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Sustainable oceans and Ocean information, Strategic stakes for France and the EU

Nearly 75% of French MEPs lost their seats on the evening of the European Parliament elections on 26 May 2019. As there are new MEPS, many of them will be pushing for a new dynamic policy, particularly on environmental issues. The Courrier du Parlement suggests putting these issues into perspective in a very specific field, that of a sustainable ocean, by comparing the points of view of Catherine Chabaud MEP (Renew Europe) and Pierre Bahurel (CEO of Mercator Ocean International) whom we interviewed recently during a conference at the European Parliament.

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@European Parliament Brussels. MEP Catherine Chabaud and Pierre Bahurel, Mercator Ocean International CEO, both calling the European Union to take the Lead for a Sustainable Ocean. ©Benjamin Rosemberg

Madam MEP, can you give us an overview of the main priorities you intend to defend during your mandate?

Catherine Chabaud: Since the first “Blue COP” gathering in Madrid in December 2019, I have been hoping for the emergence of a true European marine and maritime strategy. A “blue deal” strategy, which would include issues such as knowledge and research, the protection and restoration of biodiversity, the blue economy and its growth, but also European leadership in terms of governance. All the necessary paving stones for such a strategy are there, albeit scattered, but Europe has not yet aligned them for a common and ambitious trajectory. We have two major issues to contend with, the arrival of the climate Act and the revision of the biodiversity strategy, in which the ocean must be an integral part. That is why I am pushing my European colleagues to launch an “Ocean Action Plan”: a truly blue objective within the European Union’s Green Pact, in order to develop a convincing European strategy to turn our resources into assets, which can then be leveraged for political action. I am committed to improving the governance of the ocean, so that it is recognised as a common good of humanity and so that its sustainability becomes a major objective of our climate policies. This is one of the objectives of the European Parliament’s resolution for the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Pierre Bahurel: We are delighted that a renowned sailor as experienced and committed as Catherine Chabaud is devoting her energy and determination so effectively to the service of a sustainable ocean within the European Parliament. It is also a strong sign of France’s leadership within EU bodies, particularly on these issues.

Mr. Bahurel, could you quickly fill us in on why Mercator Ocean International’s activities are important for a sustainable ocean?

Pierre Bahurel: We are a multinational organisation based in France and our mission is to serve the general interest. More than 20 years ago, we developed algorithms to reliably digitize the ocean to enable us to predict their physical and chemical state over time. We can thus provide users with scientifically qualified and regularly updated data such as temperature, the intensity and direction of currents, ice cover, salinity, oxygen and chlorophyll content, acidity, etc. for the global ocean, from the surface to the bottom, to forecast the ocean’s state for the next 10 days or determine what it was 20 years ago. This discipline, operational oceanography, is still in the early stages of its development. It emerged from the pooling of various scientific expertise, at a time when satellites were beginning to observe the surface of the ocean to complement measurements made at sea. It has since been developed, largely thanks to the EU and its Copernicus Earth observation programme. Today, global modelling of the ocean is a rare skill, which two other organisations in the world share with Mercator Ocean International. Our data volumes are measured in terabytes and are stored on very high-capacity servers. We are forecasting tomorrow’s ocean, for our nine shareholders¹ and on behalf of the European Union.

Catherine Chabaud: In order to meet ocean challenges, the first essential step is to raise awareness of the issues. The general public but also those in charge of making political decisions are not well informed about the ocean and marine and coastal ecosystems.

(1) CMCC, CNRS, Ifremer, IRD, Météo France, the Nansen Center, Puertos del Estado, SHOM and the UK Met Office.

Highlighting the many ecosystem benefits of the ocean is essential to create political awareness of the major issues at stake, so that we can work together to find solutions. Through its studies, collection and sharing of ocean data, Mercator Ocean contributes to this major public interest undertaking.

Are France and the European Union equipped to face environmental and climate challenges?

Catherine Chabaud: Our priority is to further our knowledge of the ocean, since today only 5% of the Deep Sea has been explored! The European Union is very concerned about this topic and intends to make its contribution, particularly in the context of the Decade of Ocean Science, an initiative launched by the United Nations for the period 2021-2030 and led by the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. The challenge consists, among others, in coordinating the work of research institutes, given the increasing number of observation systems, whether satellite or *in situ*.

Pierre Bahurel: You are right to begin this discussion from the perspective of the crucial question of knowledge, as this is not always understood. Yet, more than ever, if we are to defend the ocean and use it in a sustainable way, which will also mitigate the impact of climate change, we need ocean science so that we can disseminate knowledge to as many people as possible. We contribute to the production of scientific knowledge, notably by collaborating in the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science and in the work of the IPCC², but we also do a lot to disseminate this knowledge by targeting a wide range of users around the world, particularly through the Copernicus Marine Service, which we designed and have been running since 2015 on behalf of the European Union. We make terabytes of data, indicators and scientific expertise intelligible, accessible and downloadable for more than 20,000 subscribers and 200,000 users worldwide. They expect us to provide reliable and accurate data and, above all, more and more new data and new variables to help them improve their scientific research, their public services, their business development or their educational projects.

What are the priorities today in terms of knowledge of the ocean?

Catherine Chabaud: We have to understand how marine ecosystems respond to climate change, pollution and human activities. This is fundamentally important for the conservation and restoration of biodiversity: I am thinking in particular of the "Blue Carbon" project, which consists in storing the carbon dioxide emitted by certain plants to deduct it from the national carbon budget. Not forgetting adaptation to climate change: the deep levels of the ocean are currently warming and this phenomenon is a major contributor to its acidification and thermal expansion, whence the rise in sea level.

Pierre Bahurel: Absolutely. The scientific understanding of ecosystems or climate change requires the analysis of reliable data that are available over long-periods of time. We produce some of them, such as the pH of the ocean, its oxygen or carbon dioxide concentrations, the variation of their temperature and heat content, the

analysis of sea level rise or the extension of pack ice. Analysis of long time-series of reliable ocean data is a prerequisite for understanding ecosystems or climate change and hence for major political and legal commitments, such as the European Directive on the good ecological status of waters or UN SDG 14³. Again, our data such as pH, chlorophyll-a, dissolved oxygen, or nitrate/phosphate concentrations are used to monitor threshold values or descriptors such as eutrophication⁴. Moreover, the ocean offers considerable potential for innovation and growth and there will be no sustainable ocean without the entrepreneurs of the blue economy (fisheries, aquaculture, renewable energy, coastal applications, marine biotechnology, etc.). They benefit greatly from our free, centralised and reliable data. Without widely available ocean data and indicators, it is impossible to understand, measure, innovate and make progress.

touristes issus de la France continentale.

How can the EU and France respond?

Catherine Chabaud: President Macron distinguished himself with a rather historic speech at the last "Assises de l'économie de la mer" (Sea economy summit) in early December. France has finally recognised itself as a maritime territory. Its exclusive economic zone, in other words, the maritime area over which it exercises sovereign rights, is the second largest in the world! This is why the French government wants to set up a programme to defend the ocean while boosting blue growth, in particular by bringing in new clean energies such as transport by ships fuelled with liquefied natural gas, increasing the proportion of protected areas to 30%, etc. This last objective is also in line with Europe's concerns in this area. A global strategic vision will thus strengthen the governance of the ocean, which is a common good of humanity and absolutely crucial for our future on Earth.

Pierre Bahurel: Indeed, France and the EU are not only at the forefront but almost eurythmic on this subject. The founding of Mercator Ocean was, moreover, an historic result of this common vision. This is why we are delighted with President Macron's far-reaching ambition in favour of the ocean, as you mentioned, as well as with the conclusions of the EU Council on the ocean and seas. Likewise, concerning the roadmap of the President of the European Commission, Ms Ursula von der Leyen, for a "European Green Deal" and the resolution of the European Parliament of January 2020, which asks the European Union to make the ocean one of the priorities of its strategy in favour of biodiversity. These concomitant dynamics are most welcome, since they will encourage research and innovation for a sustainable ocean, but also strengthen French and European leadership.

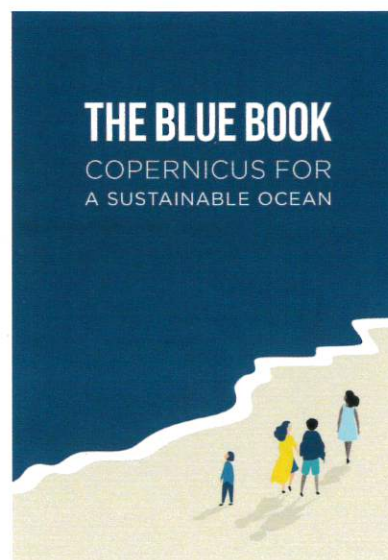
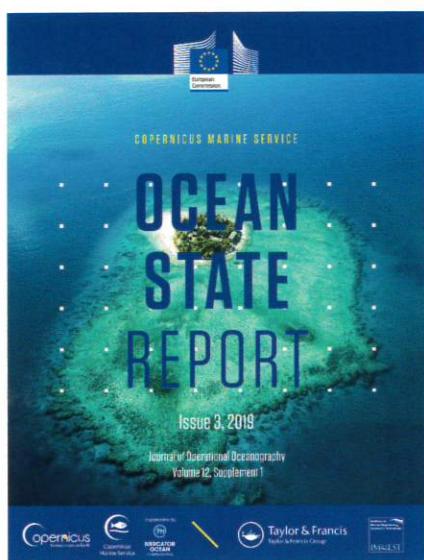
How can knowledge of the ocean and its dissemination to the general public help make the ocean more sustainable?

Catherine Chabaud: It is essential to make all citizens - including those living furthest from the coastline - understand that they have a connection to the ocean, which provides them with half of the oxygen they breathe, as well as ecosystem services and food. Protecting and conserving it is therefore an individual and collective responsibility that concerns us all.

(2) Notably in the IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and the Cryosphere (SROCC)

(3) One of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

(4) Increasing the concentration of mineral salts in water (nitrates and phosphates, in particular) leads to ecological imbalances such as the proliferation of aquatic vegetation or oxygen depletion of the ocean.



Two Copernicus Marine Service reference publications edited by Mercator Ocean International in 2019

Pierre Bahurel: I quite agree! Many associations and NGOs, such as the Ocean & Climate Platform, are working tirelessly on sharing this information, because in order to mobilise people, we must first explain the issues and educate them. This is also the intention behind the book we published at the end of 2019⁵, which was launched in the European Parliament. It shows not only the benefits to society of ocean information based on the highest scientific standards and disseminated to the widest possible audience, but also reminds us of all the threats to the ocean and all the opportunities the latter offers. It is important for young people to know that 80% of plastic pollution in the ocean comes from the land and to be aware of the role the ocean plays in storing carbon, but it is also essential to make them aware of all the economic sectors and professions related to the sea, especially those that did not exist less than two decades ago and that have now been made possible thanks to the explosion of digital technology: these include satellite experts, data scientists, specialists in sustainable finance, producers of marine thermal energy, researchers involved in the fight against plastic or oil pollution at sea, specialists in underwater acoustic forecasting and underwater archaeologists... The list is endless! With the support of our shareholders and the European Union, and in partnership with many organisations, we train users and also do whatever we can to inspire younger people. The lives they choose and their educational choices are also powerful factors for ensuring a healthy ocean and a healthy planet.

How urgent is it to develop environmental data champions in Europe at a time when international giants such as the GAFAs are gaining a foothold here?

Catherine Chabaud: This is definitely an urgent need in a multilateral context, which is why we need a concerted European strategy to develop these champions. In this sense, the work carried out by Mercator Ocean International for the EU's Copernicus Marine Service is absolutely essential, both in terms of marine data collection and coordination of services. This is what Mercator conveys in its "Blue Book, Copernicus for a Sustainable Ocean" aimed at all European citizens, including decision-makers, students and young people, with the aim of informing everyone about how the Copernicus Marine Service benefits society as a whole. Its contributors

include policy-makers, entrepreneurs, experts and scientists from around the world who are directly involved in ocean issues. Making this information available to the general public through a very educational book is an extremely important contribution to the fight for a more sustainable marine space. It's a great initiative that we should perpetuate and consolidate!

Pierre Bahurel: Your feedback is most welcome, thank you. We wholeheartedly agree with you that the "ocean is a common good of humanity", and that we need to protect it. The concept adds another dimension to our efforts. The knowledge we disseminate is in the public interest. Our experience with the Copernicus Marine Service shows that between science and society, between the production of scientific knowledge and the ever-expanding needs of users for reliable ocean data, it is imperative to develop European resources for the production, pooling and dissemination of ocean data which is standardised, educational, secure and based on the best cloud standards. In this respect, the future European data policy to be implemented by European Commissioner Thierry Breton⁶, is also crucial. France and Europe need a champion for ocean information to ensure their autonomy and leadership. At the nexus of ocean science, ocean observation, European environmental programmes, climate and ecological challenges, and players in the blue economy, Mercator Ocean International is a precursor of this leadership and needs French and European political support to consolidate its pioneering work and to hold its own against the international digital giants on both sides of... the Pacific Ocean.

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(5) The "Blue Book, Copernicus for a Sustainable Ocean" ISBN 978-2-9570294-1-9 published online at www.mercator-ocean.fr.

(6) Commissioner for Industrial Policy, the Internal Market, Digital Affairs, Defence and Space Policy.