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Guest column: Máire Geoghegan-Quinn on creating an 'Innovation Union' for our oceans

08.05.2014 11:30

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In this special guest column, European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, calls on 'citizen scientists' to take measurements of their local water, to help create the biggest data set in marine research to ever be taken on one single day.

What are you doing on 21 June? An EU-funded research project is looking for your help on a global 'health check' of our oceans. **Ocean Sampling Day** (OSD) will bring together around 100 science teams around the world, and hopefully thousands of citizen scientists like you to take measurements of your local water. The goal is to create the biggest data set in marine research that has ever been taken on one single day, like a huge snapshot of the world's oceans. There's even an app to upload your data, and you can find all the information [online](#).

Here's another date to remember: tomorrow (9 May) is **Europe Day**, marking the day in 1950 when a **proposal** by French foreign minister Robert Schuman started the process of European integration - to what has become the European Union. This might seem like a bit of a leap from marine research and citizen science, but there is a common principle: we can achieve a lot more by working together. Co-operation on marine research is a great example of how working together in the EU can benefit us all.

Sustainable use of ocean resources

That's why the European Commission today **presented a plan** to help use ocean resources sustainably and drive growth and jobs in Europe. Oceans cover 71pc of the surface of our planet. With land and freshwater resources under pressure, we will have to rely more and more on the oceans and seas to provide sources for necessities, such as food, medicine and energy. Our oceans can help us tackle issues, such as rising healthcare costs or congested, inefficient transport - problems that are costing taxpayers billions of euro.

The way to unlock these solutions - while protecting our oceans - is through research and innovation. There is about €350m in funding every year from the EU budget for marine and maritime research. There is some great work going on, including in Ireland. The **Daithi O'Murchu Marine Research Station** in Cork, for instance, is a prolific participant in EU projects. Recently, it has run projects on using sea algae to produce biofuel, or making biodegradable plastics from seaweed.

EU researchers are also now giving us a glimpse at the potential the deep sea has to offer us.

For example, researchers in the **PharmaSea** (including researchers from University College Cork) and **BlueGenics** projects are studying chemicals and organisms present up to 6,000 metres under water. The idea is that organisms and bacteria that can survive in such extreme conditions could be an interesting source of novel bioactive compounds, for instance, for antibiotics or drugs to combat diseases, such as osteoporosis.

What lies beneath

So what are the challenges ahead? One very concrete thing we must do is get a better understanding of what lies beneath the oceans. This will, for instance, allow private companies and public authorities to cut the costs of



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Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science. Image via European Parliament

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surveys and to plan maritime investments more effectively. That is why we want to deliver a digital map of the entire seabed of European waters by 2020. We estimate this will be worth at least a €1bn a year. Ireland is already a leader in the area, as evidenced by the [INFOMAR](#) initiative.

A second challenge is that maritime research efforts between EU countries are often not linked up. That's why we want to improve communication and create a marine research platform that helps researchers understand the funding opportunities available, including the EU research programme [Horizon 2020](#). We estimate that opening up all the existing marine research data that already exists in Europe could lead to new innovations worth up to €300m a year, aside from the existing benefits that research provides.

We also intend to work with international partners to extend our knowledge of the world's oceans. We have now launched the first of our satellites, which will provide a vital contribution to the Global Earth Observation System, monitoring everything from Arctic ice to oil slicks. Last year, we started the ambitious Atlantic Research Alliance with Canada and the United States - the launch event took place at the [Marine Institute](#) in Galway.

Protecting a valuable resource

One thing we must remain wary of, however, is a 'gold rush' scenario. Our oceans are a valuable resource that must be respected, not exploited mindlessly. That is why we will also continue to fund research that assesses and monitors the human impact on our oceans, such as the [Perseus](#) project, or the Micro B3 project running the Ocean Sampling Day (in which I hope you will participate!).

We stand the best chance of creating growth and jobs and improving our quality of life if we stick to the basic principle that motivated Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950: that peace and prosperity will be achieved through unity, solidarity and co-operation. The EU has gone through a difficult period, but we can return to growth with the right ideas. We need to make the European Union an Innovation Union, and that includes for our oceans.

Máire Geoghegan-Quinn

Máire Geoghegan-Quinn is European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science

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