

The Belgian Coast: A Balance Between Nature, Culture, and Urbanization

The Belgian coast features a diverse landscape, combining natural areas with urbanized and industrial zones. Preserving nature and biodiversity is not only crucial from an ecological perspective but also plays a vital role in the social and cultural experiences of residents, people that work near the coast, and visitors. As part of the EU-funded research project MARBEFES, it is being explored how to map these socio-cultural values.

What is socio-cultural appreciation?

The aim is to describe how and to what extent the natural environment contributes to social relationships, cultural activities, and expressions. These ecosystem services are important because they foster a sense of connection to a location, contribute to recreation and relaxation, reinforce local preferences and identity, inspire artistic creations, and help shape communities.

A successful Survey

The MARBEFES project team developed a questionnaire, tested by various participating institutions in their respective countries. At the end of 2024, this online survey was published by VLIZ and distributed among coastal municipalities in Belgium. Approximately 1500 local associations were contacted through public contact details on municipal websites, resulting in 285 responses. While this provides a solid and significant foundation, an imbalance in the sample was observed: older men and residents of Ostend were overrepresented in the results.

Nature attracts people & litter

The survey examined activities and motivations that draw people to the coast. While the importance of a nature-rich environment was highlighted, cultural and urban facilities were also found to be popular coastal attractions. A similar trend emerged in regional preferences, where both central municipalities like Ostend and Nieuwpoort and more nature-oriented municipalities such as Bredene and De Haan were highly favored.

The main environmental challenges identified by participants were tourism and pollution. Although these issues are well known, respondents found it harder to pinpoint specific environmental changes. The most common individual actions undertaken were recycling and avoiding littering.



The importance of this research

The survey findings underscore the value of nature in coastal experiences. The connection to the coast, awareness of environmental issues, and a sense of personal responsibility all influence how people experience this unique environment.

The MARBEFES project demonstrates that nature is not only ecologically important but also deeply intertwined with the social and cultural identity of coastal communities. These initial results will be further analyzed and compared in collaboration with European project partners. The data and findings will be shared in a future scientific publication. For a broader national implementation, expanding the sample size to include a more representative mix of regular and occasional coastal visitors is recommended.
