



THE AZORES: CONTRIBUTION OF AN ATLANTIC INSULAR REGION TO THE EUROPEAN MARITIME POLICY

Since the date of its discovery, at the beginning of the XV century, the Azores islands have always been an important oceanic platform, with a natural and privileged relation with the sea, due to their geo-strategic position.

These nine desert islands, then settled by Portuguese and other European people, were privileged witnesses of the epic era of the discoveries and the maritime founding of new worlds, becoming a basic axle for navigation between Europe, Asia and America.

For the populations - established, mainly, on coastal areas – the sea has become their privileged source of feeding and the only way of assuring the regular supplying of essential goods, in spite of violent storms and natural disasters.

Nowadays, the importance of sea in the Azores has not decreased, due to the geographical specificities of this archipelago:

With a total area of 2350 km² (two thousand three hundred and fifty square kilometres) - 2,5% (two point five per cent) of the total surface of Portugal and a little less than Luxembourg – the archipelago is constituted by 9 volcanic islands, located at about 1500 kms (one thousand and five hundred kilometres) from Lisbon and about 3900 kms (three thousands and nine hundred kilometres) from the east coast of North America.

These islands, as we can see, are not only away from Europe's mainland, but also apart from each other, as they are extended for 600 kms (six hundred kilometres) between Santa Maria and Corvo islands (almost the same distance between the southern and northern extreme of Portugal mainland).

These nine small islands are, by other hand, very diverse from each other, as their individual areas vary between the 750 km² (seven hundred and fifty square kilometres) of São Miguel island and the 17 km² (seventeen square kilometres) of Corvo island.

Another example of their diversity is the fact that, having a population of 240.000 (two hundred and forty thousand) inhabitants, the most populated island – São Miguel - has 126.000 (one hundred twenty six thousands) residents and Corvo, the less occupied , has fewer than 400 (four hundred).

But the geographical distribution and characteristics of the Azores islands also defines one of its greatest richness, in economic, ecological and bio-diversity level:

- an immense exclusive economic zone of 984.300 km² (nine hundred eighty four thousand three hundred square kilometres) and an impressive extension of coastline, with a total of 844 kms (eight hundred forty four square kilometres) - almost the 943 kms (nine hundred forty three square kilometres) of Portugal mainland's coastline).



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In despite of these differences, all the islands have a privileged relation with the sea, specially in terms of economical development, as it continues to be the main way to assure the regular supplying and exchange of goods.

Therefore, each one of the nine islands has to have, at least, one commercial port, with adequate conditions for docking ships during all year.

On the other hand, although fishing activity has been appropriately regulated, the economical development derived from this activity didn't decrease its importance. The existence of 35 (thirty five) fishing ports clearly demonstrates that.

In addition, the Region decided that it was not only trough the capture of fish and sea species that it would get its sustainable development, but rather by the practice of activities such as whale watching, scuba-diving, swimming with dolphins, underwater archaeology, sailing and others.

Furthermore, the maritime contribution to the Region's development is also connected to the implementation of sources of energy derived from waves – as in the Pico's island Wave Centre - and to the investigation of hydro-thermal fountains, maritime bottoms and unknown ways of life of the under sea.

Finally, the investment on port infrastructures and the promotion of the archipelago as a major destination on cruises type of tourism, represents another possibility of economical development derived from the sea.

For all these reasons, we can easily conclude that the sea and maritime related activities are still a major issue for this Region and their governance.

So, how can these nine European islands - with a vast EEZ and wide costal area, distant from the mainland and from each others and, consequently, with an indispensable relation with the sea – contribute and act on their large and specific maritime interests ?

Well, by its geographical, economical, cultural and historical specificities, the Azores region enjoys of Political and Legislative Autonomy in the context of the Portuguese State.

Therefore, the Azores Autonomous Region has a Legislative Assembly, directly elected by universal suffrage, from where derives the Regional Government, and enjoys power of decision on several key-areas, such as Education, Economy, Environment, Territorial Management and Sea Matters, amongst others.

We should also underline, that one of the various departments of the Azorean government holds the tutelage of Environment and Sea, including fisheries, showing the inter-connection that exists between them and the importance of the sustainability of maritime activities, which have a transversal and extended approach in all Governmental policies.

So, what has been done by the regional government of the Azores regarding maritime affairs?

Well, with the institution of political autonomy, in 1976, the regional authorities soon became aware of the need to establish policies and measures which allowed the safeguard of this important resource.



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In fact, while in many places of the planet, sea was seen as an inexhaustible resource, in the Azores were being given the first steps aiming its sustainable use.

In this way, since late seventies, the Azores Government began to implement protection measures of maritime resources, as the ones which limited some fishing equipment and kept the adequate artisan methods.

In other hand, it was also in the seventies that the Region decided to include studies on maritime subjects in the scientific and lective activities of Azores University.

Therefore, it was created the Department of Oceanography and Fisheries (DOP), decision which was disclosed of extreme importance for the elaboration of guided policies for the sector, jointly with other structures of the University, namely, the Biology and Geosciences Departments.

At a regional level, DOP has closely followed the related governmental decisions regarding fisheries and all the subjects on the sea, as the regulation of whale watching activity, studies on fishing resources or sea bottoms and protected maritime areas management.

In what concerns the intervention of the Regional Government, we can mention – in a very brief way – a number of relevant forms of action, aiming the sustainable use of sea resources, such as:

- Creation of several environmental protected areas;
- Prohibition of the use of non selective fishing equipment;
- Regulation of the fishing fleet size, taking into account the available resources of the sea;
- Regulation of coastal areas use;
- Regulation of several tourism activities, as whale watching (and, of course, before that, the abolition of its capture in the early 80's);
- Definition of management plans for all areas of Natura 2000 Network;
- Implementation of Fisheries Global Sectorial Plans;
- Creation of fishing protected areas, as in:
 - Fajãs of São Jorge island;
 - Beaches of São Lourenço, Anjos and Maia in Santa Maria island;
 - Formigas islets, or
 - Islet of Vila Franca do Campo.
- Several investments in infra-structures, re-qualification and systems of public information on the Regional Net of Protected Areas;
- The conclusion of the Plans to Order Coastal Edges of several islands.

And, finally,



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- The reformulation of regional port's system, aiming to promote a new attitude, characterized by reduction of costs, improvement of productivity levels, efficiency and the adequate management of the resources.

Then, to the question of what role for regions in European maritime affairs, I would dare to say that the Azores Autonomous region has already implemented an effective and relevant action on those fields, through an integrated and sustainable policy which must be considered by European authorities.

So, bearing in mind the geographical and economical relation of the Azores region with the sea and its practice on maritime governance, what can we say about the Green Paper on EMP?

First of all, it is clear that it has not been given enough attention to the Atlantic and insular dimension of European Maritime Policy, as the role that this Ocean has - and can play in the future - is not duly taken in account.

The Green Paper would profit if it had been chosen a detailed treatment of this reality, similarly to what happens with other geographic parts of the Union.

It is imposed, thus, in the future developments of this subject, to have in special consideration the fact that the islands of the Union are an essential element in the maritime dimension and that they are confronted with problems and specific needs.

As an example of the importance of islands, it is enough to remember that, in the case of the Azores, despite its small terrestrial dimension, it benefits of the biggest Economic Exclusive Zone of Europe.

That importance is even more significant if we look to the centred and privileged strategical position in world-wide context, as well as to the repercussions at an economic, social and environmental level from possible catastrophes occurred inside of its maritime domain.

This way, it is imposed to take in account the Atlantic and insular reality in the several aspects of the EMP, such as:

- the environmental protection;
- the preservation of resource and sea biodiversity;
- the monitoring of vessels and maritime security;
- the prevention of accidents, pollution and natural catastrophes;
- the maritime borders' control and European Security and Defence Policy,
- only to mention some areas.

In addition, it is clear that many of those issues require a response involving the simultaneous effort of various levels of government and of various sectors of responsibility.

Therefore, the trans-sectoral approach which is required for future EMP clearly advises the setting-up within its fold of an "inter-service" group with responsibility over islands.



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Besides that, it is a fact that the ENVIRONMENTAL Pillar mentioned in the Green Paper is not presented as a development element, but as a restriction to economic activity.

Therefore, some basic principles on environmental matter, nature conservation and biodiversity are not enough precise on the strategic objectives presented, such as:

- The clear definition of good environmental status for all EU;
- The need to establish surveillance programs of marine waters good status, or
- An ecosystemic approach regarding the use of fishing resources, allowing planning and implementation of specific measures adjusted to the environmental and social-economic realities of each marine ecosystem.

Concerning FISHERIES this subject is dealt in a very spread and superficial way, which is ambiguous with an integrated approach to the matters of the sea and to the sustainability of its resources.

This is, of course, of major importance to the Azores, whose Government have been acting, throughout the years, in a precautionary way regarding this sector.

It urges, therefore, that in the future EMP the Union must be aware and recognize that there are regions that have already done some work on this issue and contemplate a differentiated approach to these situations, taking them as a valid model.

This alert is not of minor importance, once the Azores have already experienced the baneful effect of this un-awareness when, in the scope of the regulation concerning the Access to Western Waters, had their restrictive policies of fishing effort and other limitations imposed to regional fishermen reduced from 200 (two hundred) miles to 100 (one hundred) miles.

It is, therefore, restated in the strongest possible terms, that the limit of the 200 miles has to be restored, since the current situation is not enough to guarantee the goal of sustainable management and can compromise the bio-diversity of the Azorean EEZ.

Besides, it is crucial that maritime communities have stability in accessing their traditional fishing resources, as well as the assurance of its sustainable use.

On another subject, it is clear that the islands of the Union have specificities when dealing with coastal edges issues.

Therefore, it becomes imperative that the EMP takes in account a differentiated approach to this issue, mainly concerning aspects like the importance of their integrated management, as well as risks.

It is also important to mention that the Azores present dangers similar to other coastal regions of the EU, but also specific natural dangers, as the ones resulting from earthquakes and volcanic activities, which deserve a particular approach.



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Regarding INVESTIGATION, the Regional Government of the Azores is pleased with the emphasis that Green Paper places in clearing and betting the improvement of knowledge on seas and oceans, which have a high technological potential.

The Azores Region already installed laboratorial structures for studies on many subjects related to these areas, as biology or hydrothermal sources of the Mid-Atlantic crest.

So, it is also important to greet a clear recognition in the Green Paper that the outermost regions are well placed for the observation of the oceanic system, meteorological cycles or climatic changes and that they have an active role in what concerns research and development of our knowledge on the seas.

Another area of excellence in terms of investigation is the geologic risk, which finds in the Region an unique framing, resulting from the triple joint defined by the confluence of American, Euro-asian and African lithosphere platforms.

The EMP should regard this as a priority area, as well as consider the Azores Region as a natural excellence lab, either for the conduction of integrated projects about the causes of such dangers, or to the development of technologies for monitoring nets and alert systems.

In what concerns MARITIME TRANSPORTS, we find important to underline the need to reformulate the strategies of the European sustainability model, in order to integrate regions like the Azores.

The EMP cannot ignore that, in the case of insular regions, maritime transport cannot be seen as an option comparing to other means of transport.

Therefore, insular cabotage and maritime transport between the islands must be considered eligible for a specific program of communitarian supports, particularly in what concerns maritime infra-structures, super-structures and marine and harbour accessibilities.

In this scope, the issue of security, monitoring, supervising and the control of the maritime traffic also deserves a special reference.

The Azores, being a privileged route of ships which cross the North Atlantic, are subjected to increased risks in what concerns sea pollution, accidents and traffic of dangerous substances: - a situation where one tiny parcel of the territory of the Union carries the risks of an activity which reverts in benefit of others.

According to this, it is our understanding that the EMP should consider in a special way these situations, foreseeing the creation of Union resources for the fulfilment of functions which are in the interest of all.

On the other hand, it is essential that all the port system is covered by multidiscipline policies with abilities in areas so diversified as port's and ships' security, monitoring, control of weapons and dangerous substances, the training and formation of specialized staff, the re-definition of emergency-plans and the combat to illegal immigration, clandestine-ness, piracy, terrorism and traffic of narcotics.



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Finally, regarding to ENERGY issues, it is obvious that the sea is, without any doubt, an immense renewable power plant.

However, it is necessary to understand that the available technologies for its exploitation still need a bigger investment, having in mind its use in a profitable and safe way.

Being the Azores a privileged region in what concerns energy potential of sea and being hindered to take benefits of the trans-European energy nets, we reaffirm the agreement that it should have the right to a priority treatment for the use of such technologies.

IN CONCLUSION, we strongly believe that there is a role for regions on the future European Maritime Policy and we also consider that the Azores can be a good example of what can be an effective and relevant action of regions on several maritime issues.

This is, truly, a moment of great meaning for Europe and with fundamental importance to our collective future, specially to our maritime regions.

So, it is necessary to have in mind that the principle of subsidiarity is one of the pillars to the exercise of government by the European institutions and a guarantee of the regional and sectorial specificities, for which the EMP should give its due importance.

Above all, we think that the Green Paper must be an opportunity not only to debate on the way Union deals with issues of seas and oceans, but also on what is necessary to be done to protect this Humanity's heritage...

Thank you very much for your attention !

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