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## Dispatches from the Field: When MSP enables Blue Growth, who benefits?

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16 February 2016. Portugal. Sleepy, scenic Olhao. Inside the conference facilities of the Real Marina Hotel in Olhao, Portugal, the room is abuzz with information exchanged, knowledge gained. [Mares Conference](#) participants are poring over posters showing emerging marine technologies and listening intently to scientists describing expanding marine uses, and ways to monitor attendant biodiversity decline. Most of the intellectual energy in the room seems focused on one thing: growth – growth in technology, in communications, in fisheries and other marine uses, in development, and in the economy.

Meanwhile, on the vast tidal flats outside the hotel, Portuguese fishers and their families are quietly going about their business, searching for and collecting shellfish from the nutrient-rich ooze of the tidal flats. The only apparent excitement comes from the shorebirds who occasionally protest the uneven competition between themselves and the humans engaged in the race for cockles, whelks, clams, and worms. Occasionally, a group of fishers breaks into song, their contented notes mixing with the unusually mild sea air, both flowing in through the open doors of the meeting room.

It would be presumptuous to assume that the families plying the flats, using the simplest technology possible to gather up delicious edibles from the coastal plain, are satisfied with life the way it is and have little interest in economic growth. Perhaps they are out on the flats because they have no choice and are part of a subsistence economy of last resort. Maybe they would all be happier working in the Algarve's many tourist hotels, contributing to the economic recovery that Portugal so desperately needs. Yet it is hard to imagine that all would be well if economic growth transformed this sleepy little corner of the Algarve into a bustling industrial or tourist center full of high-rises and superhighways, the rich tidal flats into a mosaic of shipping channels, ports, and outfalls.

So it seems as if the stage may be set to see a mighty clash of cultures unfold – as the pro-growth maritime spatial planning (MSP) agenda catalyzes new uses and expanding economies that endanger the values and the traditions of local people.

### MSP – ensuring sustainable use or incentivizing as much use as possible?

The [European Union's Roadmap for MSP](#), and all the relevant guidance and obligations that emanate from the Marine Strategy Framework Directives, are all about the Blue Economy and maximizing Blue Growth. With much of the world in economic recession, avenues for economic growth are being sought everywhere as a road to recovery. In Europe as elsewhere, there is palpable excitement about MSP "unlock[ing] the Blue Growth potential" of the oceans.

There is reason to be cautious, however, and to diligently track how MSP will end up being used. In Europe, and in other places as well, it seems that marine and coastal planning is less about ensuring that use is ecologically and socially sustainable, and much more about incentivizing as many uses as possible. In the worst-case scenario, conservation becomes just another special interest at the table and a weakly represented one at that. Expand existing uses, encourage new ones, maximize profits, and economic well-being will follow – we can worry about biodiversity and ecosystem function once the economy is back on track.

But will expanded maritime uses necessarily translate into improved well-being? Certainly Blue Growth has the potential to make select companies and individuals wealthy. To be fair, this economic growth can also make national economies more robust and provide a more solid foundation for social service and infrastructure and stabilize governments – all of which can in turn improve human well-being.

But is this the lesson provided by the history of ocean exploitation? When energy development, fisheries, shipping, and tourism expand and flourish, are the benefits shared across societies? And do those industries (and the private sector investors or public sector subsidizers who help develop them) compensate for the costs incurred for expanding uses? One doesn't have to look too far to see that in most cases, the negative externalities of economic growth affect local coastal residents. They often pay the price for all this growth by having to cope with pollution, resource depletion, declining aesthetic values, and impeded access to the places they cherish. Too often it becomes a case of 'privatize the benefits while making public the costs'.

A [recent MedTrends report by WWF](#) looks at likely scenarios for Mediterranean Sea maritime uses in light of the Blue Economy the European Union endorses. It predicts that all maritime uses will greatly expand in the region with the exception of commercial fisheries – which are in some cases thought to be at their limit and in other cases unable to compete with more profitable industries for the same swath of ocean. With all this expansion of use comes unavoidable increases in pressures on the marine system and irreversible loss of biodiversity and related ecosystem services.

The Algarve is not in the Mediterranean, but the Portuguese share the same deep-rooted connection to the sea. Seafood is part of the cultural identity of the towns scattered along the coast, and even in winter, paths along the seaside, benches overlooking cliff tops, and even beaches are filled with people socializing, getting exercise, and enjoying nature. As [Portugal looks to MSP to allocate ocean space to new industries and expand uses as much as possible](#) the inhabitants of the Portuguese coasts may well find that the world they know and love is being taken away from them. All in the name of Blue Growth and enabled by MSP.

Read a [recent article about the new legal framework for MSP in Portugal and how it may favor new uses over existing ones and prioritize financial concerns in the selection of alternatives](#).

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