



Transnational and Regional Cooperation for Shared Environmental Awareness in the Black Sea Basin

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The Black Sea with its unique ecosystem, plays a vital role for both the diverse species it hosts and the communities that depend on it for economic opportunities. Hundreds of fish species support healthy living and nutrition for local people, while native plants and agricultural products stand out as essential sources of livelihood and key elements of the region's cultural identity. However, the ecosystem and the region's economic productivity face a series of preventable challenges. From natural disasters to air, water, and soil pollution, many issues have become common concerns across all countries in the region. Ensuring the sustainability of the Black Sea's current significance and productivity starts with understanding and communicating its importance. Yet, this cannot be achieved through the efforts of a single country; it requires active cooperation and knowledge sharing among all Black Sea countries. For this reason, cross-border cooperation programmes implemented through joint efforts of multiple countries have become one of the most effective tools for protecting the Black Sea. Among these, the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme stands out.

Aware of the crucial role that regional cooperation plays in the holistic development of the Black Sea, Türkiye has been one of the most active participants in the Programme since its start in 2007. In the current Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme (2021–2027), Turkish partners are involved in 26 projects under the first call and 45 projects under the second and final call. The first call, currently under implementation, includes cross-border projects focusing not only on technical actions such as measurement, monitoring, and environmental clean-ups within the priorities of “Clean and Green Region” and “Blue and Smart Region,” but also on information and awareness-raising initiatives. Conducted in cooperation among Türkiye, Moldova, Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece, these projects strengthen the exchange of knowledge, experience, and methodologies across communities. The formation of a shared awareness and culture of protection is at the core of all these efforts.

Transnational Public Awareness Projects

Transnational public awareness projects aim not only to engage citizens directly in the programme but also to empower them to take concrete actions for the future of the Black Sea. As a result, these projects go beyond being distant, technical processes and instead help cultivate a culture of participation. Their cross-border nature also enables communities to act together, fostering solidarity and ensuring that project results continue to have long-term impact across the entire basin.

Under the “Clean and Green Region” priority of the 2021–2027 period, these public awareness projects target various age groups and needs, while using different methods and tools. Thus, each project contributes to the shared goal in a complementary way, rather than repeating one another. Local communities benefit from multidimensional experiences around themes such as environmental protection, marine and coastal cleanliness, and the blue economy. Training modules, hands-on activities, digital platforms, and workshops are among the concrete examples of these efforts. Within this context, three cross-border projects stand out in particular for their broad partnerships and active implementation in Türkiye: LEARN4SEA, ecosySTEM, and EOL.





LEARN4SEA

LEARN4SEA project is implemented with partnership among Türkiye, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Romania, with its Turkish partner being Piri Reis University. It is a cross-border educational initiative designed to help communities across the Black Sea Basin learn about and adopt environmentally friendly practices.

Targeting the specific objective of “enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reducing all forms of pollution,” the project stands out for its focus on practical learning and contribution to air quality improvement. Activities include voluntary clean-up actions, hands-on waste management trainings, virtual reality–based environmental trainings for different age groups, and drone-assisted experimental workshops. Notable examples of these activities include a World Environment Day event where children participated in clean-up activities, a transnational coastal cleaning event in which volunteer groups collected one ton of waste, and VR-based environmental learning workshops for children. In addition, the Network of Environmental Information Centres established under the project aims to make all data, solutions, and educational materials accessible to the public.



Another important aspect of LEARN4SEA is its emphasis on reusing outputs, data, and materials from previously successful projects, ensuring continuity and sustainability. Through this approach, LEARN4SEA promotes a behaviour-based environmental learning culture.





ecosySTEM



The ecosySTEM project, implemented through cooperation among Türkiye, Ukraine, Greece, and Bulgaria, is centered around the idea that children and young people are key to the future of the Black Sea.

The project aims to build strong environmental and ecosystem awareness from an early age. In Türkiye, the project is implemented by the International Association for Development and Environment, focusing on providing STEM-based (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) environmental education free of charge. This scientific and technical learning approach complements other awareness-raising projects across the region, forming the scientific pillar of environmental education in the Black Sea.

Having completed its pilot training activities, ecosySTEM will begin full-scale education in October 2025, in its Turkish training center located in Kadıköy, İstanbul. Here, children will receive training on topics such as ecosystems and biodiversity, environment and water, air, renewable energy, and waste management. Across the region, children studying through the E-STEM curriculum and modules will also have the opportunity to design their own scientific projects and present them at four regional environmental festivals.



The project also aims to integrate the E-STEM curriculum into formal education systems, allowing its outcomes to reach broader audiences and contribute to building a shared environmental consciousness.



EOL



The EOL project, with its Lead Partner from Türkiye, and in cooperation with Greece and Bulgaria, focuses on increasing environmental and marine literacy among young professionals. The project is based on the idea that understanding the relationship between the environment, the sea, and daily life can positively influence public behaviour toward nature.

Unlike many awareness-raising projects targeting children or the general public, EOL focuses on young staff from local governments, NGOs, associations, universities, and foundations; groups capable of implementing institutional and policy-level change. Training activities include environmental literacy workshops for the metropolitan municipalities of İstanbul, Tekirdağ, and Edirne, as well as for civil society organizations such as the Thrace Nature Sports Association and the Community Volunteers Foundation (TOG). These are complemented by international training of trainers sessions and cross-border workshops. The project aims to reach 10,000 people and support at least nine NGOs with training materials, thereby enhancing not only individual awareness but also institutional environmental policies.



An important note about this project is that it reflects the inclusivity of the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme: the participation of YUVA Association as the project's lead partner underscores the vital role of civil society in regional cooperation and serves as an inspiring example for other NGOs.





Regional Synergy and Continuity

Transnational public awareness projects implemented in the Black Sea Basin, place information, awareness, and education at the very center of their missions, turning environmental consciousness from theory into a way of life. The success and sustainability of this collective goal depend on diversifying activities for different countries, audiences, and age groups. While LEARN4SEA engages all age groups through hands-on environmental learning, ecosySTEM focuses specifically on children through a scientific lens. EOL, on the other hand, targets young professionals. The environmental values learned in childhood are later reinforced and implemented by young adults, creating a sustainable cycle of awareness and action across generations.

Moreover, the diversity of methods enhances the overall coherence of the regional approach. LEARN4SEA promotes physical activities such as clean-ups and waste management; ecosySTEM combines science and creativity through a structured curriculum; EOL focuses entirely on literacy and institutional education. From a regional perspective, these projects clearly complement one another. Knowledge gained through LEARN4SEA can be deepened and reinforced through the scientific approach of ecosySTEM, while the educational framework provided by EOL enables these gains to be transferred, scaled up, and sustained at a regional level through young adults and institutions. Such synergies play vital role in fostering shared

awareness across countries within the basin.

Similar synergies could also be observed in the 2014–2020 programme period. For instance, the SpiritBSBOnline project, with Turkish partners, educated young people about environmental issues through a computer game, while the LitOUTer project offered direct environmental education in schools. The CircleCON project, running concurrently, provided online circular economy training for universities and policymakers. The use of materials, tools, and outcomes from earlier programme periods and previous projects further reinforces the programme's sustainability. As previously mentioned, LEARN4SEA adopts this approach, contributing to the ongoing development of the programme while preventing duplication and ensuring long-term impact. All these pave the way for impactful synergies and possible capitalisation.





Conclusive Remarks

Challenges that no single country can solve alone continue to highlight the importance of transnational and regional cooperation. Through the active participation of Türkiye, the Black Sea Basin Programme provides collaborative solutions to environmental and socio-economic issues threatening both the ecosystem and local livelihoods. Public awareness projects play a vital role in embedding environmental consciousness as a shared regional culture, ensuring that the Black Sea is passed on to future generations with its rich biodiversity, healthy ecosystems, and strong economic potential intact.

The first step toward sustainable development and effective protection of the region lies in ensuring that all basin communities understand and appreciate the Black Sea. Through projects like LEARN4SEA, ecosySTEM, and EOL, countries are working together to raise awareness across different target groups and through diverse methods, creating a shared regional framework. Children across the basin grow up with environmental awareness, while adults actively participate in protecting the environment and integrate this awareness into their professional activities. As a result, individual learning transforms into collective responsibility, laying the foundation for a more conscious, responsible, and cooperative Black Sea region. This holistic approach, rooted in previous programme periods, continues to shape environmental values and long-term strategies across all Black Sea countries, ensuring that environmental awareness remains a lasting and guiding principle for the future.