FINAL REPORT:

'How can we successfully restore our vulnerable coastal areas in a changing climate?'

Co-organised by the MEP Group on 'Climate Change, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development', and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the event took place under the umbrella of the REST-COAST project. Moderated by **Mr. Ilias Grampas**, Deputy Director of the European Bureau for Conservation and Development (EBCD), the event addressed the importance of coastal ecosystems, which are under threat from climate change, erosion, pollution, and rising sea levels. The event came at a timely moment, ahead of UNFCCC COP30 and following the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation last year. Mr. Grampas explained that, as EU Member States develop their National Restoration Plans (NRPs), we stand at a defining stage, when commitments are turning into actions.

In his opening speech, hosting **MEP Nicolás González Casares (S&D)** emphasised the urgent need to restore Europe's vulnerable coastal areas, highlighting his personal connection to the topic, coming from Galicia where the ecosystem services provided by coastal systems are essential to the way of life. Restoring these ecosystems, he stated, is an opportunity to secure the future of the many communities that rely on them. The most cost-efficient method, he added, is through nature-based solutions, working hand in hand with the communities most affected, standing alongside those sectors most exposed, and supporting them in the transition towards sustainable models of development. Last but not least, MEP Casares furthermore stressed the importance of defending the European Green Deal as a shared societal responsibility.

Moving on, **Mr. Gábor Figeczky**, Senior Programme Manager at the IUCN European Regional Office, set the scene regarding the co-benefits of ecosystem restoration. The best ally in achieving the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C, he said, is nature itself, through healthy ecosystems. It is vital that the European Union maintains its leading role in this. IUCN, he stated, is keen on supporting countries in implementing the Nature Restoration Regulation and is directly assisting four countries in developing their national restoration plans. Coastal and marine ecosystems, in particular blue carbon ecosystems, have significant potential to contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, including carbon sequestration, coastal protection, biodiversity conservation, improved water quality, and the fostering of sustainable economic activities such as fisheries. However, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) fail to sufficiently recognise these benefits. The REST-COAST project therefore conducted an analysis demonstrating varying degrees of integration of coastal ecosystems. The project also shed light on the limited funding for biodiversity and the insufficient emphasis on ecosystem-based approaches. **Mr. Figeczky** concluded by stating that nature restoration is a triple win for people, the planet, and the economy.

Mr. Ivan Cáceres, Deputy Coordinator of the REST-COAST project, presented the outcomes of the project from a scientific perspective. According to his presentation, in marine environments, carbon sequestration works differently from that on land. Whilst sequestered carbon on land eventually returns to the atmosphere, sequestered carbon in the sea is pumped beneath the seabed, most of it not to be released again. The REST-COAST project aims to mimic nature's own methods through effective coastal restoration, in other words by applying nature-based solutions. Restoration efforts, however, must be applied on a wider scale. Furthermore, it is

important to quantify the benefits provided by the ecosystem to demonstrate the outcomes of invested funds. With 38 partners in 11 countries, the REST-COAST project brings together representatives from governments, restoration and finance experts, and bridging voices to create actionable change. Various work packages, including those on finance, governance and policy, dissemination, and hands-on restoration, support this purpose, while nine pilot cases feature different types of environments for study.

The REST-COAST project also addresses coastal restoration on a global scale. Mr. Cáceres explained that the project seeks to predict what would happen if coastal restoration practices from the pilot sites were applied worldwide. The information gathered and compiled in the REST-COAST project serves to inform decision makers, for which three policy briefs were developed: (1) on setting the basis for coastal restoration in the context of the Nature Restoration Regulation, (2) on how coastal restoration can be considered as an opportunity in increase ambition for the NDCs, and (3) on how to enhance source-to-sea connectivity from restoration activities. Mr. Cáceres explained that the REST-COAST deliverable on NDCs (*D5.4 Contribution of Restoration Activities to NDCs*) revealed that blue carbon ecosystems are under-acknowledged in NDCs and National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) within the scope of the project, providing preliminary recommendations to overcome this gap. Mr. Cáceres also advanced outcomes from the report on country-specific recommendations (*D5.5 Country-Specific Recommendations for Restoration Management and Conservation*) addressing strategic planning, technical capacity, stakeholder engagement, monitoring tools and data, NbS and ecosystem-specific needs, and funding. Similarly, he also introduced a set of 10 key recommendations from the deliverable *D5.6 A Blueprint for Coastal Restoration: REST-COAST Recommendations for Transformative Governance and Policies at International and EU Levels*). This report sheds light on opportunities that exist to strengthen a holistic approach for marine and coastal restoration considering the current policy framework. Given the context of the event, Mr. Cáceres specially highlighted recommendations related to the need to embedding coastal NbS in environmental and climate policies, as well as the importance of considering regional action plans and transnational cooperation aiming at upscaling the impact of coastal restoration.

Reacting to the previous speakers' interventions, **Mr. Jacob Armstrong**, Ocean Policy Manager at WWF European Policy Office, presented the linkages between ocean and climate action, highlighting the need for stronger EU leadership to advance marine protection, climate resilience, and well-being. He began by outlining the growing threats facing the oceans, including heat absorption, coral bleaching, species migration, ocean acidification, and extreme weather events. All of these are consequences of global warming, with major implications for around 40% of the population living near coasts and three billion people relying on seafood for their livelihoods and nutrition. He emphasised that restoring blue carbon ecosystems, such as mangroves, seagrasses, salt marshes, and kelp forests offers major benefits; carbon storage, coastal protection, food security, and biodiversity. These ecosystems also support jobs and economic growth, though their value is often overlooked in policy. Moreover, Mr. Armstrong outlined WWF's key principles for effective ocean–climate action; to raise ambition, make nature part of the solution, put people at the centre, and better align climate and ocean finance. Specifically, from Mr. Armstrong's point of view, the upcoming EU Ocean Act offers an opportunity to enshrine the 30x30 marine protected areas target into law. Also, the EU should develop an effective blue carbon strategy to strengthen ocean–climate action, as he moved on to highlight. Member States should furthermore prioritise marine habitats in nature restoration plans and provide adequate support and funding. Lastly, prohibiting destructive fishing activities, accompanied by a fair transition, is essential to reduce human pressures.

Ms. Claire Boudy, Senior Officer for Nature Restoration at the IUCN European Regional Office, presented their work in supporting France, in developing their national restoration plan. Through a technical support instrument funded by the European Commission Reform and Investment task force (SG Reform), support is offered to the French Ministry for Ecological Transition, providing recommendations on restoration measures, estimated implementation costs, and funding options. She mentioned that a similar Technical Support Instrument project is also being led by IUCN EURO to support the Netherlands, Poland and Croatia in developing their national nature restoration plans. Ms. Boudy highlighted major challenges for France's coasts, including urban sprawl, port infrastructure, coastal erosion, and sea-level rise, particularly in the Mediterranean. She recommended shifting the focus from grey infrastructure and coastal defences to nature-based solutions and green infrastructure. Furthermore, she recommended the preservation of existing ecosystems, adaptive and flexible coastal ecosystem management, and improved connectivity between ecosystems. While mentioning how the LIFE ADAPTO projects demonstrate the proven efficiency of nature-based solutions, Ms. Boudy concluded by emphasising the need to raise awareness among local authorities in France about the benefits of investing in natural, green infrastructure. She also shared IUCN's broader message; local planners should promote coastal resilience through anticipatory and adaptive planning for climate change, apply the precautionary principle, and ensure long-term monitoring of coastal activities.

Mr. Tommaso Demozzi, Biodiversity Policy Officer at the IUCN European Regional Office, moderated the Q&A session with the audience. A question raised by **Ms. Evelien Meinders** from the Dutch province of Groningen involved in the REST-COAST project as a key stakeholder, focused on whether the EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) could be used to promote a more integrated, system-based approach rather than the one currently applied under the Natura 2000 framework in the Netherlands. Mr. Armstrong responded that the NRR could indeed support such an approach, although effective implementation depends on clear coordination between ministries and inclusive stakeholder engagement, while also mentioning the potential to simplify and harmonise EU environmental planning. **Mr. François De Keuleneer**, a REST-COAST partner representing DEME, asked how the EU Nature Restoration Regulation will actually change the way nature is valued and how it will generate real financial flows toward restoration projects, given that political decision-making often focuses on short-term agendas while nature's benefits are long-term. In response, Mr. Caceres emphasised that meaningful restoration begins by reducing human pressures on ecosystems, since nature can recover quickly once stressors are removed, though sometimes more slowly depending on conditions. He acknowledged that political timelines rarely align with nature's timescales but viewed the NRR as progress, because it is a legally binding requirement for governments to act through measurable restoration targets. Also, Mr. Caceres expressed hope that future national restoration plans will better include coastal ecosystems, recognising their high cost-effectiveness and strong ecological benefits compared with other restoration efforts. **Ms. Laura Puértolas** from Albirem Sustainability (REST-COAST partner) asked how the scientific community can better translate its knowledge to influence Member State representatives and policy, and how to improve the policy uptake and practical application of scientific findings. The responses highlighted that EU Member States are taking varied approaches to their national restoration plans, but the current regulatory framework offers a chance to foster cross-sector collaboration and integrated policymaking. Speakers highlighted that transparent communication and effective dissemination of results, supported by community engagement - as seen in the Dutch example - are key to increasing public trust and scaling up successful restoration efforts.

Wrapping up the discussions, **Ms. Pilar Marín Cabeza**, Marine and Coastal Project Officer at the IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation, reiterated the urgency and key opportunity to restore coastal ecosystems. She stated that restoration can be a powerful tool for adaptation, biodiversity, and climate mitigation, but that policy, science, and community must go hand in hand. Coastal and ocean restoration, she emphasised, should become cornerstones of the European climate agenda. Looking ahead, she urged everyone to carry the momentum of the event forward, especially looking towards UNFCCC COP30, and to continue working together across sectors, disciplines, and borders.