

European Marine Board
Report of the External Review Panel
June, 2019

The European Marine Board (EMB) was established as an independent legal entity (EMB IVZW) in 2016. As the last external review took place in 2010-2011, it was deemed that a new review would be appropriate since the procedures and structure of the EMB as an organisation and Secretariat have changed significantly over the past 8 years. As such, a full internal and external review of EMB's current status was conducted. The review was meant to be of benefit to both the Secretariat and its membership in considering how EMB operates and what could be improved. The external review was purposely meant to have a forward-looking approach rather than being a heavy and detailed evaluation.

REVIEW PROCESS

The review process began with an internal review, which was conducted by the EMB Secretariat via a questionnaire to the EMB members. The results of this self-evaluation as well as other documents supplied by the EMB secretariat served as input for the External Review Panel.

The External Review Panel consisted of 4 experts plus a Chair, including:

Wendy Watson-Wright (Chair): Ocean Frontier Institute (Canada) and formerly IOC-UNESCO
Mark Dickey-Collas – ICES
Ned Dwyer – Randbee Consultants and former Exec. Director EurOcean, PT
Willie Wilson – Marine Biological Association, UK
Jacqueline Wood – UKRI-NERC, UK

A face to face meeting of the External Review Panel was organised in conjunction with the EurOCEAN 2019 Conference and the EMB Spring Plenary meeting in Paris in order that the panel could discuss items with, and ask questions of, the EMB Secretariat staff, the EMB delegates and EMB partner networks during the Conference.

Strategic areas

The main purpose of the External Review Panel was to:

- a) Consider whether the current status and operation of EMB are fit-for-purpose;
- b) Consider the relevance of EMB;
- c) Consider whether the core instruments and activities of EMB are fit-for-purpose;
- d) Comment on the achievements and impact of EMB to date, and the potential for future impact;
- e) Recommend such changes to the aims, objectives, modus operandi, core instruments and activities, and the terms of reference of EMB as appropriate.

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To answer these questions, the external review panel was asked to focus on 4 key areas of strategic importance for EMB functioning:

- **EMB organisation structure and governance** – essentially does the EMB still fulfil the tasks it was set up to perform?
- **Functioning and the role of EMB in the wider EU marine landscape** - what is the role of EMB in the wider EU marine landscape, how is EMB seen vis-à-vis other marine organisations, how can it differentiate/stand out from other similar organisations and how can it ensure added value for its members?
- **EMB activities and outputs and their impact** – which outputs have been provided over the years since the last review, and what has been their impact?
- **Financial review** – are the EMB's financial practices appropriate and how can the organisation be made financially sustainable in the long term?

The outcomes of the review are presented here as:

1. Responses to the specific questions asked for each strategic area of review
2. A SWOT analysis, in order to identify EMB's:
 - Strengths: factors that give EMB an edge over other organisations;
 - Weaknesses: factors that can be harmful for EMB;
 - Opportunities: favourable situations which can bring a competitive advantage;
 - Threats: unfavourable situations which can negatively affect the organisation.

STRATEGIC AREAS OF REVIEW

EMB Organisation structure and governance

Does the EMB still fulfil the tasks it was set up to do (provide a Forum for its members), to analyse membership, delegate engagement, participation, and support?

Review response: Overall the EMB does still fulfil its tasks, and the EMB is seen as an authoritative voice of marine science. The occurrence of inquorate plenary meetings should be seen as a concern and the gender balance of the ExCom is an issue that needs to be addressed.

The role of ExCom is well defined and the review panel noted that there has been a change in the nature of members of the Board over time, with a reduction in participation by research funders, but an increase in University Consortia.

Is the role and functioning of the EMB Secretariat still fit for purpose and if not, how this could be improved?

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Review response: Yes. The Secretariat is a highly professional, efficient and committed group of people and despite the significant turnover in staff since the last review, it continues to carry out its activities in a competent manner. It is held in high esteem by those who have dealings with it.

Are the delegates acting well as ambassadors for EMB at national level?

Review response: In some countries the role of delegates as ambassadors is working well; however, in many countries there is a disjoint. The delegates do not actively advocate and promote the organisation. This may be partly due to the fact that the people who are delegates are often delegates of a number of international or membership type organisations and therefore do not wish to show preference. In some countries there is a lack of awareness of EMB.

Functioning and the role of EMB in the wider EU marine landscape

How is the EMB seen vis-à-vis other marine organisations?

Review response: The EMB is widely regarded as a trusted organisation. It has a clear role in providing strong foresight on the research needs for marine science. The EMB is acknowledged as an effective linking organisation with the research arm (DG-RTD) of the European Commission. The major outputs of the EMB are well respected and many are considered reference documents for certain themes.

Can the EMB be differentiated from other similar organisations?

Review response: Yes, the EMB fills a well-defined niche in the marine science research-policy interface.

Comment on the communication actions and outputs from the EMB.

Review response: The EMB is a very active communicator, with hard copy publications, email briefings and a web presence. In addition, the EMB has the ability to open doors across the European marine science network and effectively disseminate information. However, the use of email briefings and pdfs for the downloading of online documents will very soon be seen as antiquated. The EMB needs to stay at the forefront of the most recent developments in communications in order to ensure its voice continues to be heard.

EMB activities and outputs and their impact

Are the EMB outputs still valuable or do we need to focus on other areas, look at the topics that we work on, is our foresight still cross-cutting?

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Review response: Yes, the outputs are valuable, and the mix has impact and is quite varied. The foresight is effective and salient; this is probably due to involving relevant experts in the Working Groups and the process used to develop the products. More recent future science briefs could be considered less comprehensive or visionary than might be expected.

Consider the current types of outputs that the EMB provides (foresight documents, future science briefs and policy brief) and their value.

Review response: The European Marine Board has a suite of outputs and activities. The rationale for each instrument in the suite is clear to insiders of the system, but likely unclear, if not irrelevant to outsiders

Would a different format of output be useful and how might the EMB communicate its work more effectively?

Review response: Yes, see recommendations

How do we evaluate the impact of our activities?

Review response: No clear answer; it is difficult to suggest pragmatic resource-appropriate mechanisms, but consultation with professionals in the field of performance measurement might assist. The work that the Secretariat does already to try to systematically track the distribution, use and impact of publications is acknowledged.

Financial review

Consider the EMB financial overview, future budget projections, etc. and give ideas on how to make the organisation financially sustainable in the long term

Review response: The EMB has a variety of sources of financial support which appear relatively resilient, with no significant asset to manage. It has strong support from Flanders regional government. Engagement in EU-projects is also a useful source of income, but it may be seen as compromising independence.

RESULTS OF SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- The European Marine Board is quite well known and respected by the marine community in Europe and has a strong brand and reputation for producing high quality materials.

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- It is successfully influencing the European research agenda across the wide marine research spectrum.
- EMB has a very clear niche as an authoritative voice for European marine science in relation to research and science-policy needs.
- It is recognised by the European Commission as being a trusted body in relation to marine science in Europe. Its opinion is respected on relevant matters, and members value it for its ability to have access to the DG-RTD and to be able to influence policy in relation to marine research priorities.
- It is a trusted partner of choice that delivers on contractual commitments in a professional and timely fashion (e.g. H2020 projects).
- EMB is also able to influence national research agendas (e.g., it helps with the structuring and alignment of marine research institutions at the national level – especially with the university groups and multi-lateral agendas (e.g., JPI-Oceans, SRIA).
- Financially, EMB has strong fiduciary principles backed by robust internal regulations and receives strong financial support from the Flanders Regional government as well as fees from all of its members.
- EMB is well supported by a professional, experienced and highly competent secretariat, that has good rapport with the membership.
- EMB is having impact and adding value on behalf of its Board members.
- Its influence is growing, especially with the Horizon programmes, and it appears to be able to address challenges requiring an integrated approach across research fields.
- The Young Ambassadors programme is a laudable initiative demonstrating the EMBs recognition of the need to engage the next generation of marine science leaders.
- The spectrum of expertise within the EMB and range of types membership is seen as positive.
- EMB has a well-defined legal status as an IVZW, which is appropriate and facilitates its operation. It has succeeded in establishing itself as an independent entity outside of ESF. It has well-developed internal guidelines and procedures which it should ensure are well known and followed.
- The ExCom's role is well defined, and its members are dedicated.

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WEAKNESSES

- There is an apparent lack of interest and engagement among some members as evidenced by the inability to obtain quorum at general assemblies on a number of occasions and the low response rate to the recent internal review questionnaire.
- There is a perceived lack of independence from the Commission. This arises due to some of the EMB activities such as wide member participation in Horizon projects where calls have clearly been strongly influenced by the EMB; co-organisation of events with the EC; limited transparency regarding high-level meetings with the EC DGs, etc.
- Within ExCom and on the Board, there is poor gender balance. This has also been noticeable in panels at the EurOCEAN meetings, although the Review Group is aware steps were taken to try and address this at the 2019 conference.
- Involvement of the membership is felt to be too top down in some countries, which results in reduced involvement of the wider community due to a reduced sense of ownership.
- There seems to be a lack of knowledge of the existence and role of the EMB within the general marine research community at national level and among mid to early career researchers.
- Long term strategic planning (financial and outputs) appears to be lacking, i.e., a multi-year financial plan as well as foreseeing topics to address over a longer timescale as opposed to what might be seen as reactions to what comes up as (possible) favoured topics from members.
- EMBs online presence will swiftly become outdated if current approaches are not updated/reformed.
- EMB is not taking full advantage of its Communications Panel.
- Doubts have been expressed as to transparency and impartiality of the ExCom *vis à vis* the full Membership in some decision making.

OPPORTUNITIES

There are opportunities for the EMB to:

- Take advantage of the positive perception and impact of EMB publications to increase engagement of different and additional stakeholder groups with the EMB.

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- Help to broaden the expertise and financial base by expanding membership of the organisation.
- Capitalise on increased global interest in the ocean (e.g., UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development; European Commission's Mission for Healthy Ocean; high level international conferences such as Our Ocean, UN Ocean conference, etc.).
- Take more advantage and consider formalising partnerships with existing pan-European and membership type organisations (e.g., JPIs) to develop joint activities; this would also help to optimise EMBs own resources.
- Inform the update of the various JPIs' strategic research and innovation agendas.
- Enhance cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary dialogue between EMB and other non-marine-specific pan-European organisations in order to address the growing need for systems-wide approaches to resolving current societal challenges.
- Enhance engagement with relevant International organisations and networks to represent European thinking on marine research on the world stage (e.g., OECD, UNESCO-IOC, ICES, OFI, G7, G20).
- Highlight Navigating the Future V at upcoming international conferences (e.g., Our Ocean, UN Ocean).
- Continue to improve dialogue with the European Commission DGs, (e.g., organise more participative workshops; interact with a broader range of DGs).
- Improve engagement with industry and marine clusters (e.g., European Network for Maritime Clusters).
- Link and seek to collaborate with international capacity building organisations related to the science-policy interface (e.g., International Ocean Institute; World Maritime University - Sasakawa Ocean Institute).
- Explore ways of enhancing and promoting dialogue and exchanges between member organisations, and foster engagement among members into project proposals.
- Find mechanisms to include small institutes with only a few people (e.g., Malta), and/or low GDP countries with an aim of 100% participation from all coastal countries in Europe.

THREATS

- The perceived lack of independence from the European Commission could lead to a loss of credibility for EMB.
- There is a danger of not maintaining and growing the membership, especially in light of the fact that other thematic Membership groups are vying for the same membership or policy space. Research institutes and other potential members have to prioritise

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memberships, often from the same organisation/ organisational resource and budget line.

- Not continuing to demonstrate value for money would be very damaging for the EMB.
- Changes to AISBL/IVZW operation forced by Belgian Law risks opening up discussion around statutes (and hence membership) at a time of ongoing transition.
- Expanding membership has practical implications (meeting size), including risk of distraction into many disparate issues and of fragmentation. It also has implications for quorum, with the risk of a few countries dominating decisions by having more members, each with a vote.
- There are perceived conflicts of interest of members who belong to multiple marine science networks, projects and partnerships. This may be understood internally but is confusing to the wider community.
- There are risks of not fully addressing the complex and detailed operation of the IVZW in accordance with Belgian/Flanders laws (e.g., HR, Health and Safety).
- ‘Competitors in the foresight space’ – there may be overlaps with the goals of other representative organisations (e.g., EuroMarine, JRC), especially in relation to attracting the ear of the European Commission.
- There is a lack of clarity of EMB’s strategic role in EOOS.
- Selection of areas of activity are being perceived to lack transparency, which challenges the credibility of the organisation.
- Concerns were expressed about EMB staying relevant and producing timely and visionary information (comments were received that more recent products are less innovative than they were 10 years ago).
- It may become more difficult to keep EMB’s voice being heard in the rising tide of public awareness of ocean issues (which are quite single issue dominated (e.g., plastics) leading to a risk of fatigue).
- Failing to adjust to the open data, and latest developments in the electronic communication world could threaten the relevance and reputation of EMB.
- BREXIT: Some UK partners may be forced to deprioritise EMB membership.

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PANEL CONCLUSIONS

The EMB is a highly respected organisation for marine science policy advice that is effectively fulfilling a very important role. The Panel’s review is very positive overall. However, there are concerns that the EMB does not appear to be preparing adequately for what is foreseen to be an increased future role in providing foresight for society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel recommends that EMB prepare a strategic framework to ensure resilience to future challenges as well as long term sustainability of the organisation. This framework should address how to:

- Remain relevant;
- Maintain products of the highest quality;
- Ensure decision making processes are equitable, transparent, and trusted;
- Disseminate outputs through relevant up to date tools that can handle enhanced electronic interactions and online inputs;
- Enhance the engagement of its membership in activities and in promoting awareness of EMB and its remit.

Alongside this framework, a multi-year business plan should also be developed, in part to capture financial fluctuations. It should try to factor in risk aspects (weaknesses & threats) as well as opportunistic activity to keep EMB innovative.

More specific recommendations include:

1. In order to maintain credibility and protect its legitimacy as a respected science-policy advisor, the European Marine Board should document publicly the stepwise process for the selection of areas, and this should include the rationale for the selections. The European Marine Board should formalise the process for scrutiny, in other words professionalise the documentation of the process.
2. To remain policy relevant, the European Marine Board should also build links with applied science users in Europe, for example with the Regional Seas Conventions.
3. EMB should consider mechanisms to increase sustainability. These could include the expansion of in-country membership, increasing income from participation of university consortia, marketing EMB membership to universities strong in marine research/training (or encouraging and/or targeting new consortia), finding mechanisms to include small institutes with only a few people and participation from outside Europe. Efforts should continue to ensure existing membership is maintained and that the ‘transition period’ to formalising membership of the IVWZ is minimised.

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4. The issues of inquorate plenary meetings and lack of gender balance of the ExCom should be seen as concerns and need to be addressed.
5. Special attention should be given to communicating the differentiation between EMB and other Membership organisations and project consortia.
6. The EMB Wikipedia page, which still refers to ESF, should be updated.
7. Consider mechanisms to allow less affluent countries to join, hence increasing the geographic coverage of members.
8. More active use should be made of the members of its Communications Panel to underpin dissemination of all its products and support implementation of emerging and novel communication approaches.
9. A comprehensive risk register should be completed and regularly reviewed by Trustees/Board.
10. Human Resources and Health and Safety reviews should be undertaken and any shortcomings addressed.
11. Links with capacity building organisations around policy/UNCLOS (e.g. International Ocean Institute, World Maritime University) should be improved.

‘Heard in the halls ‘

“What does the European Marine Board mean to operational researchers?”

“What is the key rationale for the European Marine Board?”

“In a very full field, why is the European marine Board distinct?”

“It is clearly very close to the European Commission.”

“It offers great opportunities to young researchers.”

“It clearly has a strong influence on EU project calls”