

The Black Sea Young Ambassadors program: Lessons learned in supporting ocean literacy and communicating marine geoscience

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The Black Sea is a unique sea basin with many distinctive characteristics. It has an abundance of biodiversity, natural resources, and cultural heritage. Moreover, the basin is notable for being the largest oxygen-free and hydrogen sulfide-rich volume of marine waters on Earth. Yet it is under pressure due to increasing environmental and anthropogenic-induced factors, including climate change, eutrophication, hypoxia, overfishing, and the introduction of alien species that have a drastic impact on marine ecosystems and the services we depend upon. It is crucial to create ocean-literate societies in order to protect and conserve ecosystems, as well as use and manage their resources in a sustainable manner. Here, the role of youth engagement is highly crucial. With this in mind, the Black Sea Young Ambassadors program was developed to bring together the marine geoscience research and sustainable blue economy studies carried out in the Black Sea with the public and to raise awareness of the need for a healthy, clean, and resilient Black Sea. Supported by the EU H2020 projects Black Sea CONNECT and BRIDGE Black Sea, over thirty Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOPs) have been supported since 2020. The ECOPs came from diverse backgrounds in marine and maritime fields, and they have represented the Black Sea on different platforms such as EU Research and Innovation Days, European Maritime Day, and the UN Ocean Decade Conference. With a vision of re-connecting the missing links between science and society, they conduct numerous local and regional awareness-raising activities utilizing a variety of mediums such as social media campaigns, field trips, photography contests, and interviews. Furthermore, to increase the impact of youth empowerment, they regularly come together with other sea and ocean basin youth ambassadors and exchange experiences. Similar programs may be developed at a more specific level to convey the importance of geoscience research to a broader audience.