EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR COASTAL STUDIES AND RESEARCH

Réseau Européen pour les Études et Recherches Littorales

Rete Europea per gli Studi e la Ricerca Costiera

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COASTAL STUDIES
AND RESEARCH

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NETWORK PRESENTATION

1. What the Network Is

The European Network for Coastal Studies and Research is a collaborative scientific platform bringing together scholars, researchers, and specialists engaged in the study of coastal tourism, territorial change, environmental vulnerability, and community adaptation across European coastal regions.

The network addresses a clearly identified scientific gap: the absence of a structured European research platform dedicated specifically to understanding the present state and future trajectories of coastal tourism under accelerating climatic, ecological, economic, and social pressures.

Its primary aim is to take stock of coastal tourism as it stands today and to assess what it may become in a period of ongoing and accelerating transition, in the face of global warming, sea-level rise and submersion risk, marine erosion, economic crises, and environmental pollution.

A central focus is the specific situation of coastal populations for whom tourism has often become the principal economic resource. The network examines how these communities perceive environmental and economic change, both today and in anticipation of future transformations, and what adaptive responses are being developed at local, regional, and European levels.

The network operates as a space for genuine exchange of experiences across European territories: Mediterranean coasts and Atlantic shores, Baltic shorelines and North Sea margins, island communities and continental waterfronts. These territories share the same structural vulnerability but face it through different histories, economies, cultures, and governance traditions. Learning across that diversity is itself a scientific contribution.

2. The Scientific Context: Key Data

The following figures frame the network's entire research agenda.

- 200 million people live along the European coastal zone (EEA, 2024)
- 50 million people live in the low-elevation coastal zone, below 10 m elevation (van den Hurk et al., 2024)
- 30 million people are exposed to 100-year coastal flood events (van den Hurk et al., 2024)
- 8,200 km of European sandy beaches are already governed by erosion dynamics (van de Wal et al., 2024)
- ×10 projected increase in the frequency of extreme coastal flood events before 2050 at most European coastal locations (EEA, 2024)
- €263 billion GVA and 4.88 million jobs generated by coastal tourism in the EU Blue Economy in 2023 (Borriello et al., 2025)
- Up to −20.84% projected GDP loss for the most exposed coastal regions under high sea-level rise scenarios without adaptation (Cortés Arbués et al 2023)
- ~25 million residents and 8 million buildings potentially facing inundation by 2050 under mid-range scenarios (Chen et al., 2026)

The Copernicus Marine Service Ocean State Report 9 (CMEMS, 2024) confirms that no part of European marine space remains unaffected by the interconnected pressures of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Sea levels over the North-Eastern Atlantic rose at an average rate of 3.7 ± 0.3 mm per year between 1999 and 2024. Under current trajectories, sea-level rise is projected to intensify significantly throughout the twenty-first century, increasing exposure to flooding, erosion, salinisation, and infrastructure damage.

The asymmetry between Northern and Mediterranean Europe is structurally significant: northern coastlines benefit from post-glacial rebound, while many Mediterranean coastal areas are affected by land subsidence that compounds sea-level rise. Wetlands, delta regions, estuarine systems, and low-lying coastal settlements are particularly exposed.

3. Coastal Tourism: Economic Importance and Structural Fragility

Coastal tourism accounts for 54% of direct employment and 29% of gross value added in the entire European Blue Economy (Borriello et al. 2025). Over 1.4 billion tourist nights were recorded in European coastal accommodation in 2023, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Spain received approximately 363 million coastal tourist nights, Italy 238 million, and France 163 million.

In countries such as Cyprus, Croatia, and Malta, foreign tourists account for over 90% of coastal visitors. In many coastal regions, tourism is not merely one economic sector among others: it constitutes the primary development infrastructure of coastal areas and, in several cases, the principal source of employment and local income.

This structural dependence simultaneously generates resilience and fragility. Climate change increasingly threatens the environmental conditions upon which coastal tourism economies depend. Marine heatwaves, coastal erosion, water quality degradation, flooding events, and extreme weather are already reshaping tourist flows, seasonal patterns, and territorial accessibility.

Economic modelling under RCP8.5/SSP5 scenarios suggests that some European coastal regions could face GDP losses ranging between 9.56% and 20.84% in the absence of significant adaptation measures (Cortés Arbués et al., 2023). Seasonal concentration, with 60–80% of annual tourism activity compressed into a few summer months in many Mediterranean destinations, amplifies both economic stakes and social fragility in the face of climate disruption.

4. The Scientific Gap

Scientific research on climate change, coastal dynamics, and tourism sustainability has expanded considerably in recent decades. Yet the intersection between these fields remains fragmented and insufficiently integrated at the European level.

Physical sciences document the environmental transformation of coastlines; economic studies estimate aggregate damages and sectoral impacts; policy frameworks address adaptation and coastal management. A significant deficit nonetheless persists in interdisciplinary and comparative research focused specifically on:

- tourism-dependent coastal societies and their adaptive capacity;

- community perceptions of environmental and economic change;
- territorial vulnerability and uneven resilience across European regions;
- governance conflicts and socio-ecological transitions;
- the future of coastal tourism economies under compounding climatic and economic pressures;
- the relationship between environmental transformation and territorial identity.

In particular, the perspectives of social sciences and humanities remain underrepresented in coastal policy debates, despite their importance for understanding lived experience, local knowledge, social inequalities, governance dynamics, and cultural dimensions of adaptation. The concept of regenerative tourism, moving beyond sustainability toward the active restoration of ecological and social systems, has emerged as a significant framework for rethinking coastal economies (Bellato et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Alvarez, 2024), but its empirical application to European coastal contexts in comparative perspective remains limited.

5. Research Approach

a. Genuine Multidisciplinarity

The network is built on a commitment to active collaboration among disciplines — not their parallel coexistence. Its membership brings together sociologists, geographers, historians, architects, urban planners, economists, environmental engineers, ecologists, and legal scholars. Different perspectives, methods, and analytical frameworks are treated as complementary tools for understanding coastal complexity. The network's core function is to facilitate the active comparison of findings and solutions across these specialist communities.

b. Comparative European Perspective

European coastal diversity is a central scientific resource. The network conducts comparative analysis across Mediterranean, Atlantic, Baltic, North Sea, island, and estuarine regions. Cross-national comparison of coastal transitions, territorial trajectories, and adaptive strategies is one of the network's principal analytical objectives.

c. Community-Centred Research

Coastal populations — fishermen, tourism workers, seasonal employees, hospitality operators, local residents, and younger generations — are treated not as passive recipients of environmental change, but as central actors in adaptation, territorial governance, and the production of local knowledge. Their perceptions, experiences, and strategies constitute primary research data.

Key research questions include: How do coastal communities perceive climate and economic risk? What local strategies of resilience are emerging? How are territorial identities changing under conditions of ecological and economic transformation? Which inequalities shape adaptive capacity? How are younger generations imagining the future of coastal regions?

d. Policy Relevance and Institutional Dialogue

The network aims to function as an independent pool of multidisciplinary experts providing evidence-based analysis, comparative territorial assessments, and actionable recommendations on the present and future of coastal tourism economies and communities. It seeks active engagement with European institutions, regional authorities, local governments, and civil society organisations at all relevant levels.

e. Long-Term Commitment

Climate adaptation and territorial transition require sustained observation and long-term collaborative research infrastructures. The network prioritises durable institutional relationships and cumulative comparative knowledge over short-term or isolated project outputs.

6. Research Priorities

I. Coastal Communities and Social Vulnerability

Perceptions of environmental change, place attachment, social inequality, labour precarity, demographic transformation, and community adaptation practices.

II. Coastal Tourism Economies

Tourism dependency, seasonality, economic diversification, destination transformation, and territorial resilience under compounding pressures.

III. Climate Risks and Territorial Futures

Sea-level rise, erosion, flooding, ecosystem degradation, infrastructure vulnerability, and adaptive planning at local and regional scales.

IV. Governance and Policy

Integrated coastal zone management, participatory governance frameworks, climate adaptation policies, and multi-level institutional coordination.

V. Comparative European Coastal Studies

Cross-national comparison of coastal transitions, territorial trajectories, adaptive strategies, and governance responses.

VI. Tourism and Environmental Transition

Sustainable and regenerative tourism models, ecological restoration, post-extractive territorial development, and blue-green infrastructure.

7. Network Activities

The network intends to:

- promote interdisciplinary European research collaborations;
- develop Horizon Europe, COST Action, Interreg, and international project proposals;
- organise conferences, workshops, seminars, and comparative research activities;
- facilitate exchanges among researchers, institutions, and territorial actors;
- create a European observatory on coastal tourism transition;
- support early-career researchers and doctoral training;
- disseminate scientific knowledge in multilingual and accessible formats;
- contribute to policy discussions concerning the futures of European coastal territories.

8. Institutional Partnerships and Interlocutors

The network seeks dialogue and collaboration with:

- European Commission: DG MARE, DG CLIMA, DG REGIO, DG GROW;
- European Parliament and Committee of the Regions;
- Horizon Europe, COST Actions, and Interreg / European Territorial Cooperation programmes;
- universities and research centres across European coastal regions;
- local and regional coastal authorities;
- environmental, territorial, and planning organisations;
- civil society actors and coastal community stakeholders.

MANIFESTO - European Network for Coastal Studies and Research

I. The Emergency: Coasts on the Front Line of Climate Change

European coastlines are among the first territories to confront, in measurable and accelerating terms, the consequences of climate change. More than 200,000 kilometres of shoreline, inhabited by approximately 200 million people, face simultaneous pressures from rising seas, intensifying storms, accelerating erosion, marine pollution, and the structural fragility of tourism economies developed without ecological limits (EEA, 2024; van den Hurk et al., 2024).

The scientific evidence is unambiguous. The Copernicus Marine Service Ocean State Report 9 (CMEMS, 2024) confirms that no part of European marine space remains unaffected by the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Sea levels over the North-eastern Atlantic rose at an average of 3.7 ± 0.3 mm per year over 1999-2024. Under current trajectories, sea-level rise is projected to intensify significantly throughout the twenty-first century. Extreme sea-level events, historically a 1-in-100-year occurrence, are projected to occur with ten times greater frequency at most European coastal locations before 2050 in the absence of improved coastal protection (EEA, 2024).

The Copernicus First Assessment Report on Sea Level Rise in Europe (van de Wal et al., 2024) documents that over 8,200 km of European sandy beaches are already governed by erosion dynamics, with sea-level rise adding a compounding background erosion rate to existing trends. This is not a future scenario. It is a present reality already reshaping the geography, economy, and social fabric of coastal Europe.

II. The Human Dimension: Coastal Communities Between Exposure and Resilience

The exposure of coastal populations to climate hazards is both substantial and unequal. More than 30 million people live in the 100-year event flood coastal plain, and 50 million in the low-elevation coastal zone (van den Hurk et al., 2024). Satellite-based InSAR analysis at 100-metre resolution across the entire European coastline (Chen et al., 2026) estimates that under a mid-range climate scenario for 2050, approximately 25 million residents and 8 million buildings may face inundation, with vulnerability disproportionately elevated among older adults, marginalised populations, and economically constrained regions.

The asymmetry between Northern and Mediterranean Europe is structurally significant: northern coastlines benefit from post-glacial rebound, while Mediterranean coastal areas are predominantly subsiding, compounding the effects of sea-level rise. Wetland areas experience the largest downward land motion, despite covering a small share of total coastal surfaces.

For communities whose economic identity is anchored in coastal tourism, these physical changes are not abstract. They translate into shorter beach seasons, degraded water quality, damaged infrastructure, and the progressive transformation of the landscape that defines the value and identity of their place. The distress caused by environmental change to one's home environment has been

conceptualised in the social sciences as 'solastalgia' (Albrecht et al., 2007): a place-based form of distress now documented in coastal communities across Europe.

The network places the lived experience and perception of these communities at the centre of its research agenda. How do coastal populations (fishermen, hoteliers, seasonal workers, long-term residents, young people facing uncertain futures) experience and interpret these transformations? What adaptive strategies are being developed, abandoned, or imagined? These questions require the methods and analytical frameworks of sociology, geography, history, and the humanities alongside those of environmental and economic sciences.

III. The Economic Stakes: A Tourism Economy Under Structural Pressure

The EU Blue Economy Report 2025 (European Commission, 2025) documents that coastal tourism accounts for 54% of direct employment and 29% of gross value added in the entire European Blue Economy, generating €263 billion in GVA and supporting 4.88 million jobs in 2023. Over 1.4 billion tourist nights were recorded in European coastal accommodation in 2023, surpassing pre-pandemic peaks.

In many coastal regions, tourism constitutes the primary economic pillar, the main employer, and the organising logic of territorial development. The dependency is simultaneously a source of economic vitality and structural vulnerability. Economic modelling under RCP8.5/SSP5 scenarios (Cortés Arbués et al., 2023) finds that some coastal regions face GDP losses of 9.56% to 20.84% without further coastal adaptation. Many coastal economies have become structurally concentrated, with 60–80% of annual economic activity compressed into two or three summer months in many Mediterranean destinations, amplifying the consequences of any climate disruption.

The transition affecting coastal tourism is therefore not only environmental. It is simultaneously economic, social, territorial, cultural, and political. Addressing it requires a research framework capable of capturing all of these dimensions and their interactions.

IV. The Scientific Deficit: Why This Network Is Necessary

Physical scientists document what is happening to coastlines. Economists model aggregate impacts. Policy frameworks increasingly address adaptation and coastal management. Yet the sociological, geographic, historical, and anthropological understanding of how communities experience, interpret, and respond to these transformations, and how different territorial histories, governance traditions, and cultural identities shape both vulnerability and adaptive capacity, remains systematically underrepresented in the policy debates that matter most.

The concept of regenerative tourism, moving beyond sustainability toward the active restoration of ecological and social systems, has emerged as one of the most substantive frameworks for rethinking coastal economies (Bellato et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Alvarez, 2024). Its empirical application to European coastal contexts in comparative perspective, however, remains limited. Case studies exist; comparative European frameworks do not.

This network exists to address that deficit: to build the comparative, multidisciplinary, community-centred knowledge base that European coastal policy currently lacks, and to ensure that evidence from the social sciences and humanities informs adaptation and governance decisions at all relevant levels.

V. A Vision for Coastal Transition

The transition from extractive to regenerative coastal tourism models is not a choice between economics and ecology but a condition for the long-term viability of both. Coastal territories where the tourism economy is rebuilt on more diversified, year-round, and ecologically grounded foundations, drawing on the specific cultural and natural heritage of each place rather than generic mass-tourism models, demonstrate greater resilience in the face of accelerating environmental pressures.

Blue and green infrastructure (restored wetlands, renaturalised seafronts, living shores …) can serve simultaneously ecological and social functions. Governance models that are genuinely participatory, that manage inevitable conflicts of use in shared coastal and maritime spaces, and that distribute the costs and benefits of transition equitably, offer more durable foundations for territorial development than top-down or market-only approaches.

These are not aspirational abstractions. They are emerging practices already documented in territories from the Atlantic to the Adriatic, from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, that deserve systematic study, cross-European comparison, and wider dissemination. The network's work is oriented toward precisely this comparative documentation and analysis.

VI. Scientific and Methodological Principles

- Scientific rigour and policy relevance: the network produces knowledge that is both methodologically robust and directly actionable for decision-makers at local, national, and European levels.
- Genuine multidisciplinarity: sociology, geography, history, architecture, economics, ecology, environmental engineering, and law are treated as complementary analytical lenses on the same complex reality.
- Community-centred research: the perceptions, knowledge, strategies, and experiences of coastal populations are primary research data, not a backdrop to other forms of scientific inquiry.
- Comparative European and extra EU perspective: the diversity of European coastal territories, Mediterranean, Atlantic, Baltic, North Sea, is a scientific resource, as well as the rest of the world; learning across that diversity is a core network function.
- Territorial equity: the costs and benefits of coastal transitions must not reproduce or deepen existing social and territorial inequalities; the most economically and socially vulnerable communities warrant particular analytical attention.
- Long-term commitment: the timescales of climate change and community adaptation require sustained research programmes and durable institutional relationships.

VII. Network Commitments

- To produce and disseminate rigorous, comparative, interdisciplinary research on the present state and future trajectories of coastal tourism across European territories, with particular attention to socio-ecological dimensions and community perceptions.
- To build and maintain a living European observatory of coastal practices, documenting experiments in regenerative governance, blue-green infrastructure, and post-extractive tourism economy models.
- To engage actively with European institutions, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and the relevant Directorates-General, to provide independent, evidence-based expert input into the policy frameworks governing coastal territories.
- To facilitate genuine exchange of experience among researchers, practitioners, and community representatives from different European coastal contexts, across disciplinary, linguistic, and national boundaries.
- To support the training of early-career researchers equipped to work at the intersection of climate science, social science, territorial governance, and community practice.
- To communicate research findings in accessible, multilingual formats to the widest possible audience.

VIII. Call for Participation

The network addresses three complementary audiences.

European Institutions and Policy-Makers

The transition of coastal tourism in the face of climate change is not a sector-specific question. It is a territorial, social, and governance challenge of broad European significance. Its recognition as a priority domain in research funding (Horizon Europe, COST Actions), regional development policy (Cohesion Funds, Interreg), and blue economy governance frameworks would enable a substantially more effective European response to the challenges described in this document.

Researchers Across Disciplines and European Territories

Scholars, scientists, and specialists engaged with coastal futures (whether from environmental sciences, social sciences, humanities, engineering, law, economics, or planning) are invited to join a network that takes seriously both the urgency of the coastal crisis and the irreplaceable contribution of multidisciplinary collaboration to understanding it. The knowledge required to address these challenges cannot be produced within disciplinary silos alone.

Coastal Communities, Organisations, and Elected Representatives

The experience, knowledge, and adaptive capacity of coastal populations are the foundation upon which any credible research agenda must be built. The network is committed to research that takes local knowledge seriously, that engages communities as active participants rather than passive subjects, and that contributes findings directly relevant to the decisions facing coastal territories.

European coastal territories are entering a period of profound and prolonged transition. This network seeks to contribute to understanding these transformations through rigorous research, comparative analysis, genuine multidisciplinary exchange, and sustained European scientific cooperation.