



ABOUT FLOW



FLOW is an international research project on how young generations (16-30 years old) engage with water and oceans, exploring their values, expectations, and emotions. The project connects young people across Europe with marine and freshwater stakeholders to drive innovation, policy, and sustainability in water ecosystems.

The FLOW project supports the EU's Mission to Restore Our Oceans and Waters by 2030 by examining young generations' engagement with aquatic ecosystems, focusing on their values, expectations, and emotions. The project explores their emotional and intellectual connections to water and provides insights to aid policy development for ocean restoration.

Methods



HORIZON
SCANNING



WEAK SIGNALS
ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION TO FORESIGHT STUDY



The foresight study on human-water relations provides insights into **how culture shapes and enacts young generations' relationships with water and oceans**. This policy brief **summarises key findings** from the analysis of cultural signals on human-water relations young people encounter. The aim is to inform and guide EU policymakers, especially under the Mission Restore Our Oceans and Waters by 2030 initiative, in engaging youth with aquatic environmental issues. Through horizon scanning, we identified signals from cultural sources that express and influence human-water relations. We uncovered both popular signals (e.g. books in bestseller lists or movies with a lot of views), as well as fringe signals encountered by researchers or signals specific to one of the FLOW regions. By **analysing 225 cultural signals**, the study uncovered novel insights into how young people envision their relationship with water and their role in shaping future aquatic ecosystems. This brief summarises the findings of the horizon scanning, with special emphasis on the **implications for policy and youth engagement**.

APPROACH OF THE FORESIGHT STUDY



Exploring Youth Engagement with Water Ecosystems: Investigate how young generations in Europe relate to aquatic environments, focusing on their values, emotions, and future expectations.



Funded by
the European Union



Horizon Scanning for Emerging Trends in Human-Water Relations: Analysing culture with foresight tools to detect emerging trends in human-water relations, which may influence future policy and restoration efforts, e.g. using films, documentaries and video games to understand the shaping of human-water relations.



Framework for Human-Water Interaction: Master, Steward, Partner, Participant: Categorising youth perspectives into human-nature relationship categories to understand their connection and potential contributions to ocean restoration and sustainability.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FORESIGHT STUDY



Scanning, organising and analysing sources from different media proved to be an insightful approach for capturing collectively-held imaginaries, expectations, hopes and fears connected with aquatic environments. The foresight study shows that there are different ways in which (future) human-water relations are represented. We assigned the analysed cultural sources to four images.



Master over Nature: The analysed media in this category center on human control over water systems, often driven by economic motives or technological innovation. For example, in the video game Dave the Diver, water environments are depicted as a site for exploitation, where technological progress is necessary to overcome natural challenges.



Steward of Nature: Here, the focus shifts to human responsibility toward aquatic ecosystems. The Global Fishing Watch Map project is an example, showing how geospatial data can be used to monitor and protect ocean health. Additionally, cultural products such as the film No Mad emphasise personal responsibility in safeguarding water ecosystems.

Partner with Nature: This category emphasises equality between humans and nature, with legal frameworks like The Legal Rights of Rivers representing new ways to conceptualise natural entities as partners. These signals reflect a shift in how society sees its relationship with aquatic environments, acknowledging their legal rights and intrinsic value.



Participant in Nature: This approach views humans as part of an interconnected ecosystem, where emotions and direct experiences with water play a central role. The documentary *My Octopus Teacher* exemplifies this connection, showing how deep emotional bonds with aquatic life can transform our understanding of human-water relations



FEARS, HOPES, AND HUMAN CONNECTION TO WATER



Fears and Hopes: The analysis uncovers a pronounced sense of urgency among young generations regarding the precarious future of aquatic ecosystems. Climate change, pollution, and the collapse of marine biodiversity are perceived as existential threats, with many cultural signals expressing a fear of "losing nature." Oceans, in particular, are frequently portrayed as victims of human exploitation, with cultural products highlighting key issues such as **biodiversity loss**, **sea level rise**, and **the destruction of marine habitats**. These depictions reflect an acute awareness of the fragility of aquatic environments, emphasising the human role in their degradation. Concurrently, the study reveals a counter-narrative of **hope**, particularly in the context of innovations in **sustainability** and **conservation**. Themes of **stewardship**, **blue innovation**, and **rights-based approaches** — such as granting legal rights to water bodies— emerge as significant sources of optimism. These hopeful signals reflect a growing belief in humanity's capacity to restore and protect aquatic ecosystems through **collective action**.



Emotional Disconnect? The research also highlights a persistent challenge in maintaining emotional connections with aquatic environments. Many cultural products, while attempting to bridge this gap, often resort to **anthropomorphising** non-human entities like oceans and marine life. Despite the potential inadequacy, these **simplified depictions** succeed in engaging young audiences, fostering a sense of **connectedness** that is vital for environmental conservation. The simplification may, in fact, serve as an entry point for broader engagement, where emotional and intellectual connections with water ecosystems can evolve into deeper understanding and action.



The cultural sources analysed present water in a variety of ways, reflecting the complexity of human-water relations. Water is often depicted as both a **resource** to be exploited and a **powerful force** worthy of respect and protection. Some cultural expressions focus on the **beauty and fragility** of oceans, emphasizing their vulnerability to human actions, while others highlight the ocean's role as a **boundary or threat**—a force that must be managed or controlled. This diversity in depictions signals that the **image of water** is undergoing a transformation. Young generations are engaging with nuanced understandings of water's **material and symbolic** value, influenced by both mainstream and fringe cultural narratives.



IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION OCEAN



1

Education and Awareness: Engage young generations in initiatives that emphasise the interconnectedness of humans and aquatic environments. Encourage youth to see themselves as stewards and participants in nature, which fosters a sense of responsibility for protecting ecosystems.

2

Leveraging Culture: Use media that resonates with young generations to promote positive human-water relations. For example, documentaries like Seaspiracy and video games like Dave the Diver can highlight both (anthropogenic) threats to oceans and the role of humans in conserving them. The Mission Ocean can link to these media to reach young people.

3

Promoting Active Participation: Encourage policies that facilitate youth participation in conservation efforts. This includes hands-on initiatives such as citizen science projects and volunteering or voluntourism programs where young people actively engage with conservation projects.



FLOW

FUTURE LIVES WITH OCEANS AND WATERS

<https://www.flowhorizon.eu/streams-currents/>

KIEL, MAY 2024

All these research results are publicly available at FLOW website:

<https://www.flowhorizon.eu/streams-currents/>

FLOW has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 101093928.

Disclaimer: Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or those of the European Climate, Infrastructure, and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Funded by
the European Union