

Science for Environment Policy

The Irish marine environment: high public awareness, but low trust in management

The Irish public are sceptical of government and industry's ability to manage the marine economy, finds a survey. However, they place a large amount of trust in scientists. The research also indicates that people living in Ireland have a reasonable level of knowledge of the importance of different marine ecosystem services.

In 2010 marine related economic activity was estimated to be worth €1.2 billion to the Irish economy. Yet coastal and marine environments are under threat from a number of pressures, such as marine [litter](#), pollution and [climate change](#), and action is required to mitigate these threats and improve the quality of [marine environments](#).

The [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#)¹ (MSFD) requires EU Member States to use an integrated approach to achieve a 'good environmental status' of marine waters by 2020. Part of the integrated approach involves incorporating the viewpoints of many different stakeholders in how the marine environment is managed. The position of organised groups of stakeholders, such as industry or environmental groups, are often captured in policy consultations. However, the opinions of ordinary citizens are difficult to include in the decision making process and the views of citizens towards the marine environment are relatively unknown.

The researchers explored the values, concerns and preferences towards the Irish marine environment of 812 individuals through a national survey. The survey was conducted in such a way as to capture a representative sample of the population, as recorded in the 2011 census.

Areas covered by the survey included concern about the threats to the marine environment, the level of support for marine planning and action, and views on the competence of different groups to manage the marine environment.

Respondents saw the greatest threats as industrial pollution and litter. Less than 50% perceived a threat from [agriculture](#), despite being identified as a threat by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency. Sixty eight per cent of people believed that the marine environment was in a good state.

Both market (e.g. food and tourism) and non-market (e.g. climate and recreation) ecosystem services were rated as being highly important by respondents. The three most important services offered by Irish seas and coasts were believed to be: a marine food source (91%), the oceans as a tool to regulate the environment (87%) and recreation and tourism (86%).

Compared to other EU nations, (France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the UK) the Irish public were far more sceptical of the ability of both government and industry to make plans about where and when different activities can happen at sea, i.e. marine spatial planning. Instead the Irish public placed more trust in the competency of scientists than policymakers to achieve this task. This suggests that a greater, or more transparent, role for scientists in marine policy formation could result in greater support from the public.

Overall, the study uncovered a number of details about the Irish public's perception and attitudes towards the marine environment and its management. This suggests that this type of survey could be used to help inform marine policy development, by gathering information on the opinions and preferences of communities using, or affected by, coastal and marine resources.



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1. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:164:0019:0040:EN:PDF>