



BLUEMISSIONAA

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Advancing Ocean Research: The Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool for Ocean and Waters

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool for Ocean and Waters is a key outcome of BlueMissionAA, a project funded by the European Union (see right-hand box). The Reflection Tool facilitates embedding sustainability and responsibility into research and innovation projects for coastal restoration. Citizen involvement is an essential part of this, since coastal and ocean restoration directly affect local communities. At the same time, the health of the ocean continuously impacts their daily lives and well-being.

Two key takeaways emerged from co-developing the Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool for Ocean and Waters with 29 users:

1 Shedding light on the SDGs, RRI, Open Science, and Social Impact

Users testing the Reflection Tool were partly initially unaware of key frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), Open Science, and Social Impact. The Reflection Tool helped them understand the relevance of these frameworks and provided practical ways to integrate them into their work.

2 Guiding Ocean Research Pathways with the Reflection Tool

By offering a clear framework for fostering just and sustainable research practices, the Reflection Tool serves as a valuable guide for projects. However, experiences showed that not all concepts are equally relevant to every project, highlighting the importance of flexible and context-specific application.



THE STORY SO FAR

Our oceans and waters are under increasing pressure from habitat degradation, marine biodiversity loss, pollution, and the accelerating impacts of climate change¹. In response, the EU Mission “Restore Our Ocean and Waters by 2030” aims to protect and regenerate marine ecosystems at scale by the means of research and innovation, citizen engagement and blue investments. It also aims to achieve climate neutrality. With four area-based ‘Mission Lighthouses’, i.e. Atlantic-Arctic, Mediterranean Sea, Baltic-North Sea, and Danube-Black Sea, the EU Mission encompasses places to pilot and showcase, develop and apply the Mission activities².

The role of BlueMissionAA

BlueMissionAA supports the EU Mission Ocean in the Atlantic and Arctic basins by acting as a coordination hub to strengthen governance, monitor progress, share knowledge, foster innovation, and engage citizens. Its core focus is on restoring marine and coastal ecosystems to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience.



SUMMARY

Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Open Science, and Social Impact frameworks collectively aim to foster sustainable development across its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. These approaches are particularly critical in research and innovation projects with far-reaching societal and ecological implications. This is the case for coastal restoration initiatives, where many citizens are affected and compliance to agreed standards is crucial.

The Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool for Ocean and Waters supports this ambition by integrating these four frameworks into a single, user-friendly and freely accessible structure. Through 19 guiding questions, the Tool enables research and innovation projects – particularly those under the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters" – to reflect on and improve their impact. It ensures alignment with key societal and planetary values established by the United Nations and the European Union, as anchored in the SDGs, RRI, Open Science and Social Impact. Users experienced the Reflection Tool as helpful and co-created it. The development of the Reflection Tool is described [here](#), under "WP5 – Citizen Engagement & Knowledge Transfer".

"[...] [The Reflection Tool] gave me a good opportunity to reflect on the work we are doing through the project and the areas we need to work on." – user feedback

KEY RESULTS: TESTING THE REFLECTION TOOL

The Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool for Ocean and Waters was tested with 29 members of research and innovation projects in the field of Ocean and Waters. The test demonstrated the value of the Reflection Tool and helped to improve it. Key results are summarised on the right. To widen the impact of the Reflection Tool, a general version of it was created, applying to all research and innovation projects: The Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool.

- > **High engagement with core values:** Projects showed strong alignment with the SDGs and RRI, indicating broad awareness of responsible and sustainable research practices.
- > **Focus on marine over social issues:** Topics like 'Life under water' and 'Open Science' were prioritised, while areas such as 'Social justice' received less attention.
- > **Value in project-level reflection:** The tool is particularly useful for individual projects in tracking their development over time. Comparability between projects is limited due to their varying resources and thematic foci.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the insights gained through developing the Responsible and Sustainable Research Reflection Tool, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance its impact. These recommendations aim to ensure the Tool's long-term value, strengthen responsible and sustainable research practices, and foster a more inclusive, open research ecosystem across Europe and beyond.



1. Ensure Long-Term Accessibility and Usability of the Reflection Tools

To provide lasting value for researchers, funders, and communities, the two Reflection Tools are being made publicly accessible in a permanent, user-friendly format. They will become available [here](#).

- **For researchers and innovators:** Incorporate the Reflection Tools into your project workflows to systematically address Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Open Science, and social impact considerations. Share feedback to further refine the tools and ensure they meet your needs.
- **For funding bodies and administrators:** Recommend or mandate the use of the Reflection Tools as part of funding guidelines and evaluation criteria. Provide resources for support and discussion to facilitate their adoption.

2. Promote Integration Across Research and Innovation Sectors

- **For researchers and innovators:** Apply the Reflection Tools to embed RRI, SDGs, Open Science, and social impact into your projects across all thematic areas through one unified framework. Use and share the tools as first entry points to align with best practices in responsible and sustainable research.
- **For funding bodies and administrators:** Disseminate the Reflection Tools through your networks, funding calls, and outreach activities. Encourage their use in diverse thematic areas to establish a unified approach to responsible and sustainable research across disciplines.

3. Support an Open and Inclusive Research Ecosystem

- **For researchers and innovators:** Use the Reflection Tools as a starting point to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, and to ensure equitable access to participation in research. Leverage the tools to transparently address RRI, SDGs, Open Science, and social impact in your work.

- **For funding bodies and administrators:** Recommend or require the use of the Reflection Tools in project proposals to enable stakeholder oversight and foster a culture of inclusivity and transparency in research and innovation.

4. Leverage Cascade Funding Mechanisms to Drive Sustainable Research Practices

- **For researchers and innovators:** Utilise the Reflection Tools to align your proposals with sustainability, responsibility, and impact criteria, ensuring your projects resonate with funder priorities and stand out in competitive calls.
- **For funding bodies and administrators:** Integrate the Reflection Tools into cascade funding schemes to guide smaller organizations and projects. This will help ensure consistent standards across funded initiatives and provide accessible support for applicants and beneficiaries, maximizing the impact of your funding strategies.



By implementing these recommendations, researchers, innovators, and funding bodies can collectively strengthen responsible and sustainable research practices, contributing to an inclusive and impactful research ecosystem.

REFERENCES

¹ European Commission: Directorate-General for Environment, Water & marine reports 2025 – From source to sea. Volume 1, Water Framework Directive & Floods Directive, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2779/6415253>

² European Commission (2024a) EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. Available at: <https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/restore-our-ocean-and-waters>

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