



Communicating the maritime sustainability: Analysis of main EU policies from a Maritime Spatial Planning perspective

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Abstract

The European Green Deal (EGD) is a comprehensive framework that seeks to transform the European Union into a climate-neutral, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive economy. Within this transition, the maritime and coastal dimensions represent both an opportunity and a challenge. They encompass strategic economic sectors (energy, transport, fisheries, and tourism) and socio-ecological resources (marine ecosystems and food systems), whose interactions require coordinated and integrated governance. Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) has been identified as a key enabler of the Green Deal's implementation in the marine domain; yet, while its legal and technical foundations are well established, its communicative dimension remains under-theorised.

This paper examines how communication and engagement are conceptualised across eleven EU policy frameworks linked to the maritime Green Deal, including recent communications such as the European Ocean Pact and the Vision for Agriculture and Food. Through a qualitative desk review, the study identifies evolving communication patterns, from provision of technical information toward emerging integrative and interactive structures, dashboards, boards, literacy initiatives, and digital participatory tools. The findings show that, although EU policies increasingly emphasise transparency, participation, and citizen empowerment, they lack a cohesive communicative strategy that consistently links institutional, scientific, and cultural narratives. MSP is discussed as a potential interface through which such narratives can be spatialised and made accessible. In addition, the paper introduces a research framework for "Maritime Green Deal Communication" based on three dimensions- flows, narratives, and design, intended to foster ecosystem-based governance and marine ecological citizenship.

Keywords: Policy Communication; Sustainability; Science-Policy Interface; Communication design; Ecological Citizenship.

1 Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) represents the European Union's most ambitious collective policy vision, aiming to decarbonise the economy, protect biodiversity, and ensure a just and inclusive transition (European Commission, 2019). Despite subsequent refinements to its implementation roadmap (European Commission, 2025a), achieving a sustainable and resilient European economy depends not only on regulatory coherence and technological innovation but also on the quality and coherence of policy communication. Communication is not a peripheral function but integral to how policies are designed, negotiated, legitimised, and enacted (Kyomugisha, 2025; Pegan & Lovec, 2025). Contemporary policy communication mediates between evidence and decision-making, shapes public understanding, and constructs shared meanings that enable collaboration across actors (de Vries, 2019; Walker et al., 2023; Barreto et al., 2024). In this context, linear “science-push” models have progressively given way to policy-pull and co-production paradigms, characterised by distributed and interdependent knowledge exchange (Bielak et al., 2008; Cvitanovic & Hobday, 2018).

From a media and communication theory perspective, policy communication is increasingly analysed through the lenses of strategic narratives, audience segmentation, and ethical governance. Research on policy dissemination shows that policymakers and institutional actors prioritise different attributes of policy-relevant knowledge—such as clarity, brevity, relevance, or feasibility—calling for differentiated narrative and design strategies rather than uniform information delivery (Smith et al., 2022). The Narrative Policy Framework conceptualises policy narratives as structured combinations of problem framing, causal interpretation, and normative orientation that shape learning, coalition-building, and legitimacy within governance systems (Shanahan et al., 2011). Earlier work also highlights that narratives function as strategic instruments through which governments manage uncertainty and negotiate consent in complex policy environments (Nixon, 1980), while critical public relations scholarship underscores the ethical tensions between informative and persuasive communication, emphasising transparency and dialogical openness when communication becomes embedded in governance processes (Gelders & Ihlen, 2010).

Design theory provides complementary lenses for interpreting these dynamics. The Design Council's Double Diamond framework highlights iterative cycles of divergence and convergence that parallel the communicative demands of sustainability transitions (Design Council, 2023). Design for policy approaches similarly stress the value of visualisation, storytelling, prototyping, and narrative framing in translating complexity into actionable insight (Bason, 2014). These perspectives are particularly relevant in environmental governance, where many ecological processes remain invisible and must be rendered socially intelligible through communicative devices such as maps, narratives, metaphors, and infographics (de Vries, 2019; Soffietti et al., 2024).

In the maritime domain, communication becomes especially complex. Marine spaces are dynamic, multi-dimensional, transboundary, and cognitively distant for most citizens. Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), established under Directive 2014/89/EU, provides a framework for balancing economic uses and ecological protection but relies heavily on mediating knowledge, values, and exchanges across institutions, scientists, communities, and stakeholders (European Commission, 2020d; Zaucha et al., 2019; 2025). Existing research indicates that MSP communication often remains vertical and top-down, dominated by institutional reporting and expert-driven documentation, with limited integration of media, design, or participatory communication practices (Soffietti et al., 2025a). This gap between

MSP's participatory mandate and its communicative infrastructure highlights the need for stronger policy-level support for iterative, dialogic, and narrative forms of engagement.

Building on these insights, this paper extends the analysis beyond MSP to the broader architecture of EU policies shaping how the maritime and coastal dimensions of the Green Deal are communicated. It examines both early EGD-related strategies (from 2019) and more recent Commission communications, including the European Ocean Pact (2025) and the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025), to assess whether a more integrated communicative vision is emerging across intersecting policy fields. These newer instruments increasingly embed communication within governance structures, digital tools, literacy programmes, and participatory mechanisms, offering a valuable opportunity to examine how the EU's sustainability narrative is evolving.

The central hypothesis guiding the paper is that the communicative infrastructure of the EGD, its vocabulary, channels, tools, and symbolic framings, influences the capacity of MSP and related governance instruments to function as transformative interfaces linking science, policy, and society. Accordingly, the study investigates:

1. How communication and engagement are addressed across principal EU policies underpinning the maritime and cross-sectoral dimensions of the EGD;
2. To what extent these policies enable or constrain knowledge exchange across the science-to-policy-to-society interface;
3. How design-driven communication approaches could strengthen MSP's role as a mediator of Green Deal narratives and spatialised societal futures.

2 Methods

A review of key EU policy documents explicitly linked to the European Green Deal and relevant to its maritime and coastal dimensions was undertaken. The review builds on the one proposed by Danenberg & Soffiatti (2023) and aimed to identify how communication, dissemination, and engagement are framed within these policies and to extract recurring concepts, mechanisms, and implicit models of interaction across policy domains.

The analytical process followed four stages:

1. **Selection of sources** Based on the assessment by Burg et al. (2022) regarding the relevance of the MSP Directive to the EGD, and to capture more recent developments in EU sustainability communication, a corpus of eleven primary documents was selected. These include:
 - *The European Green Deal* (COM/2019/640)
 - *A New Approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy* (COM/2021/240)
 - *EU Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy* (COM/2020/741)
 - *Biodiversity Strategy 2030* (COM/2020/380)
 - *Farm-to-Fork Strategy* (COM/2020/381)
 - *Strategic Guidelines for Aquaculture 2021–2030* (COM/2021/236)
 - *Zero Pollution Action Plan* (COM/2021/400)
 - *Proposal for the Green Claims Directive* (COM/2023/166)
 - *Long-Term Vision for a Clean Planet* (2019/2582 RSP)
 - *A Vision for Agriculture and Food – Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations* (COM/2025/75)
 - *The European Ocean Pact* (COM/2025/281).

Document selection followed four criteria: formal linkage to the European Green Deal; relevance to maritime, coastal, or land–sea interaction domains connected to Maritime Spatial

Planning (MSP); status as an official EU policy communication or legislative proposal; and adoption between 2019 and 2025, allowing comparison across policy generations. The inclusion of the 2025 Communications aimed to assess the continuity and expansion of communicative principles in the most recent policy generation under the Green Deal umbrella, particularly the integration of maritime, agricultural, and cross-sectoral sustainability narratives.

2. **Keyword mapping** – Each document was examined for the terms *communication*, *dissemination*, *engagement*, *awareness*, *stakeholder*, *citizen*, *information*, and *participation*, both individually and in combination. Attention was also given to references to *literacy*, *dialogue*, *narrative*, and *co-creation*, which signal more transformative forms of policy communication.
3. **Interpretive coding** – Each occurrence was categorised according to its communicative function, drawing conceptually on Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969). The categories reflect increasing degrees of engagement and agency in policy communication:
 - **Informative** – provision of data, information, or transparency measures;
 - **Consultative** – inclusion of stakeholders through structured consultation processes or feedback mechanisms;
 - **Participatory** – shared or co-designed activities engaging citizens or sectors in decision-shaping processes;
 - **Transformative** – communication that frames systemic change through learning, narratives, or collective meaning-making.

The framework was piloted on a subset of documents and subsequently refined. All documents were then systematically coded for references to communication, engagement, literacy, participation, and related mechanisms. To enhance reliability, two authors independently coded approximately one third of the corpus. Divergences were resolved through discussion and consensus, resulting in high interpretive alignment and a stable coding scheme suitable for comparative analysis.

4. **Cross-comparison and synthesis** – Results were synthesised into thematic clusters representing recurring communicative orientations across policy fields. Later documents, adopted in 2025, were comparatively analysed to identify shifts or expansions in communication paradigms during the ongoing implementation of the Green Deal’s policy setting. Mention of MSP was also considered.

This interpretive, comparative design enables the identification of transversal communication principles in the European Green Deal architecture and shows that more recent instruments, such as the *Ocean Pact* and the *Vision for Agriculture and Food*, extend these logics toward increasingly integrated, participatory and cross-sectoral governance frameworks.

3 Results

The policy review (synthesised in Table 1) confirms that communication is increasingly recognised as a structural component of European Green Deal (EGD) implementation, including in maritime and marine-related domains. However, its scope and degree of operationalisation vary across policy sectors and generations. Earlier documents (2019–2021) primarily frame communication as information provision and stakeholder consultation, whereas more recent initiatives adopted in 2025 introduce more explicit communicative

infrastructures, including education-oriented, participatory, and digitally mediated engagement mechanisms.

Across the corpus, four recurring thematic patterns emerge: (i) citizenship and awareness frameworks; (ii) sectoral and stakeholder engagement mechanisms; (iii) transparency and trust-building instruments; and (iv) integrative communication frameworks aimed at cross-sector coherence.

3.1 Citizenship and awareness frameworks

Foundational Green Deal documents, notably the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) and the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy (European Commission, 2021a), emphasise citizen awareness, public confidence, and mobilisation through “active public participation” and cross-sector collaboration. However, these commitments remain largely normative, offering limited specification of concrete tools or processes for fostering active ecological citizenship, particularly in maritime contexts (McKinley & Fletcher, 2010; Buchan et al., 2023). A clearer linkage between communication and Ocean Literacy (UNESCO, 2018) emerges in the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy (European Commission, 2021a), which frames knowledge production and education as prerequisites for meaningful participation (McKinley & Fletcher, 2010). This orientation is further consolidated in later policy instruments, notably the European Ocean Pact (European Commission, 2025b), where literacy, engagement, and governance are explicitly articulated as interdependent components of ocean governance. Beyond the maritime domain, the Vision for Agriculture and Food (European Commission, 2025a) expands the communicative scope of sustainability policies by emphasising cultural and generational dimensions. Here, communication is framed not only as information dissemination but as a mediating process aimed at restoring trust and fostering dialogue within sustainability transitions. Overall, communication is increasingly positioned as a component of a broader social contract underpinning the Green Deal. Nevertheless, citizens are still predominantly addressed as information recipients or consumers, rather than as active co-creators of policy outcomes, limiting opportunities for bottom-up interpretation and adaptation.

3.2 Sectoral and stakeholder engagement

Sector-specific policies display marked differences in the scope and depth of their communication strategies. The Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy (European Commission, 2020c) prioritises awareness-raising and workforce education but remains focused on coordination among institutional and industry stakeholders. The Strategic Guidelines for a Sustainable and Competitive EU Aquaculture (European Commission, 2021b) adopt a more outward-facing approach, combining transparency measures with locally grounded outreach initiatives. By contrast, the Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (European Commission, 2020a) introduces explicitly cultural and intergenerational communication dimensions, including youth platforms and partnerships with museums, NGOs, and cultural institutions. These initiatives mobilise storytelling and cultural mediation as communicative levers, extending engagement beyond sectoral stakeholders. The Vision for Agriculture and Food (European Commission, 2025a) reinforces this participatory orientation by proposing institutionalised dialogue through mechanisms such as a European Agriculture and Food Board and cross-sector communication platforms, embedding dialogue as a structured component of policymaking. A further step is taken with the European Ocean Pact (European Commission, 2025b), which establishes permanent communicative infrastructures, including the Ocean Board, the Ocean Pact Dashboard, and the State of the Ocean Report. These instruments support transparency and coordination across sectors while embedding literacy initiatives, youth ambassadorship, and participatory observation tools, such as the Digital Twin of the

Ocean, within policy practice. Collectively, these policies indicate a gradual shift from sectoral outreach towards more systemic forms of communicative governance, where data, design, and dialogue are increasingly combined.

3.3 Transparency, trust, and green claims

Several policies explicitly frame communication as a mechanism for accountability and trust-building. The Zero Pollution Action Plan (European Commission, 2021c) and the Green Claims Directive (European Commission, 2023) establish benchmarks for communicative reliability by targeting misinformation and strengthening standards for environmental claims. The Green Claims Directive, in particular, introduces verification requirements and methodological standards that enhance the credibility of sustainability communication in consumer markets. The European Ocean Pact (European Commission, 2025b) extends these transparency objectives through commitments to open data governance. Instruments such as the EU Ocean Pact Dashboard and the State of the Ocean Report provide public access to monitoring data and policy progress, operationalising transparency as both reporting and public scrutiny. Despite these advances, most policies prioritise technical accuracy and data provision, offering limited guidance on collective interpretation, narrative sense-making, or social mediation processes central to trust-building and democratic legitimacy.

3.4 Integrative communication frameworks and cross-sector coherence

The inclusion of the Vision for Agriculture and Food and the European Ocean Pact marks a transition from fragmented, sector-specific communication towards more integrated communicative architectures within the EGD. Both documents explicitly link communication to governance through boards and networks connecting science, policy, and civil society; dashboards and reports institutionalised as transparency instruments; and education, literacy, and youth engagement programmes supporting behavioural change and generational renewal. In the Ocean Pact, this integration takes the form of a multi-level governance framework aligning environmental, economic, and security narratives within a shared communicative structure. In the Vision for Agriculture and Food, it is articulated through culturally and ethically oriented communication strategies aimed at reinforcing social legitimacy.

Table 1. Synthesis of communication orientations across EU Green Deal policy documents

Policy document (year)	Dominant communication orientation	Representative quotation (abridged)	Approx. frequency*
European Green Deal (2019)	Informative Consultative	“Active public participation and confidence in the transition is paramount if policies are to work and be accepted.”	High (policy-wide framing)
Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy (2021)	Participatory	“Citizen engagement and ocean literacy are prerequisites for a sustainable blue economy.”	Medium–High
Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy (2020)	Informative Consultative	“Achieving scale-up will require collaboration of Member States, regions, citizens and stakeholders.”	Medium
Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (2020)	Participatory Transformative	“Involving younger generations and cultural institutions is key to supporting biodiversity recovery.”	Medium

Policy document (year)	Dominant communication orientation	Representative quotation (abridged)	Approx. frequency*
Farm-to-Fork Strategy (2020)	Informative	“Improving food information to consumers is essential for sustainable choices.”	Medium
Aquaculture Guidelines 2021–2030 (2021)	Consultative	“Community engagement and social acceptability strongly influence aquaculture development.”	Medium
Zero Pollution Action Plan (2021)	Informative / Consultative	“Open data provision will help citizens and stakeholders better understand and visualise pollution.”	High
Green Claims Directive (2023)	Informative	“Consumers must receive reliable, comparable and verifiable sustainability information.”	High
Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025)	Participatory	“Communication is a cornerstone for rebuilding trust between farmers, policymakers and citizens.”	Medium
European Ocean Pact (2025)	Transformative	“The EU Ocean Pact Dashboard and Ocean Board will foster transparency, participation and shared governance.”	High

* Frequency refers to the relative recurrence of communication-related references within each document (low / medium / high), based on qualitative coding of explicit mentions of communication, engagement, literacy, participation, or dialogue.

4 Discussion

The analysis shows that communication has become increasingly visible within the European Green Deal policy architecture but remains unevenly integrated across sectors and instruments. Although references to information provision, awareness, literacy, and engagement are widespread, communication is not yet consistently embedded as a structural component of governance design.

Early Green Deal instruments largely frame communication within technocratic and informational paradigms. Policies such as the Farm-to-Fork Strategy (European Commission, 2020b), the Zero Pollution Action Plan (European Commission, 2021c), and the Green Claims Directive (European Commission, 2023) prioritise accuracy, traceability, and verification. While essential for consumer protection and institutional transparency, these approaches tend to reduce communication to the transmission of validated information, with limited attention to interpretation, contestation, or behavioural translation.

Stakeholder engagement also remains largely sector-specific and asymmetrical. The Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy (European Commission, 2021a) and the Aquaculture Guidelines (European Commission, 2021b) foreground professional networks and expert dialogue, whereas the Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (European Commission, 2020a) adopts more culturally embedded and socially oriented communication practices. The Vision for Agriculture and Food (European Commission, 2025a) further extends this approach by framing communication as a means of rebuilding trust, identity, and intergenerational continuity.

Only a limited subset of policies conceptualises communication as a societal, educational, or ethical process. Where communication is linked to literacy and empowerment, a shift emerges from dissemination towards co-creation, most clearly articulated in the European Ocean Pact (European Commission, 2025b). Through boards, dashboards, reporting instruments, and youth programmes, the Pact reframes communication as a governance function rather than a supporting activity.

The 2025 policy instruments also introduce integrated communicative infrastructures that signal a maturation of the Green Deal's communicative vision. By embedding communication in monitoring, coordination, and policy learning processes, these instruments move beyond sectoral silos and support cross-cutting coherence.

Taken together, the findings indicate that while the Green Deal initially framed sustainability primarily as a technological and economic transition, more recent policies increasingly foreground its cultural, social, and intergenerational dimensions. Nevertheless, the narrative and imaginative aspects of change remain underdeveloped, and the persistent gap between informational and participatory communication may limit public ownership and cross-sector coherence.

Within this context, Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) emerges as a potential translation space where policy language, spatial decision-making, and societal narratives intersect. MSP's participatory requirements and reliance on visual and cartographic communication offer opportunities to connect Green Deal objectives with place-based experiences of change, but realising this potential requires clearer and more integrated communicative guidance at EU level. The European Ocean Pact, with its proposed Ocean Act and communicative governance instruments, represents a significant step in this direction.

The findings also have direct implications for MSP practice. Inclusive MSP depends on sustained communicative infrastructures that render marine policies intelligible and actionable for diverse stakeholders (Papageorgiou et al., 2024). Ocean literacy initiatives can act as strategic assets when communication is tailored to territorial contexts and everyday practices (Soffiatti et al., 2025b). Moreover, geoportals, dashboards, and interactive visualisations can support deliberation when they move beyond data display towards narrative and participatory design (Davret et al., 2024). Emerging tools such as Digital Twins of the Ocean further illustrate how scenario-based visual communication can link data, futures, and stakeholder dialogue within shared interfaces (Haupt et al., 2025).

Overall, despite extensive references to transparency and engagement, the European Green Deal still lacks a fully articulated, cross-cutting communicative strategy. Developing such a strategy would not only clarify policy objectives but also strengthen collective imagination, deliberation, and participation in a shared European sustainability transition.

5 Conclusions

This study examined how the maritime and cross-sectoral components of the European Green Deal articulate communication and engagement across eleven major EU policy instruments. It identified both convergence and divergence in the way the European Union conceptualises the role of communication in advancing environmental, economic, and social objectives.

The review shows that although communication is widely acknowledged as essential to the green transition, its implementation remains uneven and often under-specified. The first policy documents of the EU Green Deal period focus primarily on technical information and consumer transparency; more recent documents, including the *Ocean Pact* and the *Vision for Agriculture and Food*, present greater attention to participatory governance, literacy, youth

engagement, cultural narratives, and digital infrastructures. The emergence of communication-focused governance tools (e.g., dashboards, boards, ambassador networks) suggests a shift toward more systemic and reflexive communication frameworks.

The findings indicate that the maritime component of the EU Green Deal would benefit from a more integrated, design-oriented, and cross-sectoral communication framework, capable of supporting behavioural change, stakeholder ownership, and societal legitimacy. Such a framework should:

1. **Treat communication as a strategic governance function**, embedded from problem-framing to implementation and monitoring.
2. **Promote multi-level interaction** among EU institutions, Member States, maritime sectors, rural and coastal communities, and civil society.
3. **Leverage digital visualisation tools**, such as dashboards and digital twins, to make environmental issues tangible, relatable, and participatory.
4. **Foster narratives of ecological and marine citizenship**, connecting daily life with long-term stewardship and collective responsibility.

For MSP, these insights imply that communicative coherence is as critical as data coherence. If MSP wish to act as a bridging mechanism that spatialises the ambitions of the Green Deal and the Ocean Pact, translating abstract targets into place-based stories, trade-offs, and opportunities.

More broadly, communicating the green transition, including its maritime, and coastal land-to-sea interaction dimensions, demands more than the provision of accurate information: it requires the deliberate construction of a shared narrative of transformation in which citizens recognise both themselves and their future. Achieving this vision depends on interdisciplinary collaboration among policymakers, communicators, designers, and scientists. By investing in communication as both institutional infrastructure and cultural practice, the European Union can reinforce the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and long-term resilience of its sustainability transition.

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