

Blue spaces: how to promote health and wellbeing in Europe

Friday 20.11.2020, 15:00-16:00 CEST

Welcome addresses

Tonino Picula, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) President of the Seas, Rivers, Islands & Coastal Areas (SEArICA) Intergroup welcomed the participants and briefly presented the SEArICA Intergroup. While reminding of the importance that coastal areas and maritime spaces play in the EU, with 200 million Europeans living in cities established on coastlines, river networks, and lakes, he highlighted the need for a holistic European maritime strategy linked to the Green Deal. He finally welcomed the research undertaken to quantify the benefits of living near blue spaces and called for the elaboration of policy solutions based on the evidence found.

Keynote speeches

Lora Fleming, Professor at the European Centre for Environment and Human Health (ECEHH) of the University of Exeter (UK) gave an overview of the evolution of academic research on blue health and introduced the EU-funded Blue Health project. She explained that previous research on the effects of natural environments on health and well-being tended to focus on green spaces, while ignoring the importance of marine environments. She then underlined the potential of blue health policies in the EU, which has over 91,000 km of coastline and outlined the results of the research. She presented the solutions and tools developed for communities, planners and individuals on how to measure environments and their benefits on social behaviors. Finally, she briefly presented the H2020 Seas, Oceans and Public Health in Europe ([SOPHIE](#)) Project.

Lewis Elliott, Lecturer at the University of Exeter presented insights from the [BlueHealth International Survey](#), which gathered 18,838 respondents from 18 countries and territories over 2017-2018. The survey shows that populations having less connection to nature, or which spend less time in nature, have poorer mental wellbeing. The authors of the study also found evidence that increasing the contact with nature significantly reduces the probability of mental distress, smoking and excessive drinking, and increases mental well-being. Finally, he explained that a high environmental quality of blue spaces, e.g. an increase in water quality, is associated with an increase in added value for the country or region.

Mireia Gascon, Assistant Research Professor at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal) presented several examples of blue health interventions based on the [blue health toolbox](#) for planners, architects, decision makers, communities, which are a set of guidelines developed to foster the development of blue health projects. She then showed that small-scale projects improving access to water in [Tallinn](#) and Tartu, Estonia led to an increase in the use of these areas. Similarly, she underlined that two projects in [Barcelona](#) respectively easing access to an urban river and encouraging workers to walk to their office showed positive results.

Susanne Wuijts, Susanne Wuijts Senior Researcher and Policy Advisor at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) gave an overview of the risk-benefit assessment of blue spaces through the [Decision Support Tool \(DST\)](#) developed to inform planning, designing and management of blue spaces. She then displayed several examples of urban blue spaces management in [Amsterdam](#), Rotterdam and [Plymouth](#). Finally, she concluded that the EU regulatory framework in this sector is sufficient but stressed that urban issues require further guidance.

Sieglinde Gruber, Head of the Healthy Oceans & Seas Unit in the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission concluded the webinar by pleading for a cross-disciplinary approach to explore opportunities and challenges related to blue spaces and blue health. She welcomed this global shift from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity as a way to efficiently tackle environmental challenges. She then briefly presented the way the European Commission intends to implement its commitments to sustainable development, the 2030 agenda and its DGs through external as well as internal policy actions. She emphasized the growing importance of these commitments in light of the Covid-19 crisis, stressing that the pandemic provides an additional impetus to steer the recovery in an environmentally friendly direction. She concluded by pointing out the need to overhaul the EU's policies pertaining to all dimensions of the economy in order to protect and restore natural ecosystems and thus improve human health.