivers and seas due to their size, longevity, diverse habitat utilisation and their migratory life cycle that connects coastal waters to the upper reaches of riverine ecosystems. Therefore, their protection needs a holistic approach, connecting international waters, coastal areas, and often multi-national river systems. The pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons aims at restoring all existing sturgeon populations to "least concern" (IUCN) or "favourable" (Habitats Directive) status and re-establishing self-sustaining

¹ See: www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention/on-biodiversity-and-climate-change#.

² See: <https://rm.coe.int/1680746b90>.

sturgeon populations as well as their life-cycle habitat in their historic range to an extent that ensures species survival and representation of the subpopulations where possible.

Several European diplomas have also been awarded to marine areas of exceptional European importance for the preservation of biological, geological and landscape diversity and which are managed in an exemplary way³ and to wetlands in direct contact with the sea. The Bern Convention is also implementing the Emerald Network which is an ecological network made up of Areas of Special Conservation Interest and which aims to ensure the long-term conservation of species and habitats of European importance requiring specific protection measures and protected by the Bern Convention. Several Emerald Network sites (or candidate sites) have a marine part or are exclusively marine⁴.

The Bern Convention is fully equipped to contribute to better protection of seas and oceans in Europe.

³ Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Finland) and Selvagens Islands Nature Reserve (Portugal) are marine sites or include a marine component (see the full list of diploma areas: www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention/european-diploma-areas).

⁴ See: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention/emerald-viewer>