

# 11

# Tourism and recreation

**Authors** Darline Vandaele<sup>1</sup>, Liesbet Billiet<sup>1</sup>, Jonas Lescroart<sup>2</sup>, Steven Dauwe<sup>2</sup>

**Lectors** Jan van der Borg<sup>3</sup>, Dries Debruyne<sup>4</sup>, Hannelore Maelfait<sup>5</sup>, Bart Neuts<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Westtoer

<sup>2</sup>Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ)

<sup>3</sup>Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven), Geography and Tourism

<sup>4</sup>The Blue Cluster (DBC)

<sup>5</sup>Province of West Flanders

Vandaele, D., Billiet, L., Lescroart, J., Dauwe, S. (2023). *Tourism and recreation. Compendium voor Kust en Zee = Compendium for Coast and Sea 2023: 1-10.* <https://dx.doi.org/10.48470/56>

© photo: SL-Photography

Europe is the most visited tourist region in the world (COM (2010) 0352) and, in addition to the preservation of natural, historical or cultural heritage, the sector ensures the development, innovation and diversification of various products and services. Blue tourism (including the cruise industry) is the main driver of the European Blue Economy in terms of added value and employment (55%) (The EU Blue Economy Report 2020). Over 40% overnight stays by tourists take place in coastal areas (Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2022 and COM (2014) 86).

The Belgian coast is the most popular holiday destination in the country. In 2021, the year after the height of the corona crisis, the region recorded over five million arrivals and nearly 30 million overnight stays in residential tourism. The coast also welcomed nearly 15.5 million day-trippers (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021).

Not only the coastal municipalities are attractive for tourists, the hinterland of the coastal zone has touristic assets as well. For instance, the tourist regions *Brugse Ommeland* and *Westhoek* together registered over 400,000 arrivals and 1.1 million overnight stays in 2021 (Westtoer, Trendrapport Brugse Ommeland 2020-2021, Westtoer, Trendrapport Westhoek 2020-2021). Moreover, because of its war history, the *Westhoek* also welcomes a large number of commemorative tourists. During the commemoration period (2014-2018) of the Great War (1914-1918), 2.8 million tourists visited the region (Westtoer, WOI-herdenkingstoerisme in de Westhoek 2019, Monitor WO-I Herdenkingstoerisme Westhoek -Westtoer 2021). However, it should be mentioned that the borders of these tourist regions extend beyond the hinterland municipalities of the coastal zone.

## 11.1 Policy context

### 11.1.1 Coastal tourism policy

The European tourism policy is stipulated by the Directorate-General Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) of the European Commission (see also [Overview of EU Tourism Policy](#)). Within the context of the renewed Blue Growth strategy (COM (2021) 240), a new European strategy for sustainable coastal and marine tourism will be drawn up (DG MARE).

In Flanders, the [Travel To Tomorrow](#) policy (*Reizen naar Morgen*) of Tourism Flanders (which is under the supervision of the Flemish minister for Tourism ([policy paper Tourism 2019-2024](#))), elaborates a new vision on tourism which was adopted since April 2021 (not exclusively for the coastal zone). This new vision continues on the path towards sustainable and qualitative tourism where the entire experience is key and where the interests of the various stakeholders are taken into account. This shift to quality instead of quantity was already one of the objectives of the [Strategic policy plan for coastal tourism and recreation 2015-2020](#), drawn up by Tourism Flanders and *Westtoer*. This plan stipulates the thematic and regional strategic and operational objectives for a sustainable development of coastal tourism (see also **11.5 Sustainable use**).

The policy for the *Brugse Ommeland* and the *Westhoek* regions is outlined at the provincial level by *Westtoer* in the strategic policy plans for tourism and recreation of *Brugse Ommeland* ([Brugse Ommeland 2021-2027](#)) and the *Westhoek* ([Westhoek 2018-2024](#)).

In the past, coastal projects were financed by the Government of Flanders via the *Kustactieplannen* (I-III; 1997-2009) and the *Impulsprogramma Vlaamse Kust* (2010-2014). Since 2015, the realisation of the above mentioned strategic objectives has focused on [tourism leverage projects](#) (*toeristische hefboomprojecten*) within the tourism impulse programmes of the Government of Flanders and cycling and walking network projects that apply to the whole of Flanders. Since 2020, four thematic funding calls have been launched under the banner 'Everyone deserves a holiday' (*Iedereen verdient vakantie*).

Additionally, a permanent measuring and monitoring system has been developed that provides figures on the characteristics of coastal tourism. The results are compiled in an annual trend report ([Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021](#)), a key figures overview and a six-monthly monitoring report. These reports also include figures on expenditure and employment ([Kenniscentrum Westtoer](#)).

### 11.1.2 (Water)recreation policy

The provincial policies on outdoor recreation in the coastal zone are drawn up by *Westtoer* in strategic policy plans. Recreation is also included in the strategic policy plan for the province's tourist regions.

Concerning water recreation along the coast, the RD of 4 August 1981 on the Police and Shipping Regulations for the Belgian territorial sea, coastal harbors and beaches is of interest ([Federal Public Service \(FPS\) Mobility and Transport, oplijsting vaarregels](#)). Additionally, the marine environment Law of 11 December 2022 and its implementing decrees impose a number of restrictions on recreation in marine protected areas (see also thematic chapter **Nature and environment**). The regulation with regard to boating and water recreation on the waterways has been developed by the [DG Shipping](#) (FPS Mobility and Transport). Within the framework of the Law establishing the Belgian Shipping Code ([Scheepvaartwetboek](#)) (Law of 8 May 2019), a revised legislation on recreational boating was enforced on 4 July 2019 (RD of 28 June 2019). An overview of the most important changes can be consulted on [FPS Mobility and Transport, wijzigingen pleziervaart](#). The [Federal Consultation Platform Pleziervaart](#) spans the gap between the sector and the federal government to optimise consultation.

At the European level, the [\(bathing\) water quality](#) in the coastal zone (within the 1 nautical mile (nm) zone) is addressed under the umbrella of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) (Directive 2000/60/EC) umbrella by, among others, Directive 91/271/EC on urban waste water and Directive 2006/7/EC concerning the management of bathing water quality. The latter directive sets out the standards for bathing water quality ([VMM 2006](#), see also the website [kwaliteit zwemwater](#)). These European measures are implemented at federal level by the RD of 23 June 2010 concerning the establishment of a framework for achieving good surface water status. At the Flemish level, the Decree of 18 July 2003 (Integrated Water Policy) (more information: Coordination Committee on Integrated Water Policy ([CIW](#))) and the Decision of the Government of Flanders of 8 December 1998 on bathing water quality are of importance. [The Flemish Agency for Care and Health \(Vlaams Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid\)](#) is responsible for the health aspect of bathing water quality.

More information on the sectoral legislation and the legal framework on tourism and recreation at the coast can be found on the website of [Tourism Flanders](#) and in the [Codex Coastal Zone](#) (themes [Tourism and recreation](#), [Coastal zone management](#) and [Local legislation](#)). Policy-relevant documents and information with or without coastal zone-specific relevance are also offered via the website [KennisWest.be](#) of the province of West Flanders.

## 11.2 Spatial use

### 11.2.1 Spatial planning for coastal tourism

In the Belgian part of the North Sea (BNS), tourist and recreational activities are not zone-specific, provided that the safety and sustainability of the activity can be guaranteed ([annex 1](#), MSP 2020-2026, RD of 22 May 2019). In this context, compatibility with other uses is an important point of attention. For example, tourist activities may be subject to both temporal (e.g. in case of military exercises, construction works, etc.) and permanent (e.g. near wind farm concession zones) restrictions. However, it should be mentioned that an increasing number of guided visits to wind farms are being organised for tourists.

The areas for tourism and recreation are primarily demarcated by spatial planning (see thematic chapter **Social and economic environment**). Instruments such as the spatial structure plans, spatial implementation plans (SIPs) and regulations at the Flemish, provincial and municipal levels, indicate the potential for future tourist/recreational developments within certain areas. In the Flemish Spatial Structure Plan ([RSV](#)), the coast is identified as an urban network, which is a defining structure on the Flemish level. Because of its tourist-recreational facilities, the coast is also recognised as a tourist-recreational network which requires a policy on a Flemish level. This policy is developed within the framework of initiatives and studies such as [Metropolaan Kustlandschap 2100](#) (MKL 2100) ([phase 1](#) (including an outline of the historic context of coastal tourism)/ [phase 2](#) / [phase 3 part 1, 2 and 3](#)), the [Master Plan for Coastal Safety \(2011\)](#), the ecosystem vision for the Flemish coast ([Vanderbiest et al. 2017a](#), [Vanderbiest et al. 2017b](#)) and the [Coastal Vision](#) project (see thematic chapter **Safety against flooding**). The designation of Ostend and Bruges as regional urban areas ([regionaal stedelijke gebieden](#)), and Blankenberge and Knokke-Heist as small urban areas ([kleinstedelijke gebieden](#)) in the RSV is also important for the tourism sector as this designation entails consequences for the potential 'highly dynamic functions' that may be developed in the coastal region. Subsidies have already been granted for revaluation projects in Ostend (2009 and 2013) and Koksijde (2019) ([10 jaar Strategische projecten 2018](#)) through the [Strategic Projects \(Strategische projecten\)](#) tool in the context of the RSV. In addition to the RSV, the regional spatial implementation plans (RSIPs) can be consulted at [Omgeving Vlaanderen](#).

Parallel to the further implementation of the RSV, the Government of Flanders is working on a new spatial policy plan ([Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen](#)). A [strategic vision](#) has been prepared in the autumn of 2021 that sets out the policy for a renewed approach to mobility and land use. The vision builds on previous initiatives such as the [Groenboek. Vlaanderen in 2050: mensenmaat in een metropool Beleidsplan ruimte Vlaanderen \(2012\)](#)



and [Witboek Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen](#). For the coast and the *Westhoek*, a supra-local strategic vision has already been developed wherein the spatial development of the region is optimally attuned to mobility and public transport ([Vandekerckhove et al. 2019](#)). In the context of this spatial development policy for the coastal zone, a Territorial Development Programme (*T.OP Kustzone*) has been developed. In this active instrument, the Department of Environment and Spatial Development (OMG) collaborates with the Province of West Flanders and local authorities on short- and medium-term spatial development projects. The *T.OP Kustzone* builds on the revised [Provincial Spatial Structure Plan W-VL](#) (PRS-WVL) local partner consultations and studies such as [CcASPAR](#), [MKL2100](#), [Codex Coastal Zone](#), [STADSMonitor](#), etc. (see thematic chapter **Social and economic environment**).

The Province of West Flanders is also working on a new [spatial policy plan](#) (concept report approved in March 2022). Important supra-regional policies for the coast are formulated in the current [PRS W-VL](#). Within this plan, several coastal municipalities were selected as residential areas with opportunities for touristic-recreational development under specific conditions. The [PRS W-VL](#) also defines outdoor recreational green areas, amusement parks and tourism-recreational linear elements (watercourses, railway beds, dykes and road infrastructure). Additionally, a number of strategic project areas were selected where tourism and recreation should be given an important place ([PRS W-VL, Strategic policy plan for coastal tourism and recreation 2015-2020](#)). These include the Yser estuary in Nieuwpoort, the area to the east of Blankenberge, the area to the south of Knokke's railway station, the military base of Koksijde and the east bank of Ostend. The provincial spatial implementation plans (PSIPs) (in particular the PSIPs for beach and dike) are of significant importance for organising the tourist-recreational functioning of each coastal zone area. A zoning is defined that outlines a number of preconditions for future developments. The coastal zone already has a well-developed cycling and walking network and development zones have been designated for the construction of 'cycling highways' between seaside municipalities.

At municipal level, processes are under development to create new opportunities for tourism and recreation within the municipal structural plans. This should enable the spatial planning of tourism and recreation at a local level to be written down in more detail in the implementation plans. In this regard, a guideline is provided by the research of [Gruijthuisen \(2015\)](#) on the needs and requests of tourists in Belgian and Dutch seaside resorts, in which, among other things, the demand for a modernisation of public spaces was recorded.

## 11.2.2 Management of touristic space

The Government of Flanders owns almost all beaches<sup>1</sup> along the Belgian coast, with the exception of the military base at Lombardsijde (Belgian Defence) and some strips in De Panne and Koksijde (municipal authorities). The [Coastal division](#) (FPS Mobility and Public Works (MOW), Agency for Maritime Services and Coast (MDK)) grants concessions for the development, maintenance and exploitation of the marinas for water recreation and sports (sailing schools, recreational boats, recreational sea fishing, hikers, etc.) along the Flemish coast ([Coastal division](#)). In this context, an annual budget of over 20 million euro is foreseen. Additionally, the Coastal Division is responsible for providing safe coastal protection measures (see also thematic chapter **Safety against flooding**) in which the added value for tourism is often taken into account during the development of innovative coastal protection measures (e.g. grass dikes) ([Coastal division](#)). The Coastal Division is also in a position to grant beach and seawall concessions for tourist and recreational use in consultation with municipal authorities, other public authorities, utility companies, contractors, private persons, etc. ([Coastal division](#)).

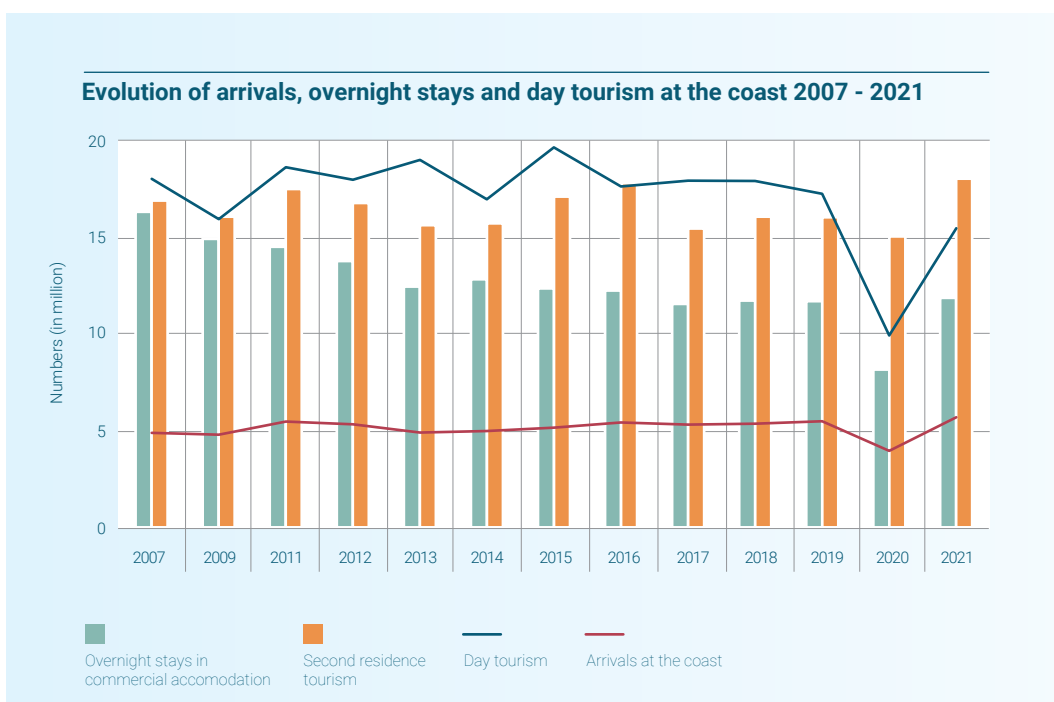
## 11.3 Societal interest

### 11.3.1 Coastal tourism<sup>2</sup>

The tourist-recreational sector is crucial for the coastal economy. In 2021, 5,745,023 (+42.9% vs. 2020) arrivals at the coast in the [residential tourism sector](#) could be registered, representing a total of 29,896,679 (+28.9% vs. 2020) overnight stays (figure 1). Commercial accommodation constitutes roughly 40% of these stays, and second-home tourism 60% ([Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021](#), more information: study [Vakantieganger in commerciële logies-Westtoer \(2022\)](#), [Impact tweedeverblijvers voor het Kusttoerisme, Westtoer 2016](#)). A significant increase after a substantial drop in 2020 due to the coronacrisis and related leisure restrictive measures. Whereas the number of day-trippers before the corona crisis varied between 16 and 19 million tourists, this had recovered to 15.5 million tourists in 2020 (+55.4% vs. 2020) ([Toerisme in cijfers XL 2017, Dauwe et al. 2019, Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021, Westtoer 2021](#)).

<sup>1</sup>The total beach area on the Belgian coast amounts to 25.3 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 20.2 km<sup>2</sup> is low beach and 5.1 km<sup>2</sup> is high beach (for the beach area per municipality, with a division into high and low beach: [Biologische waarderingskaart en Natura 2000 Habitatkaart - Toestand 2018](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Here we follow the statistical definition of 'tourism', which includes business visits in addition to private visits.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the number of day-trippers, overnight stays in commercial accommodations, second-home tourists and arrivals along the coast (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2012-2013, Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2015-2016, Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2017-2018, Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2018-2019, Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021. \*For the years 2008 and 2010 no figures are available in the cited reports.

The total turnover generated by coastal tourism amounted to 3.3 billion euro in 2021, which is about the same number before the corona crisis (+50% vs. 2020) (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021). In 2021, residential tourism accounted for 2.5 billion euro of direct expenditure and day tourism for 735.1 million euro (table 2) (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021, more information: [Vakantieganger in commercieel logies-Westtoer 2022](#)). When visiting the coast, the average day-tripper spends about 45 euro per day, a resident in commercial accommodation 90 euro per night and a second-home owner in a holiday house 42 euro per night ([Impact tweedeverblijvers voor het kusttoerisme, Westtoer 2016](#), [Dagtoeristen aan de kust 2018](#), [Vakantieganger in commercieel logies-Westtoer 2022](#)). A study of the meeting industry on the coast shows that this sector accounts for a turnover of 60 million euro (2013) (Westtoer, [onderzoek Meeting aan Zee 2015](#), Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2018-2019).

**Table 2.** The direct expenditure of coastal tourism per type of tourism in 2021\* ( Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021).

Type of tourism	Direct expenditure of tourists in million euro	Percentage
Commercial accomodation	1,078.7	32.2
Second-home tourism	1,455.9	43.4
Mooring in marinas	22.1	0.7
Day tourism	735.1	21.9
Meeting industry	60.0	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,351.8</b>	<b>100</b>

\* The figures in the most recent trend report, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021 don't allow a complete actualisation of this table. Turnover data of the meeting industry and mooring in marinas isn't collected on an annual basis. The listed number originate from the latest census (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2018-2019).

The activities of Belgians during day trips (including those to the coast) were examined in more detail in [pilotonderzoek naar daguitstappen van de Belg \(2010-2011\)](#) and more recently in [Dagtoeristen aan de kust \(2018\)](#) and [Vakantieganger in commercieel logies-Westtoer \(2022\)](#). These show that the weather conditions are the major decisive factor for a visit to the coast and that the typical coastal visitor especially enjoys the healthy sea air and relaxes in the coastal environment. Concerning activities, strolling on the dike (73%), visiting cafes,

tearooms, terraces (51%) and restaurants (47%) are very popular. Over 80% of the tourists come to the sea by car (Westtoer 2021). The presence of the International Airport Ostend-Bruges and the seaports of Ostend and Zeebrugge play an important role in the influx of foreign tourists to the Belgian coastal zone. The traffic figures for the International Airport Ostend - Bruges are available on its website. On the website of the *Mobiliteitsraad Vlaanderen* (MORA) figures are available about the number of passengers in the above-mentioned ports.

Along the Belgian coast 27 water sports clubs were active in 2019, accounting for approximately 9,720 members (Dauwe et al. 2019, Coastal Portal). Additionally, 13 yacht clubs were active, spread over the four coastal marinas (Zeebrugge, Blankenberge, Ostend, Nieuwpoort) with a total capacity of 3,553 berths (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021). A survey in April 2019 showed that the Flemish coastal marinas have approximately 9,540 members, the majority of which are affiliated to the yacht club of Nieuwpoort (5,640 members) (Dauwe et al. 2019, Maelfait 2020). As part of the *Seaconomics* project (2010-2014), the economic significance of the marinas was investigated (Westtoer, onderzoek gebruikers kustjachthavens 2013). Based on this study, the average turnover generated by all users of the Flemish coastal marinas was estimated at 25.3 million euro per year. More recent figures by Westtoer estimate this to be rather 22.1 million euro (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2018-2019).

Direct employment based on coastal tourism turnover in 2021, is estimated at 24,984 full-time equivalents (FTE), with a total employment (direct and indirect) of 34,700 FTE, assuming that 1 million euro represents 7.2 FTE of direct employment and 3.4 FTE of indirect employment (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021). In 2020, total employment was estimated at 22,900 FTE. This is probably an underestimate which can be attributed to systems of temporary unemployment that were put in place as a result of the corona crisis (Westtoer, Trendrapport Kust 2020-2021).

The relationship between coastal tourism and the social and economic aspects of the coast is also partly addressed in the thematic chapter **Social and economic environment**. Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in addition to an obvious economic added value, there is increasing scientific evidence that 'blue spaces', particularly coastal areas, have a positive influence on the general sense of wellbeing of humans that should not be underestimated (SOPHIE project, Hooyberg et al. 2020, Severin et al. 2021).

### 11.3.2 Hinterland tourism

In addition to coastal tourism, hinterland tourism also accounts for a significant number of arrivals and overnight stays. The tourist-recreational regions of the Brugse Ommeland and Westhoek registered almost 420,000 arrivals (+75.0% vs. 2020) and almost 1.1 million overnight stays (+75.2% vs. 2020) in 2021, the year after the peak of the corona pandemic (Westtoer, Trendrapport Brugse Ommeland 2020-2021, Westtoer, Trendrapport Westhoek 2020-2021). How the corona pandemic has impacted commercial accommodation in tourist regions of the coastal zone can be read in research by Westtoer (Logiesbevraging rond impact corona - Westtoer 2022). The total tourism turnover of the Brugse Ommeland and Westhoek in 2021 is 216.6 million euro. Based on these turnover figures, total employment (direct+indirect) is estimated at 2,297 FTE assuming that 1 million euro equals 7.2 direct and 3.4 indirect FTE.

## 11.4 Impact

As mentioned above, coastal tourism has a significant economic and societal value and is directly linked to a number of facilities such as the coast tram and marinas. However, tourism in the coastal area also creates certain challenges for the social and ecological environment. On the social level, the amount of little-occupied second-homes has an impact on the quality of life along the coast, resulting in higher real estate prices and a weakened social cohesion. Moreover, the region also suffers from mobility problems and (seasonal) unemployment (Meire and Bracke 2005, Goffin et al. 2007, Maelfait et al. 2012, Dauwe et al. 2019, Kansarmoedeatlas West-Vlaanderen 2021 (see thematic chapter **Social and economic environment**)).

The large amount of second-homes also affects the cultural heritage along the coast (IDEA consult 2009), although clear synergies between tourism and the coastal heritage exist, such as the touristic function of cultural-historical buildings along the coast (De Baerdemaeker et al. 2011, Kusterfgoed) (see thematic chapter **Maritime and coastal heritage**).

From an ecological point of view, the emergence of mass tourism at the coast from the 1930s onwards, with the massive implantation of tourist-recreational accommodation (holiday homes, campsites, weekend accommodation parks, second-homes, etc.) has played a major role in the urbanisation of the coastal zone, the

fragmentation of valuable open space and the disappearance of biotopes (PRS W-VL, Goffin et al. 2007, Maelfait et al. 2012, Henkens et al. 2012, Coastal Portal). Especially the dune area has experienced a strong fragmentation, partly caused by spatial planning (Welkom in de duinen 2008, Provoost et al. 2014, Vanderbiest et al. 2017a) (see thematic chapter **Nature and environment**). Furthermore, the high concentration of tourists and residents in the coastal zone during the peak season can cause several direct and indirect ecological effects (table 3). The number of tourist at the coast can be monitored with the *Kustbarometer*.

**Table 3.** An overview of the main direct and indirect ecological effects caused by the high concentration of tourists and residents in the coastal zone.

Impact	Literature
Energy and water use	Vanlerberghe and Vanhoutte 2001, Goffin et al. 2007 (see thematic chapter <b>Agriculture</b> ), Lenders et al. 2013, Antea 2018
Litter on the beach and in the water	Lescrauwaet et al. 2006, Goffin et al. 2007, Maelfait 2008, Doomen et al. 2009, Claessens et al. 2013, Actieplan Marien Zwerfvuil 2017, Devriese and Janssen 2017, Belgian State 2018, Seys et al. 2019, Devriese and Janssen 2022 (more on the impact of marine litter, see thematic chapters <b>Maritime transport, shipping and ports</b> and <b>Nature and environment</b> )
Mechanical beach cleaning	Belpaeme 2003, Dominguez 2006, Goffin et al. 2007, Doomen et al. 2009, Vanhooren et al. 2011, De Bruyn et al. 2020
Eutrophication of the coastal waters	Maes et al. 2004 (MARE-DASM project BELSPO), OSPAR 2017, Desmit et al. 2018, VMM (see thematic chapter <b>Agriculture</b> )
Traffic intensity	Goffin et al. 2007, Dauwe et al. 2019
Trampling and disruption of the beach and dune ecosystem	Vincx et al. 2001, Maes et al. 2004 (MARE-DASM project BELSPO), Provoost et al. 2004, Deros 2005 (GAUFRE project BELSPO), Goffin et al. 2007, Krijgsveld et al. 2008, Welkom in de duinen 2008, Provoost et al. 2014 (see thematic chapter <b>Nature and environment</b> ), Seys et al. 2019, De Bruyn et al. 2020
Pollution by recreational boating	Maes et al. 2004 (MARE-DASM project BELSPO), De Wachter and Volckaert 2005 (GAUFRE project BELSPO), Lescrauwaet et al. 2006, Goffin et al. 2007
Pollution by recreational fisheries	Verleye and Devriese 2019, Verleye and Dauwe 2021 (see thematic chapter <b>Fisheries</b> )

## 11.5 Sustainable use

In recent years, there has been a trend towards putting responsible tourism within a more comprehensive framework than only the protection of the environment. The United Nations Sustainability Goals for example, have become an important framework in the development of tourism activities (United Nations Sustainability Goals, *Travel to Tomorrow*, *Roadmap Blauw Toerisme*, DBC).

The shift to an integrative form of added-value tourism within a sustainable framework is reflected at the European level in the renewed vision of a sustainable blue economy (COM (2021) 240) (see **11.1 Policy context**). Europe identifies the protection and creation of nature as a precondition for the development of sustainable and resilient tourism. The importance of heritage (see thematic chapter **Maritime and coastal heritage**) and “slow” tourist activities (local activities, reduced frequency of travel, etc.) is also underlined. These two elements are also reflected in the plans of *Interreg VI Vlaanderen-Nederland* (*Interreg Vlaanderen-Nederland: concept programma 2021-2027*).

At the Flemish level, this new integrative and sustainable vision on tourism is translated into the Flemish government’s *Travel to Tomorrow* policy vision (see **11.1 Policy context**). In this context, a new, quality-oriented framework is being used for evaluation purposes. Today, sustainability in tourism or recreation is recognised and promoted through various quality labels such as the *Blue Flag* for sustainable tourism, the *Q-label* for tourism entrepreneurs, the *Green Key*, the *accessibility label* of the non-profit association *Inter*, etc. (more information: *Tourism Flanders*). Inspired by the *Travel to Tomorrow* policy vision, the Flemish spearhead cluster *The Blue Cluster* (*De Blauwe Cluster*, DBC) has developed a vision towards a sustainable, innovative but authentic tourist experience (*Roadmap Blauw Toerisme*, DBC). By initiating and participating in various projects (see also table 4), this vision is further elaborated.

In addition to making tourist and recreational activities more sustainable, nature also occupies an important place in the tourist experience. Ecotourism generates increasingly more income, which in turn results in ecologically valuable landscape programmes and projects: e.g., *the Belgian Coast*, *Ztar*, *Life+ project FLANDRE*, *Vedette* project (table 4). Moreover, the natural areas in the coastal zone maintain a whole range of ecosystem processes that are crucial for maintaining tourism and recreation as an ecosystem service (Van der Biest et al. 2020).

To ensure the protection of nature, including against the environmental impact of tourism activities, Europe has established the [Natura 2000 network](#) of protected areas under the Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EC) and the Birds Directive (Directive 2009/147/EC) (see thematic chapter **Nature and Environment**). For the protection of nature in the coastal zone, the Dunes Decree (14 July 1993 and following) and the Flemish Ecological Network (*Vlaams Ecologisch Netwerk (VEN)*) are also important (see in more detail in the thematic chapter **Nature and Environment**). In this context, [Vanden Eede et al. \(2014\)](#) developed biological valuation maps for the Belgian coastal zone, which can be used as a tool to support decision-making by local policymakers for orienting spatial projects and allowing tourism activities. In addition, *the Milieurapport Vlaanderen, Achtergronddocument 2006: Kust en Zee* ([Goffin et al. 2007](#)), the *Kustkompas: indicatoren voor een duurzaam kustbeheer* ([Maelfait et al. 2012](#)) and the *Strategic policy plan for coastal tourism and recreation 2015-2020*, elaborate on the balance between nature conservation on the one hand and the needs of recreational users and tourists on the other hand. Finally, the combination of recreation and nature is discussed in publications such as *De Uitkerkse polder, een recreatieve meerwaarde voor de Vlaamse kust* (2007), *Welkom in de duinen* (2008), [Henkens et al. \(2012\)](#), [Cosyns et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Provoost et al. \(2014\)](#).

**Table 4.** Non-exhaustive list of studies, projects and visions that address sustainable coastal tourism.

Study - project - vision	Description
<a href="#">Kindvriendelijkheid aan de Vlaamse kust</a>	Study on how to make the Flemish coast more attractive for families with children.
<i>Klimaatverandering als motor voor een vernieuwd kusttoerisme?</i> ( <a href="#">De Waegemaeker 2012</a> )	Study examining the impact of a compartmentalised coast (CcASPAR) on coastal tourism.
Aligning biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services in spatial planning: Focus on ecosystem processes ( <a href="#">Van der Biest 2020</a> )	Overview of the impact of various ecological and anthropogenic processes along the Belgian coast on tourism and recreation as an ecosystem service.
COASTAL	Project that draws up an integrated picture of the coast and the hinterland, looking for sustainable and socially relevant business and policy opportunities, including links with tourism.
FLANDRE	LIFE project with the aim of improving nature and the nature experience on the French-Belgian border.
Ztar	The Ztar project, successor to the ZENO project, aimed to restore the mudflats and salt marshes of the <a href="#">Zwin</a> natural reserve.
120 km Kustkwaliteit	Project to develop sustainable beach and coastal management. See e.g. studies by <a href="#">van Meenen 2009</a> , <a href="#">Pijpers 2009</a> , <a href="#">kansen aan de kust 2009</a> .
VEDETTE	Project that focuses on sustainable and eco-tourist development within the cross-border dune area between Dunkirk and Westende.
EUROCYCLO	Project to promote bike tourism in the region.
TENDANCES	Project encouraging the development of specific products and services that can contribute to the promotion of the heritage and characteristics of the French-Belgian coast and the Luxembourg province.
PROFIT	Project aimed at making the tourism sector more profitable and sustainable by boosting innovation.
FACET	Project investigating how circular solutions can reduce the pressure on resources and waste production of coastal tourism.
Think Tank North Sea	Cross-sectoral vision platform (similar to <a href="#">The North Sea Vision 2050</a> ) where representatives from the quadruple helix (policy, private, scientific and society at large) develop visions for the sustainable development of the North Sea by 2050.
<i>Coastal memorandum Natuurpunt (Kustmemorandum Natuurpunt)</i>	Vision that addresses the benefits of manual beach cleaning and advocates for integrated coastal zone management.
Smart WaterUse	Project on addressing water risks and the smart use of water within sectors of marine food, aquaculture, textiles and tourism.
BLUE BALANCE	BLUE BALANCE aims to increase public involvement and participation in the sustainable transition of the Flemish coastal region and thus the development of a social 'licence to operate' for sustainable (economic) activities. The project focuses in particular on residents and tourists of the Flemish coastal region and aims to bring them into dialogue with local industrial stakeholders and policymakers.



## Legislation reference list

Overview of the relevant legislation on European, federal and Flemish level. For the consolidated European policy context see [Eurlex](#). The national legislation can be consulted on the [Belgian official journal](#) and the [Justel-database](#), the Flemish legislation is available on the [Flemish Codex](#).

European legislation and policy context			
Document number	Title	Year	Number
<b>Communications</b>			
COM (2010) 352	Communication from the Commission: Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe	2010	352
COM (2012) 494	Communication from the Commission: Blue Growth opportunities for marine and maritime sustainable growth	2012	494
COM (2014) 86	Communication from the Commission: A European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism	2014	86
COM (2021) 240	Communication from the Commission: On a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU. Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future	2021	240

<b>Directives</b>			
Document number	Title	Year	Number
Directive 91/271/EEC	Directive concerning urban waste-water treatment	1991	271
Directive 92/43/EEC	Directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Habitats Directive)	1992	43
Directive 2000/60/EC	Directive establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy (Water Framework Directive)	2000	60
Directive 2006/7/EC	Directive concerning the management of bathing water quality and repealing Directive 76/160/EEC (Bathing Water Directive)	2006	7

Belgian and Flemish legislation		
Dates	Title	File number
<b>Decisions of the Govt. of Flanders</b>		
Decision of the Government of Flanders of 8 December 1998	Besluit van de Vlaamse regering tot aanduiding van de oppervlaktewateren bestemd voor de productie van drinkwater categorieën A1, A2 en A3, zwemwater, viswater en schelpdierwater, ter omzetting van Richtlijn 2006/7/EG van het Europees Parlement en de Raad van 15 februari 2006 betreffende het beheer van de zwemwaterkwaliteit en tot intrekking van Richtlijn 76/160/EEG	1998-12-08/51

<b>Decrees</b>		
Dates	Title	File number
Decree of 14 July 1993	Decreet houdende maatregelen tot bescherming van kustduinen	1993-07-14/31
Decree of 18 July 2003	Decreet betreffende het integraal waterbeleid	2003-07-18/72

<b>Royal Decrees</b>		
Dates	Title	File number
RD of 4 August 1981	Koninklijk besluit houdende politie- en scheepvaartreglement voor de Belgische territoriale zee, de havens en de stranden van de Belgische kust	1981-08-04/31
RD of 23 June 2010	Koninklijk besluit betreffende de vaststelling van een kader voor het bereiken van een goede oppervlaktewatertoestand	2010-06-23/04
RD of 28 June 2019	Koninklijk besluit betreffende de pleziervaart	2019-06-28/08

Belgian and Flemish legislation (continuation)		
Dates	Title	File number
<b>Laws</b>		
Law of 20 January 1999	Wet ter bescherming van het mariene milieu en ter organisatie van de mariene ruimtelijke planning in de zeegebieden onder de rechtsbevoegdheid van België	1999-01-20/33
Law of 8 May 2019	Wet tot invoering van het Belgisch Scheepvaartwetboek	2019-05-08/15