Abstract to WG I

The marine environment is subject to a variety of threats, ranging from loss or degradation of biodiversity and habitats to effects of climate change. Particularly coastal areas are at threat. The related pressures include commercial fishing, shipping, pollution from dangerous substances and nutrients, discharge of sewage, waste dumping, shrinkage/removal of wetlands and invasion of alien species etc. Also climate change has and will have an even greater effect on coastal areas in terms of sea level rise and extreme weather conditions which adversely impact local communities and the economy. Measures to control and reduce these pressures and impacts mainly exist at a global and regional level in the form of global MEAs and regional agreements such as the Barcelona Convention for the Mediterranean, OSPAR for the North-East Atlantic and the Helsinki Convention for the Baltic Sea. These agreements are supplemented and made operational with the establishment of legalized institutions and action programmes (e.g., MAP).

However, in the case of many of these marine threats it is vital to maximize the spectrum of cooperation to also include sub-regional and local initiatives and actors, especially in the case of contingency planning and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), where cooperation and coordination with neighbouring countries is essential. In this regard, cooperation and measures should ideally be developed and carried out also through a regional or sub-regional action plan on marine protection. This action plan should contain realistic but comprehensive objectives, indicators and measures. A good example of such an action plan is the Baltic Sea Action Plan developed and coordinated by the parties to the Helsinki Commission on the Baltic Sea.

To achieve efficient marine protection and contingency planning it is very useful to take an eco-system approach, whereby the cooperation and planned measures cover the entire eco-system. In this regard, the IMO designation of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSA) is very important. In the case of the northern part of the Adriatic Sea, IMO is considering this designation. This designation would have many implications. Firstly, cooperation and coordination needs to be strengthened to tackle marine pollution and conservation issues in a more holistic and integrated manner. Secondly, this designation would require the development of a regional seas action plan. Thirdly, more stringent measures need to be introduced to protect the PSSA against pollution and biodiversity loss. It would not be possible to allow potentially polluting activities (e.g. oil platforms, gas terminals or even shipping of polluting substances) near to the coast line. EIA would be required for virtually all human activities close to sea and measures might also have to be taken to reduce the environmental impact from tourism. In terms of shipping, it would be even more important to ensure that only doubled hulled ships are allowed passage. Also additional marine protected areas (MPA) would need to be designated to allow marine species to recover and thrive.

Hence, cooperation at all levels, efficient legal and institutional frameworks, development of ICZM and contingency planning mainly on the sub-regional level, and the taking of an eco-system approach are all important factors to efficient marine protection and emergency prepardness. All of these measures should be taken with a participatory approach, involving industry, authorities, international organizations, NGOs, the research community, local communities and the general public as such. Public participation is mainly realized through certain developed tools such as Environmental Impact Assessment or Strategic Environmental Assessment. It is tremendously beneficial to have wide consultation and discussions on major strategic documents, including ICZM and contingency plans.