EUROPEAN SEAGRASS RESTORATION ALLIANCE

European Seagrass Recommendations 2026

On the future of seagrass restoration in Europe

In this document, Ecological Restoration is defined as:

"The process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed".

Society for Ecological Restoration.

This encompasses the full continuum between 'passive and active' restoration approaches (EU Nature Restoration Regulation, Article 3(4) 2024/1991) - from stressor removal, such as tacking anchoring and propeller scars or improving water quality, and establishing protected areas, through process-based interventions such as reducing hydrodynamic stress and enhancing light conditions, to the active planting of seeds, seedlings, shoots, or sods.

Crucially, restoration is not solely an ecological endeavour; it aims to restore socio-ecological integrity, ensuring that restored ecosystems continue to deliver benefits for people and the planet, including the recovery of ecosystem functions and services such as supporting commercial and subsistence fisheries and carbon capture and storage.

European Seagrass Restoration Alliance
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Preface

Few ecosystems carry as much discrete significance as **seagrass meadows**. Among the most productive ecosystems on Earth, they underpin coastal economies by supporting fisheries productivity, enabling recreation, and contributing to the **cultural and environmental heritage of coastal communities across Europe.** As **nature-based solutions,** they protect our shorelines from erosion and floods, filter water and capture and store carbon, contributing to climate change mitigation and regulation. Despite this immense value, seagrass meadows have declined dramatically across Europe and, in some places, have disappeared entirely. Yet, some hopeful signs of recovery have been observed following management interventions, including restoration.

The European Seagrass Restoration Alliance (ESRA) originated from a single, urgent mission: to safeguard European seagrass meadows for current and future generations. As a collaborative platform, ESRA bridges the gap between research and evidence-based, large-scale practice, connecting the European seagrass restoration community and creating a **unified voice** for these critical habitats.

Over the last century, European seagrasses have endured catastrophic declines. Driven by reduced water quality, disease, unsustainable fishing practices, the spread of invasive species, the uncontrolled expansion of recreational activities and rampant coastal development, the majority of our historic meadows have disappeared. Yet, there is **hope for the recovery** in the remnant seagrass populations still present in most European nations, and in the potential new seagrass habitats that have become available in modified coastal systems. Early attempts to reverse this negative trend were often marked by slow progress and frequent failures, leading many to view seagrass restoration as an insurmountable challenge. That narrative is now changing.

Of about seventy-two species worldwide, only four seagrass species are native to European waters: *Posidonia oceanica, Cymodocea nodosa, Zostera marina and Zostera noltii*, and yet these four are biologically diverse. Indeed, in Europe, communicating 'seagrass restoration' presents a distinct challenge, because it encompasses very different habitat types under the same umbrella: from long-lived, structurally complex systems such as Posidonia meadows (more comparable to oak forests), to more dynamic and fast-growing systems such as Zostera and Cymodocea meadows (closer in nature to terrestrial grasslands).

For some species, and in some systems, we are moving from small-scale trials to large-scale projects that prove that seagrass restoration is not only possible but truly transformative. By expanding seagrass cover, we are reviving critical marine ecosystems, strengthening coastal economies, and enhancing community resilience in the face of a rapidly changing climate. We now find ourselves at a critical juncture. The world is moving fast: climate change, marine heatwaves and unprecedented conditions or ecological novelty are creating new pressures, but **the political will to act has never been stronger.** ESRA's work is embedded in a global movement, aligned with the **UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the legally binding targets of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation.**

Growing financial investments, alongside the ambition sparked by emerging nature credit dialogues, are focusing attention and accelerating the momentum for restoration. **But as ambition grows, so must our rigour.** Seagrass restoration in Europe is still in its infancy, and **significant knowledge gaps remain. Restoration at scale for all seagrass species will simply not be possible without addressing open scientific issues.** Because seagrass grows in vastly different environments across Europe - from the brackish Baltic Sea and tidal Atlantic, to lagoons and the clear waters of the Mediterranean Sea - no one-size-fits-all methodology will suffice. **Science, and the open sharing of knowledge, must therefore remain central** to realising the full potential of seagrass recovery across our coastal seas.

ESRA provides continuity in a fragmented field. We operate on **FAIR principles,** ensuring that data are Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable, and the **CARE principles,** a complementary set of guidelines for Indigenous Data Governance that stands for Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics. Our community is built on a **foundation of transparency and trust.** Sharing our failures matters as much as celebrating our successes; by openly discussing what has not worked, we sharpen our standards, advance technological solutions and help ensure that every investment delivers the greatest possible impact. ESRA stands on the shoulders of a century of dedicated research and conservation, and builds on the energy of the scientific community that has driven European seagrass collaboration forward.

At the founding of our alliance, **ESRA established a set of recommendations to provide a unified, continent-wide consensus for action, set high scientific standards, offer credibility to stakeholders, and inform realistic targets for policymakers.** To remain at the forefront of this field, we commit to regularly renewing these recommendations, reflecting the latest advances in ecology, socio-economics, engineering, and biology.

Our guiding principle is clear: we must conserve and protect first. Restoration is not a licence to destroy existing habitats, nor is it a simple tool for environmental offsetting. It is a vital intervention to rebuild the scale and resilience of our seascapes. **Through this document, we aim to provide the transnational guidance necessary to help turn the tide, ensuring that European seagrasses remain a vibrant, living legacy for generations to come.**

Consensus

The European Seagrass Recommendations were written following discussions on the need for a European ‘consensus’ at the 2nd European Seagrass Restoration Workshop. This Workshop was hosted by Le Parc naturel marin du Bassin d'Arcachon in France from the 8th to the 10th of April 2025. It was attended by 211 people from 17 European countries and the USA, South Africa, and Australia.

The European Seagrass Recommendations document was then drafted by topic and species representatives from across Europe during the European Seagrass Recommendations Workshop hosted by the University of Groningen in Schiermonnikoog, The Netherlands, from the 17th to the 20th of February 2026. This workshop was attended by 26 people from 12 European countries. This draft document was then sent for review to a further 26 colleagues from 15 European countries, so that, in total, participants from 17 European countries co-created this document. The editors then integrated the comments and suggestions.

Recommendations

1. Safeguard existing meadows.

Background:

Healthy, mature seagrass meadows deliver far greater ecological benefits than newly restored areas. Restored meadows require time to expand and to develop the complex canopy structures and root systems that underpin ecosystem functions and services. For example, carbon capture and storage increases gradually as organic matter accumulates in the seabed, a process that has been ongoing for decades, centuries, or even millenia in well-functioning meadows. When mature meadows are lost, these long-term benefi ts disappear and cannot be quickly regained through restoration. Preventing damage to existing seagrass should therefore be a primary management priority.

Recommendation:

Prioritise the protection of existing seagrass meadows to prevent further degradation and enhance their resilience against climate change threats. **Restoration should complement, not replace, strong conservation measures.**

2. Reduce pressures first.

Background:

Without reducing the underlying causes of degradation, seagrass restoration efforts are unlikely to deliver lasting results. Successful seagrass restoration begins with identifying and reducing or removing the human-induced pressures that have historically caused losses and continue to prevent natural recovery. Key stressors include eutrophication, pollution, fishing impacts, increased turbidity, physical disturbance or removal (e.g. boat anchoring, dredging and construction of coastal infrastructure), invasive species, and disease. Attempting restoration before the original causes of decline are addressed is a common reason why many restoration projects fail. Addressing these pressures - for example, by improving water quality, implementing effective protection measures, and removing physical impacts can stimulate natural recovery and create the environmental conditions needed for accelerating the recovery of seagrass through active planting.

In some locations, pressures may not be sufficiently reduced prior to active restoration. Stressors such as climate change or permanent hydrographic modifications (e.g. harbour constructions or coastal defences) often mean that pressures are structural and irreversible. While climate change cannot be mitigated locally, recovery may remain possible when other stressors are reduced.

Recommendation:

Identify and reduce or remove key environmental pressures where possible to create suitable conditions for recovery. **Planting** should be used to promote recovery **only after underlying stressors have been sufficiently addressed.**

3. Identify the past, present, and future potential of seagrass habitat to guide restoration.

Background:

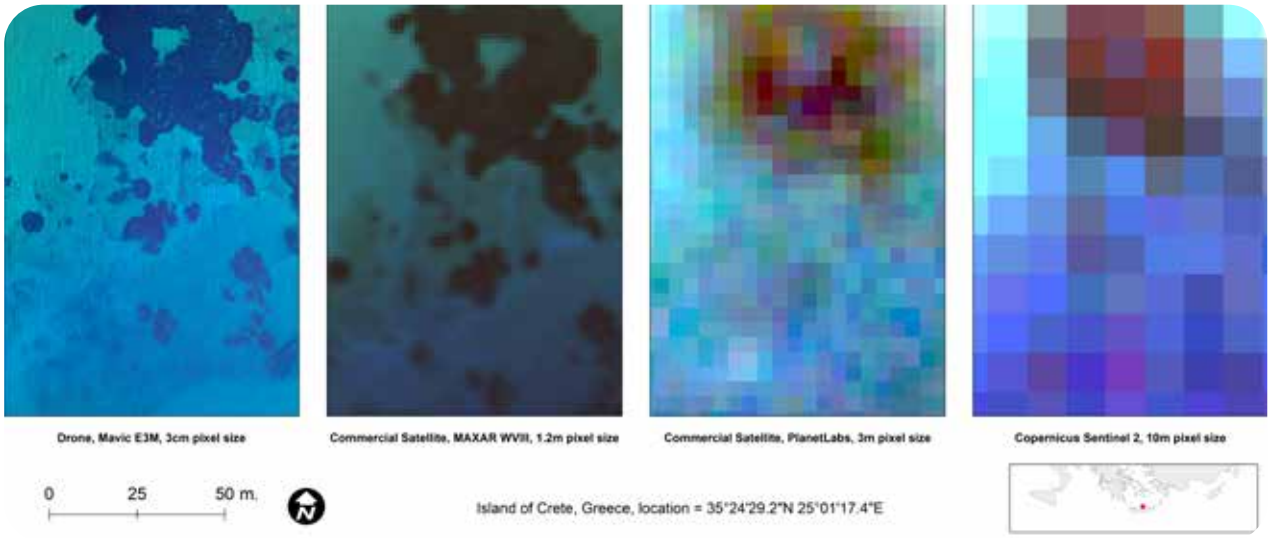
Effective seagrass restoration requires a clear understanding of where meadows occurred in the past and where they persist today, but most importantly, where they are most likely to thrive in the future under forecasted conditions, including climate and human alterations.

Reconstructing historical reference conditions through coring is opening a window into the deeper past, enabling us to reconstruct the presence of historic seagrass meadows. Simultaneously, a comprehensive and regularly updated overview of current European seagrass distribution and status is needed, including genetic structure and connectivity. The mapping of seascape connectivity through habitat linkages and metapopulation dynamics is critical, as it influences long-term resilience and restoration success. Such assessments can reveal trends such as decline, natural recovery, species shifts, and the spread of invasive species, and can support reporting, monitoring, and implementation under European Union (EU) policy frameworks, including the alignment with nature repair credit financing mechanisms.

Looking ahead, restoration planning should also anticipate future establishment opportunities by identifying habitats likely to remain or become suitable for seagrass under changing and novel environmental conditions. Marine spatial planning must identify ecologically and socially suitable sites by capturing both space (e.g., the seagrass Essential Ocean Variables - EOVs) and place (local ecological knowledge, diverse activities, and place values), to more equitably inform coastal restoration planning and meaningfully embed local perspectives.

Recommendation:

Restoration planning should be guided by **socially** and **ecologically** suitable places, and by integrated assessments of **historical distribution, current meadow status**, and **future habitat potential** to support adaptive and resilient long-term marine spatial planning.



4. Long-term monitoring is essential for adaptive management.

Background:

Ecological monitoring for restoration projects should be designed to provide consistent data on seagrass presence and health over sufficiently long timeframes - at least 10 years - to capture natural variability and long-term ecosystem dynamics and trends, and critically to ensure that the conclusions we derive on the 'success' of transplantation projects are reliable. Tracking key environmental variables, such as water quality and light availability, may be necessary both to confirm that the drivers of past declines have been addressed and to detect ongoing environmental change. Moreover, monitoring is required to evaluate successes and failures, improve restoration approaches, and understand how both natural and restored meadows respond to current and future pressures, including climate change. In addition, monitoring ecosystem functions and services, such as carbon capture and storage and biodiversity gains, helps demonstrate the broader ecological and societal benefits of restoration.

The long-term monitoring of socio-economic benefits of ecosystem restoration projects is also still too often underprioritized. Socio-economic monitoring before, during, and after the project is required to demonstrate that ecosystem restoration also benefits society. Together, these data provide the evidence base needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the restoration, to adjust management actions over time, and to ensure that restoration measures remain effective under changing environmental, economic, and societal conditions.

Recommendation:

Implement long-term monitoring of environmental conditions, restoration trials, and ecosystem functions and services to **support adaptive management,** improve restoration success, and demonstrate ecological and societal benefits.

5. Develop evidence-based approaches and promote ethical knowledge sharing.

Background:

Effective seagrass restoration should be grounded in evidence-based approaches that integrate existing scientific knowledge, practical experience, and local knowledge. Site-specific environmental conditions can greatly influence outcomes, highlighting the need for an integrated, adaptive, and data-driven approach. System-and species-specific guidelines, including decision-support tools, will help managers and practitioners select appropriate sites, methods and donor material while reducing uncertainty and risk.

Scaling up restoration will depend on continued methodological innovation, including the strategic use of technology, process-based approaches that address ecological feedbacks, and risk reduction in planting design through the optimisation of scale, density, and spatial arrangement. Creating and continuously improving system- and species-specific guidance, including decision-support tools, will help managers and practitioners select appropriate sites, methods and donor material while reducing uncertainty and risk. Clear, shared ethical principles and measurable success metrics are needed to align restoration actions with realistic ecological goals and evolving policy objectives.

Recommendation:

Develop **shared, evidence-based, and accessible restoration guidance** with **clear and realistic success metrics;** promote **ethical practices;** and support adaptive management through **continuous knowledge exchange** to guide and future-proof restoration.

6. Build human capacity.

Background:

People are at the heart of successful seagrass restoration efforts. To accelerate progress, sustained investment in capacity building and professional development is essential. Practitioners, managers and policymakers need the right skills, practical experience, and a solid understanding of how seagrass ecosystems function to design, implement, and scale up effective restoration and associated policy. Strengthening seagrass literacy through knowledge exchange and skills development across the sector will increase the impact and efficiency of restoration efforts. However, as restoration moves towards professionalisation and commercial delivery, the bottleneck for scaling up is not only knowledge or experience, but also permanent operational infrastructure. Healthy seagrass habitats must also be recognised not only as ecological assets, but as critical natural infrastructure that supports human well-being through fisheries productivity, coastal protection, biodiversity, and carbon capture and storage. Acknowledging these societal benefi ts helps overcome social and institutional barriers, strengthens public and political support, and fosters long-term stewardship and social impact. Co-design and leadership by local communities and stakeholders from the beginning are equally important, as they increase the likelihood of successful restoration in the long term.

Innovation and scale require structured collaboration across the 'quadruple helix' of science, policy, industry, and society, as well as the organisational and commercial infrastructure to deliver it. A skilled workforce is needed to implement restoration at scale whilst embedding community-led approaches. By developing human and operational capacity in tandem, Europe can move towards successful seagrass restoration at scale.

Recommendation:

Invest in both the **human capacity** - training and education - and the **organisational and commercial infrastructure** to build professional restoration capacity and improve seagrass literacy; **strengthen stakeholder and community engagement** through co-design; and foster cross-sector collaboration and public **recognition of seagrass as critical natural infrastructure.**

7. Align governance, policy, and financing mechanisms with science for restoration.

Background:

Effective seagrass restoration at scale requires governance, policy, and financing frameworks that are coherent, enabling, and firmly grounded in scientific evidence. However, legislative reform must come first. Where current regulatory frameworks are poorly designed, they can actively constrain restoration by limiting where activities may take place and which methods may be used, forcing practitioners into suboptimal sites and approaches with negative consequences for success and cost-effectiveness. Across Europe, legislation should therefore be better harmonised and streamlined to support cross-border restoration efforts, systematically identifying and addressing regulatory bottlenecks such as licensing and permitting requirements that delay or restrict activities, while embedding restoration objectives within existing environmental, climate and marine policy instruments. Only once this legislative foundation is in place can financing mechanisms deliver their full potential.

Substantial upscaling of funding is required to align with upscaling restoration practice. For this, we must establish financing mechanisms that are ethical, grounded in high integrity, scientific robustness, transparency, and equitable benefit sharing. Crucially, these models must ensure additionality while maximising long-term ecological permanence, aligning with broader climate adaptation, biodiversity recovery, water purification and other blue economy goals and funding streams. By collectively aligning science, policy, and finance, we will create the right enabling conditions needed to move past short-term pilot projects and deliver durable, seascape restoration efforts.

Recommendation:

Harmonise or create new European policies and regulations to enable restoration through clear, streamlined permitting, the **removal of administrative barriers,** and strengthen the integration of existing and new environmental and climate frameworks. This must be supported by a **substantial increase in long-term, fair, and continuous funding streams, along with novel financing mechanisms,** to deliver lasting, large-scale ecological outcomes.

8. Develop and optimise resilient seagrass supply chains.

Background:

Achieving active seagrass restoration at scale requires a reliable and sustainable supply of donor material. This can be supported by securing long-term supply chains that combine responsible harvesting from wild donor populations with the development of dedicated nurseries operating at commercial scales. In some nations, seagrass habitat fragmentation, the disappearance of meadows and seed banks, and a resulting lack of ecological connectivity mean that the natural recovery of seagrass is unlikely. In these cases, the introduction of propagules (seeds or transplants) is essential. This makes the choice of seeds or plants from a donor meadow a critical policy decision rather than a minor technical detail.

There is an urgent need to establish appropriate frameworks for sourcing and managing seagrass propagules, building on good practices whilst addressing the key knowledge gaps specific to marine systems. Critical risks of poor plant or seed sourcing include poor ecological adaptation (low germination and survival) and genetic pollution (loss of local adaptations).

These supply chains should be underpinned by responsible governance frameworks and scaled-up nursery capacity. Research should further explore assisted migration and the selection of climate-resilient genotypes to enhance adaptation to global change, while harvesting, processing, storage, planting, and monitoring techniques should be continuously optimised to improve effi ciency, survival rates, genetic diversity and connectivity.

Recommendation:

Develop **sustainable and climate-proof donor material supply chains** through ethical natural sourcing and expanded nursery capacity. Advance restoration methodologies by **optimising seed quality and production, harvesting, processing, storage, planting and monitoring techniques,** considering genetic aspects and develop methodologies and technologies to enable scaling.

An ethical foundation.

Given the rapid pace of environmental change and unprecedented ecological novelty, seagrass restoration must follow an adaptive, iterative management approach that remains responsive to changing conditions. Transparent reporting of both successes and failures, combined with continued knowledge development and the open sharing of lessons learned, is essential to improving practice and accelerating seagrass recovery.

Seagrass restoration programmes should embed strong ethical standards, including the use of the best available knowledge, the protection of donor meadows, the consideration of genetic diversity and biosecurity risks, meaningful inclusion of stakeholder and indigenous knowledge, and the recognition of collective benefits, all within full regulatory compliance.

Local communities are central to successful restoration. People living close to seagrass meadows often hold invaluable knowledge and deep cultural connections to these ecosystems. Meaningfully integrating and externally recognising this knowledge can unlock solutions that address both restoration goals and local development needs.

We support research on assisted migration and climate-resilient genotypes to enhance adaptation to global change. However, these approaches carry real ecological and ethical risks, including unintended impacts on local gene pools and biosecurity. Such decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, guided by the best available genetic and ecological evidence.

As a community, we call for the establishment of an Open Source and collective European Seagrass Data Observatory, encompassing cartography, monitoring data, and a database of European seagrass restoration projects. Ideally, this database would be integrated into existing initiatives within the European Digital Twin Ocean (EDITO), with a focus on seagrass. Seagrass is now a Global Ocean Observing System (GOOS) Essential Ocean Variable (EOV), providing standardised, scalable monitoring of its health, distribution and change across EU member states.

The participants of the 2nd European Seagrass Restoration Workshop in Arcachon, France, recognised the need to share experiences and lessons learned from restoration projects, as well as the value of coordinating policy and regulatory changes that promote or enable ethical seagrass restoration. The European Seagrass Restoration Alliance (ESRA) is committed to facilitating this work. We sign this consensus document as individuals committed to seagrass restoration, and not on behalf of our employers or institutions.

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