Annual Report 2023

Stichting Varda continues to support the ocean advocacy community. As in 2021 and 2022, the bulk of the Stichting’s activities were in support of the “Our Fish” initiative. This year, the Stichting also provided a grant to the France-based BLOOM Association for campaign work in support of implementation of the European Common Fisheries Policy.

Our Fish

Our Fish is working to end overfishing and restore a healthy ocean ecosystem. By collaborating with others, and deploying robust evidence, Our Fish is calling for an end to overfishing as a critical and significant action to address the biodiversity and climate crises.

BLOOM

BLOOM is a non-profit organization founded in 2005 that works to preserve the marine environment and species from unnecessary destruction and to increase social benefits in the fishing sector.

Activities Report

Our Fish Activities in 2023

Fish-climate science & communications
- Our Fish continued to work with scientists to ensure the science behind “Fish are Carbon Engineers” and “fisheries management is carbon management” was developed and shared to increase the understanding of key policy makers, decision makers and the media:
Finalised a series of 9 scientific papers in the themed issue of *Frontiers in Marine Science* ‘How overfishing handicaps resilience of marine resources under climate change’. Our Fish talked to Seas At Risk about ensuring that they maximise the completion of this series with media and engagement activities, with authors;

Commissioned a one-stop shop scientific article, produced by Comms Inc and co-written by leading scientists Rashid Sumaila, Angela Martin, Emma Cavan, Grace Saba and William Cheung, to bring together all of the current science on this issue and provides a reliable, peer-reviewed reference for NGOs and others, submitted to *npj* for publishing (currently in peer review). SAR, Oceana and others have been connected with the authors and when it is published will also do support communications and advocacy, sharing the paper with other networks and policy-makers;

We worked with the **International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)** to introduce the idea of the fishing impacts on oceanic carbon – this has been a game-changer in the EU. ICES is the scientific body responsible for informing EU decision-making on fisheries management so they are critical to ensuring we have ecosystem and climate impact assessments of fishing and management to deal with these impacts. They hosted a workshop in ICES Headquarters 25-27 April 2023, with 40 participants in person and a further 50 online. Participants came from across the EU, America, Turkey and northern Africa. The group is in the process of producing a report, a policy advice briefing, continuing work on the three key streams, and running another workshop in 2024. Our Fish also successfully engaged other NGOs active on fisheries, so that they can monitor and continue to drive this process going forward – mainly BUND (Germany), Pew, Oceana and Global Fishing Watch.

- Our Fish worked with **partners** in Ireland and Denmark to communicate the narrative to decision makers and advisors at member state level, as well as EU and international level, including:
  - Presenting to the North Sea Fisheries and Climate Change webinar hosted by the **North Sea Advisory Council** on “Fisheries management as carbon management” (including stakeholders from governments, fishing industry, NGOs and science);
  - Highlighted the importance of ecosystem-based fisheries management for protection of biodiversity during the **Convention on Biological Diversity COP15 with a webinar** in December 2022 including Dr William Cheung, former vice-president of Sweden Isabella Lövin, Dr Emma Cavan, Ska Keller MEP, and Dr Guillermo Ortuño Crespo, with live interpretation in French and Spanish, and had over 100 attendees.
o Briefing for Members of Parliament in Denmark with WWF, FSK PO (low impact fishers of Europe) and hosted by local Danish Socialistik Folkepart marine environment rapporteur Marianne Bigum in April 2023;

o Briefing for TDs in the Irish Parliament in May 2023 on “Fisheries management is carbon management and climate action”, with Angela Martin, Dave Reid of Marine Institute, and Morgan Raffray of VertigoLab. This included follow up with the member of parliament to ask questions and pressure the government to act;

- Our Fish capitalised on the advocacy work with experts, thought leaders and decision makers, by following through with media releases, social media and Opinion Pieces, ensuring that we were repeating our message in various forums and forms:
  - Our Fish placed opinion pieces in The Parliament, EU Observer, and UNFCCC;
  - Our Fish achieved repeated coverage of reports and events in Politico, EuroNews, The Guardian, France24, EFeverde, The Irish Times, El Diario, and many more;
  - Quality of Twitter coverage for Our Fish was always more important than quantity. While we had many tens of thousands of email supporters, most of them were not on Twitter. Instead, Twitter proved an invaluable tool for sharing our messages, demands, narratives etc. with: national and EU level politicians, EU commission officials, people from NGOs, scientists and...
journalists. Between April 1 2-22 and June 28 2023, Our Fish tweets received at least 318,600 impressions (the number of times a tweet is seen). See Twitter Annex for more details.

- See Media Annex for more details and individual news pieces.

- Our Fish invested in communicating and building relationships with European citizens so that we could mobilise them online to show public support for important action to end overfishing and address the climate and biodiversity crisis. This resource was built and maintained over years, through continual updates and targeted actions:
  - At the end of the campaign, we had 33,821 subscribers to Our Fish, including 17,122 in English, 7018 in German, 5256 in Dutch and 4425 in Danish. 55% of the supporters were classed as highly engaged, and often open and click emails.
  - In November 2022, 2000 supporters wrote their own postcard messages to Commissioner Sinkevičius, asking for the EU to show leadership during the COP27 climate conference and shift to low impact, low carbon fishing;
  - 4,431 people signed a citizens’ letter calling on EU finance and tax ministers to end fuel tax subsidies for the fishing industry and instead invest public money in financial support that was good for people and planet;
  - Nearly 4,000 people sent an email message to the EU Commission, asking them to ensure real change for fair allocation of fishing quotas (implementation of CFP Article 17). Each supporter chose to focus on either benefits to the community, biodiversity, or climate.
  - At the close of Our Fish, we have worked with our digital mobilisation providers More Onion to make a legally compliant transition plan for Our Fish supporters to our partner NGOS Oceana (for the English, Dutch and Danish supporters) and Deutsche Umwelthilfe (German supporters). This involved ensuring the process was compliant with GDPR laws, and encouraging the supporters to sign up to the other NGOs (not just transferring their data). Unfortunately, Oceana doesn’t have the capacity to communicate in Danish and Dutch to the supporters, so mostly the English-speaking supporters have transferred – with 4,145 signing up to Oceana and 1,597 signing up to DUH. This is a very valuable resource for our partner NGOs, as building of supporter bases typically costs at least €5/person for subscriptions who are not educated or engaged like Our Fish supporters are.

- Our Fish finished our public campaign work in Europe with a huge public exhibition in front of the European Parliament in Brussels with our long-term collaborators Fishlove, including striking images of celebrities, highlighting ‘Ending overfishing in the EU: The decade to past and the decade to come’. The exhibition received overwhelming support, was seen by hundreds of citizens, policy makers and decision makers over the period of Ocean Week (5-9 June) and widespread media coverage.

- For our NGO partners, allies and fellow colleagues in the European Commission, Parliament, media, scientific, creative art, philanthropic and ocean sectors, we held a Gala event to celebrate the last 6 years of campaign work, with special guests actor Jean-Marc Barr, European Commissioner Viginijus Sinkevičius, MEP Ska Keller, Professor Rashid Sumaila and Fishlove founder Nicky Röhl.
“The things you have done are unbelievable. How many people are at Our Fish? You will be surprised. The power, the impact. [...] All of this gives me hope. This is just the beginning. Well done, thank you.” Professor Rashid Sumaila

“...We really need that louder voice, that voice that Our fish has been, we need that loud voice of civil society, we need it louder now, stronger now, because else we are not gonna manage ever.” Ska Keller MEP

- Watch this super short fun [film](#) to see some of the work of Our Fish did over the past 6 years.

### Just transition to low-impact, low-carbon fishing (CFP Art. 17)

- Our Fish continued to drive the agenda around implementation of the CFP’s Art.17 and the potential to use this as a key tool in the transition to low-impact and low-carbon fishing, both within the NGO sector and in Government. We held monthly calls with other NGOs to share information, resources and collective plan actions. This group is continuing now that Our Fish has closed, and will be predominantly led by SAR, with support and engagement from WWF and others.

- Our Fish commissioned [blue economy specialists VertigoLab](#) to write a report demonstrating how Article 17 can be applied in 2 fisheries – Haddock in the Celtic Sea and Plaice in the Baltic Sea. The report “[Empowering EU fisheries policy to restore marine health, tackle climate change and create jobs](#)” demonstrated that France, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Sweden and Denmark would grow jobs, decrease ecological impacts and maintain economic output. The report was launched in April 2023 with a press briefing, attracting [media coverage](#), and was presented to Ministers and government staff in France, Germany, Denmark and Ireland, along with local partners.
Our Fish also organised a briefing for European Commission staff “Fisheries management as carbon management and climate action” to raise awareness of the importance of the ocean biological pump to climate mitigation, provide an update from the latest scientific workshop with ICES on fishing impacts on ecosystems and carbon, and to communicate the potential of Article 17 implementation to address these problems. Over thirty people connected online and approximately twenty people joined in person, with participants from DG MARE, CINEA, DG ENV, DG CLIMA and DG RTD. Oceana and SAR staff joined the briefing to continue the NGO connection on this issue.

Our Fish also organised a briefing for Permanent Representatives to the EU - “Fisheries management as carbon management and climate action” to raise awareness of the importance of the ocean biological pump to climate mitigation, provide an update from the latest scientific workshop with ICES on fishing impacts on ecosystems and carbon, and to communicate the potential of Article 17 implementation to address these problems. Six representatives from Permanent Representations attended the briefing, including from Spain, which now has the EU Presidency and is therefore very important.

Our Fish also worked with Portuguese NGO Sciaena to hold an online workshop on Article 17 with Portuguese government staff, fishing industry representatives, scientists and civil society. The workshop had interpretation from English to Portuguese and was successful in raising the issue and putting it on the agenda for follow up by Sciaena in 2023.

Our Fish worked with Spanish NGO Ecologistas en Acción and others to advocate for strong implementation of Article 17 in the review of their national fisheries law, including by running an online workshop with representatives of the Spanish government, fishing industry, science and civil society – a report was produced in Spanish and English and circulated to national and EU level policy makers. The national work involved media releases, briefings and meetings with politicians and applying for legal review of the new law to investigate if it is CFP-compliant. We were successful in ensuring the reference utilising environmental, social and economic criteria when allocating fishing opportunities, however final law does not set minimum and maximum percentages for these allocations, and it tries to prevent it applying to exiting quotas (this is legally challengeable and will be the focus of future work in this area). We received extensive media coverage including La Vanguardia, Faro de Vigo, EuropaPress and La voz de Galicia.

WWF Poland coordinated a public letter signed by 8 institutions, including 3 fisheries organisations, who attended our joint workshop on Article 17 in December 2022, that went to Polish Ministers and authorities endorsing further action on Article 17 implementation, and is featuring the work in their Polish Election campaign in 2023.

Decarbonisation and removal of fossil fuel subsidies
Our Fish continued to work closely with ClientEarth to lead the campaign Stop Fossil Fuel Subsidies on reform of the ETD and remove fuel subsidies, coordinating with BLOOM in France, Transport & Environment and Oceana at an EU level, and national groups in EU Member States. This involved many briefings and meetings with Permanent Representatives responsible for fiscal issues on the Review of the Energy Taxation Directive (ETD) and with those responsible for fisheries and environment;

Our Fish commissioned blue economy experts to write a new report ‘Better use of public money: the end of fuels subsidies for the EU fishing industry’ to demonstrate that while the EU provides €1.3 billion in fossil fuel tax subsidies each year, it could instead use the revenue from appropriate fuel tax to support the fishing fleet in ways that are more environmentally, socially and economically beneficial. The report was released in a Press Briefing, was covered in Reuters among other outlets, and was distributed to Member State policy makers and ministries, as well as the Commission;

We found support from key Member States on removing fuel tax subsidies in the ETD, however the file was moving very slowly, was impacted by national elections, and compounded by the rising cost of fuel;

The European Commission released an “Energy transition action plan for the fishing industry” as part of their marine action package in early 2023, which will be useful to stimulate and add further motivation for the EU fishing industry and state governments to transition towards low-carbon fuel and remove tax subsidies for fossil fuels. Unfortunately, the Commission’s plan was very light on ambition, actions and strong guidelines, and our press response critiquing it, was picked up;

Our Fish joined ClientEarth and Oceana in a final press release calling for ambitious targets to carbon-neutral fisheries in the new Energy Transition Partnership announced by the Commission at a stakeholder conference in June 2023.

EU Ocean Action Plan and CFP Implementation review
Our Fish had been working with other NGOs for a number of years to get the European Commission to ensure that their EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries (Marine Action Plan) and CFP implementation review required ecosystem
and climate impact assessments of fisheries and implementation of CFP Article 17 to allocate quota based on environmental, social and economic criteria in order to assist in a just transition to low impact and low carbon fishing. In February 2023 the Commission finally released a package of 3 reports, which failed to jump the chasm from rhetoric to roadmap. Details in our press reactive, which was covered by . Highlights include:

- In the Marine Action Plan, they proposed to map seabed carbon and the impact of bottom trawling in EU waters, however this is too little, too slow and fails to address extraction of fish and CO2 emissions;
- They propose the phase out of bottom trawling Marine Protected Areas and Natura 2000 sites, by 2030 at the latest. They also suggest this should be extended beyond MPAs however it’s clearly too slow to address the urgent biodiversity and climate crisis;
- In the CFP Implementation report committing to develop an economic tool that properly values natural marine ecosystem services to society, which is positive and can help drive ecosystem-based fisheries management;
- The CFP implementation report proposes that the Commission will develop a guide for EU member states to utilise environmental, social and economic criteria for the allocation of fishing quota (Article 17 implementation), which is a huge step forward as they have actively disassociated themselves with this work for years;
- The Energy Transition Plan for the fishing industry was more of a discussion paper than an action plan and will require more specific actions, and the removal of fossil fuel tax subsidies to be effective at overriding the negative incentives to continue carbon-intensive fishing practices such as bottom trawling.

**Our Fish Skillshare**

In order to facilitate handover of skills, resources and reflections from Our Fish to other NGOs at the close of the project, the Our Fish project held a workshop on Wednesday 31 May and Thursday 1 June, with the support of a grant from the Calouste-Gulbenkian Foundation, in Brussels to:

- Facilitate and motivate the development of an ambitious strategy for the future of the EU fisheries campaign;
- Expose NGO allies to diverse campaign strategies and tactics, and share critical skills; and
- Invite pan-EU and national NGOs to carry on critical pieces of work, sharing the responsibilities among themselves.

**Participants:**

41 participants attended the 2-day workshop in total from:

- 10 from Member State-based NGOs including 6 people from 3 Portuguese NGOs
- 3 representatives from philanthropic foundations
- 2 external participants / speakers
- 27 staff members of EU or regional based NGOs

**Key outputs:**

- The workshop achieved its objectives with feedback from participants resoundingly positive, including mentions of: the value and importance to strategizing and creating collectively, being inspired by other NGO’s work, hearing and learning from the views of external players, identifying new areas of fisheries-climate work, and connecting on a personal level;
- NGOs received presentations from Our Fish on the strategies and outcomes from the campaign, and from Comms Inc on developing and implementing the fish-climate narrative;
- A report was shared with all participants with detailed notes from the skillshare;
- NGOs agreed the key to success from the Our Fish campaign, which should be carried through with future NGO work in EU fisheries as far as possible was:
  - the strategy of raising the fisheries issue out of the fish ghetto, promoting the contribution of fish to the climate and ocean restoration;
- the engaging and mobilising value of public-facing, courageous and hopeful campaigning;
- constant collaboration with others, leading the groups to work in a united way in order to increase the collective impact beyond individual NGOs;
- sharing of resources with NGOs working in Member States to ensure campaign impact reaches throughout the EU, and is not only focused on European Parliament or the Brussels bubble.

BLOOM: Final report on legal actions for the implementation of CFP Article 17

**Reminder of our project objectives**
1. Obtain a structural social-ecological change in the way fishing quotas are allocated
2. Obtain objective and transparent criteria for quota allocation
3. Use Article 17 CFP to challenge the quota allocation to monster pelagic trawlers

Our long-term project aims to transform, in strategic steps, the quota allocation system to shift towards ecological and social fishing, first in France and then throughout the EU. To achieve this, we have agreed with our lawyers upon the best and more efficient strategy for tackling the implementation of Art. 17 of the CFP in France, which would enable us to transform the quota allocation system through legal action.

The purpose of our actions was to force France to give up the opaque regime that only benefits industrial players, to force the allocation of fishing quotas according to transparent, objective, and socio-environmental criteria. This is the only way to stop destroying the ocean and to restore its health.
Accomplished activities

BLOOM launched two legal actions on 26 May 2023:

1) An internal review in partnership with artisanal fishers to put an end to the unfair and opaque quota allocation practice:

Alongside artisanal fishermen, we entered a legal battle against the French government to demand a fairer and more transparent distribution of fishing quotas, and to combat the opaque regime that benefits the fishing industry.

In partnership with artisanal fishers’ associations (Plateforme de la petite pêche, Les Ligneurs de Bretagne and Pleine Mer) and a Norman fisher (a member of the producers’ organization “Les Pêcheurs Normands”), BLOOM lodged an internal review against the decree allocating fishing quotas between producers’ organizations for the year 2023.

In our request, we explain why this national text ignores European Union legislation, and in particular Article 17 of the CFP. The decree contravenes the EU law, in that it does not include any environmental criteria when allocating quotas. In addition, the decree fails to meet the requirement for transparency since it remains totally silent on which criteria are used to allocate each quota. Finally, it also ignores the objectivity criterion of Art. 17 since the distribution is completely unfair between producers’ organizations. The French authorities had two months to respond. Having received no response, we challenged the implicit refusal of our request. On September 28, 2023, we lodged a legal action before the Administrative Court of Rennes to enjoin the French government to withdraw this decree.

2) Three requests for environmental information to force greater transparency:

We sent three requests for environmental information to the French government with regards to the allocation of fishing quotas and ensuring greater transparency.

We requested:
- The summary of quota exchanges between France and other EU Member States;
- The opinions of the Comité National des Pêches which is the text issued by professional fishing representatives on which quota distribution is based;
- The management plans of producers' organizations (POs) approved by the Ministry, which will enable us to understand how, within these organizations, quotas are distributed among their members.

We received a reply from the administration: a part of the requested information was disclosed but we faced a refusal for the other part. The administration complied with our first two requests and sent us all the exchanges between France and the other Member States, as well as the opinions of the Comité National des Pêches. However, regarding the management plans, which set out the rules for the distribution of fish within the POs, the administration refused claiming these documents were preparatory in nature. This argument was unfounded, given that, in environmental matters, all information must be communicated and that, according to the Code rural et de la pêche maritime (the French Code of Maritime Fishing), these management plans are documents validated by the Minister which must be sent to each member of the producer
organization. This refusal by the French administration is yet another demonstration of the opacity that reigns in the fishing industry.

Subsequently, as we never give up, we referred the matter to the Commission d'accès aux documents administratifs (CADA is the French Commission on Access to Administrative Documents) on August 28, 2023. This Commission issued a positive opinion on the communicability of this information. With the CADA's confirmation that the documents concerned environmental information that could be communicated, BLOOM took the case to the Administrative Court to force the administration to disclose these documents.

In both cases, we are waiting for the defense, i.e. the French authorities to submit its arguments. For each case, we will exchange our legal arguments, and once the written procedure closed, the judge will set a date for a hearing. We hope that the courts will force full transparency on fishing quotas and their fair distribution.

Our impact

By uniting artisanal fishers in this strategic attack, we had struck right at the heart of the problem and shown the lobbies that they now have two major adversaries:

- BLOOM, on the one hand, knowing that we will never allow them to trample the principles of social equity, transparency, or our right to a healthy environment ever again.
- And justice, on the other hand, which no one has yet used to seriously and systematically oppose them.

Today, the fishing industry needs to make a transition as quickly as possible to prevent the fishing industry from bringing about the death of small-scale fishing and plundering resources. To achieve this, it is essential to understand how fishing opportunities are distributed, and then establish more equitable and sustainable management. This is crucial at a time when the fishing industry urgently needs to make the transition to low-impact methods to halt the collapse of marine biodiversity and artisanal fishing.

The major quota battle we launched in 2023 is far from being over, BLOOM will continue to tackle social injustice in the fishing industry until we reach our goals and ensure full implementation of Art. 17 of the CFP.