



## Fair Seas Ireland's response to:

### [Galway County Council's Local Authority Climate Action Plan 2024-2029](#)

*Fair Seas is a group of Ireland's leading environmental non-governmental organisations and networks seeking to protect, conserve and restore Ireland's unique marine environment.*

*Fair Seas partners: BirdWatch Ireland, Coastwatch, StreamScapest, Irish Environment Network, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Irish Wildlife Trust, Sustainable Water Network.*

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[Fair Seas](#) welcomes the opportunity to respond to Galway County Council's draft Local Authority Climate Action Plan 2024-2029.

The climate and biodiversity crises are inextricably linked. The persistence of one exacerbates the other, and therefore, they must be addressed together at all levels of society if we are to truly mitigate, adapt and overcome these intertwined global emergencies.

Ambitious climate action from local governments has never been more important given the ever-worsening impact of anthropogenic-driven climate change on local communities, economies and the environment.

Fair Seas is a campaign which focuses on the proper protection and restoration of Ireland's seas, and we wish to highlight how effective action to reverse the decline of biodiversity at sea is critical to the health and productivity of our environment upon which society so heavily relies.

Fully functioning and healthy seas are our greatest ally or 'Nature Based Solution' in tackling climate change regarding mitigation (e.g., the sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere through 'Blue Carbon' marine habitats and species such as seagrass meadows) and adaptation (e.g., marine habitats providing protection from coastal erosion and flooding such as saltmarsh, sand dunes and seagrass meadows).

Therefore, Fair Seas are encouraged to see that some of the environmental objectives in the draft Climate Action Plan are to '*Protect, conserve and enhance County Galway's biodiversity and heritage (LN 2)*' and to '*Support nature-based solutions to mitigate against and adapt to climate change and provide additional co-benefits (LN 3)*'.

However, we strongly suggest that an **even greater emphasis on the role of biodiversity, and particularly the protection and restoration of *marine* biodiversity is warranted** as the draft Climate Action Plan is progressed and associated actions finalised. The climate and biodiversity crises are inextricably linked and therefore a more joined-up and ecosystem-based approach is needed to address them, especially at the local authority level.

The protection and restoration of the environment, including the coastal marine environment is vital for coastal communities which are adapting to and growing resilience against the impacts of climate change. Therefore, Fair Seas recommends that Galway County Council;

**(1) Support coastal communities in identifying coastal Marine Protected Areas (MPA)**

which would be designated under EU or National law (new national marine Protected Area legislation is due in 2024) to safeguard and enhance ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, coastal erosion, and flooding protection and resilience, which would simultaneously improve marine biodiversity in the area. Bottom-up, community initiated and local stakeholder led protected areas are often the most successful in delivering positive outcomes for nature and climate.

Fair Seas believe that Ireland's forthcoming new MPA legislation must include;

- (a) Ambitious MPA legislation and targets as soon as possible to protect and restore marine biodiversity enshrining the 30% of Irish waters in a MPA by 2030, as well as a 10% strictly protected targets into law;
- (b) Robust marine protected area management which ensures these sites are effective and deliver for nature;
- (c) Principled and high quality stakeholder participation in MPA site selection, monitoring and management with a clear timeframe of delivery.

**(2) Conduct feasibility studies for developing a Marine Protected Area** along the Galway coast for the restoration of biodiversity including climate important habitats, species and ecological processes (e.g., oyster beds, shellfish beds, seagrass beds and kelp forests, saltmarsh, carbon sequestration, coastal defence)

- In Fair Seas' [Revitalising Our Seas report](#), we carried out a scientific assessment of the high biodiversity and species rich areas in Irish waters which identified the Galway Bay area as an area of interest for MPA designation.

- (3) **Carry out a marine ecosystem service assessment of the Galway coast** to inform the development of a flagship restoration and conservation initiative which protects and enhances marine biodiversity as well as ecological processes important for mitigating and adapting to climate change such as carbon sequestration by seagrass meadows, or saltmarsh and sand dunes for coastal protection.

**Carry out marine natural capital analysis** to understand how much County Galway's coastal and marine habitats contribute towards local economies when they are in a healthy state and the economic losses that could be suffered if they continue to become degraded. Nature restoration and the protection of ecosystems that store carbon and protect us from climate change is not a 'cost' but an investment. For example, studies show that restored natural habitats such as mangroves are extremely cost effective at preventing flooding, providing \$100,000s/ha in flood protection benefits over project lifetimes. Saltmarsh and seagrass meadows provide similar flood, coastal erosion and storm surge protection on the Irish coast.

- These assessments should be progressed using local expertise and organisations, citizens science and academic institutes working together in and for the community.
- These assessments should be used to develop a prioritisation process of conservation actions which sets out how existing vulnerable, threatened and rare species, habitats and ecological processes should be protected and restored as soon as possible.

- (4) **Form a MPA working group** which is tasked with developing, actioning and enforcing management in Galway's current marine and coastal protected sites (Natura 2000 & Natural Heritage Areas), as well as raising awareness, outreach and education of the role of the ocean in addressing the twin climate and biodiversity crises.

- Ireland's current Natura 2000 sites at sea lack effective management measures, whereas, if managed properly and with the help of local authorities, these areas could help coastal ecosystems and communities achieve greater levels of climate resilience and ecosystem health.

Fair Seas wishes the Galway County Council the best of luck in finalising and implementing their Climate Action Plan.

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