

In depth: Biggest-ever European Maritime Day offers an exciting world of discovery

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I am diving in the clear waters off the coast of Calabria. A few fish pass slowly to my left. Looking down, I spot several big stone blocks on the seabed. As I move closer to take a better look, a voice in my ear tells me these marble slabs were being carried by a large Roman Empire barge when it sank in the 3rd century AD.

A touch on my arm brings me back to reality: not underwater, but inside the Congress Centre in Lisbon, where the 2019 edition of European Maritime Day (EMD) is currently in full swing. Courtesy of the EU-funded [BLUMED project](#) [2] and equipped with headphones and a pair of virtual reality goggles, I have just experienced the Punta Scifo D shipwreck in the EMD exhibition hall.

With 1500 registered participants, EMD 2019 has broken all previous records, including for the biggest ever exhibition, with 105 exhibitors. Walking around offers a glimpse into the exciting opportunities our seas offer – and that plenty of businesses are starting to grasp.

Business opportunities from the sea

A few stands further down, for example, Lisbon-based [Algae for Future \(A4F\)](#) [3] are showing off test tubes with colourful microalgae extracts. Founded in 2008, A4F are aiming to replace chemical components used, for example, as food colouring or in cosmetics, with microalgae. As COO Luis Costa explains: “We don’t produce the microalgae ourselves, but we do produce the technology that our clients use. We hope to scale up eventually.” They currently employ 40-50 people and are testing

their technology on a 14ha site.

Meanwhile, at the pitch stage, seats are in short supply as people stop by to get a glimpse of the blue economy of the future. Pedro Pires from [WavEC](#) [4] explains new engineering solutions for both wave energy and offshore aquaculture sites. Silvia Lino, research scientist at biopharmaceutical company [Sea4Us](#) [5], is investigating into how new chemical compounds from marine organisms could help “switch off pain”.



The conversations carry on in the two B2B meeting areas, where the air is full of intense energy, as participants exchange business cards and gather around laptops to demonstrate their products. A total of 320 B2B meetings have been scheduled using the conference app, with extra slots added to accommodate demand. As the end of the coffee break arrives, participants linger, in no hurry to move

They're missing out – as I discover, the official [programme](#) [6] of workshops (organised by maritime stakeholders) and breakout sessions (led by the European Commission) offers plenty of inspiring stories of its own.

In the blue bioeconomy workshop, João Rito, a researcher who founded sustainable aquaculture start-up [SEAentia](#) [7], explains his career journey from researcher to entrepreneur. “Thinking as a researcher is completely different from thinking as a businessman. But we have a great opportunity that we didn't have 10 or so years ago: the possibility to find mentors and learn from them.” And learn he did. “From the first idea, it changed a lot. Even basic things like the type of fish we wanted to farm. It took several years.”

Gonçalo Costa from [Biomimetx](#) [8] chimes in: “When we started we didn't know how to talk business. We didn't know how to sell.” Realising this weakness, they joined an accelerator programme. There they learned how best to sell their idea of developing a “green” antifouling additive to marine paints: focusing less on the science, and more on how would-be investors can benefit. The company went on to raise 1.6 million EUR of venture capital in Portugal. “I don't think science can be put aside. But you have to emphasise what you have to offer, your value proposition,” Gonçalo concludes.

Role of EU funding

Back at the pitch stage, EU executive agency EASME is showcasing [EU-funded projects](#) [9], focusing on everything from tidal energy to recycling old fishing nets to using large sails to reduce emissions from large ships.



In fact, what is striking is just how important the EU has been in getting many exciting blue economy projects and businesses off the ground.

In a breakout session on EU-backed innovation, Chiara Petrioli from [Archeosub](#) [10] describes how her team has developed underwater internet technology, allowing underwater robots to exchange real-time data with people on the surface. The project began under the EU's 7th research framework programme and has grown into a company of more than 25 employees, now supported by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

"This is a ground-breaking technology, but at the beginning the market was not ready. Getting access to EU funding and a loan backed by the European Investment Bank really allowed us to scale up and sustain our growth. Now we are on the market since one year and a half," Chiara explains.

The company started out focusing on archaeology and underwater cultural heritage, but its technology has since proven useful far beyond, e.g. in offshore energy or aquaculture. Yet with surprising frankness Chiara concedes that: "We have made a lot of mistakes. We were just lucky that the market was not yet ready for this technology."

Simon Forrest, CEO at Scottish tidal energy company [Nova Innovation](#) [11], also benefitted from EU funding. Founded in 2010, they were the first company in the world to successfully deliver an offshore tidal array, in Shetland. Their core product is a 100kW plug-and-play power station. "It's basically like an IKEA flat pack," Simon jokes. "We can export it to anywhere in the world."

His conclusion is clear: “EU support has turbocharged our company.” And it’s not just the funding that’s European. “The new turbine we’re working on has 16 suppliers from all across Europe: Germany, Greece, Estonia... This is actually a European product. The benefits go all around Europe.”

Value of cooperation and communication

As I move between workshops, I begin to note several recurring themes. One is the added value of cooperation, whether in coastguard operations, data-sharing, or research and innovation.

In a workshop on seafood, Jose Manuel San Emeterio presents ongoing efforts to promote [cooperation among seafood clusters](#) [12] in the Atlantic. One of the biggest benefits, he explains, is how their project brings together partners from five different countries, but also with very different competences. This diversity is helping the project to pilot software and apps that improve the performance of the seafood sector.

And sometimes, cooperation starts at home. As one speaker points out: “In Italy alone we have 8 different ministries. We need to coordinate. This makes the country become stronger at EU level as well.”

Another shared theme is that of communication. For Elżbieta Berkowska, working as a policy analyst for the Polish Parliament, this is already the 8th EMD. Her face lights up as she talks about why she keeps coming back. “Bringing all maritime people together like this is a wonderful idea, very useful. I wait all year to attend this event!” This year she spent her first morning in a workshop discussing the social acceptability challenge of aquaculture. “It was very interesting to hear that people in other European countries share some of the challenges we in Poland are facing.”

Meanwhile, in the ocean literacy workshop, the need for new ocean stories and narratives draws murmurs of agreement from the audience. In a workshop on green and sustainable ports, researcher Angela Carpenter describes communication as a [key challenge for ports](#) [13] in developing more sustainable business models. “Local communities often see ports as a necessary evil. Better communication makes for a happier, healthier community and less conflict.”

Using the oceans sustainably

By far the biggest theme however, is how to use the oceans sustainably. As Commissioner Vella said at the opening: “There is something uniting us: the will to protect the oceans.” Challenges like plastic pollution, climate change, or environmental degradation are on everybody’s minds. And participants are not afraid of tackling them.



João Costa, Innovation Manager at XLAB Slovenia, presents ongoing [work](#) [14] to develop a “port environmental index” that combines several KPIs like emissions, waste production and light pollution into one metric. This would allow small and medium ports to easily monitor and act on the environmental footprint.

Over at the interactive marine litter workshop, organiser Mariana Mata Lara from [AQUALIT](#) [15] has divided participants into groups to find solutions under four main headings: marine litter prevention, recovery, transformation, and mapping and quantification. Discussions are lively and result in a number of concrete ideas: from introducing regional tenders for waste management to create economies of scale, to asking producers to rent out fishing gear instead of selling it, thereby creating a business model with in-built producer responsibility.

As the event draws to a close, I remember two things I have heard repeated over the past two days. The first is that we don’t inherit the oceans from our ancestors, but borrow them from future generations. The second is that any successful project includes the thinkers, the doers, the communicators – but also the funders. The beauty of EMD, I reflect, is that it brings all of those people into one room. And if the energy of this year’s event is anything to go by, the next generation may have a little less to worry about.

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