

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN WATER RESOURCE CONSERVATION: ECONOMIC PROSPECTS AND FUNDING

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International cooperation in water resource conservation plays a key role in maintaining environmental balance and ensuring sustainable development. River and marine ecosystems, particularly in the Black Sea Basin, are under constant pressure from anthropogenic factors, including industrial pollution, overfishing, and climate change.

The SturNet project (*Network for the Preservation of Sturgeon and for the Sustainability of the Black Sea Basin Ecosystem BSB00172*) is an international initiative under the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme, aimed at addressing these challenges by coordinating scientific, managerial, and financial resources from Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine. This article examines the economic aspects of international cooperation in water resource conservation using the SturNet project and the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme as case studies. It also highlights the role of key international organizations and the Blue and Smart Region concept in this process.

Economic Benefits of International Cooperation in Water Resource Conservation.

Reduction of Economic Losses from Ecosystem Degradation. Water pollution and the destruction of natural ecosystems result in significant economic losses. The costs of water purification, fish stock restoration, and dealing with environmental disasters far exceed the costs of preventive measures. Joint programs for environmental monitoring and control help minimize these losses and ensure the stability of aquatic ecosystems.

Support for the Fisheries Industry and Job Creation. Sustainable use of water resources fosters the long-term development of the fishing industry. The SturNet project plays a key role in this sector, as the restoration of commercial fish populations, such as sturgeon, will create new jobs and provide a stable income for fishermen and businesses in the fishing industry.

Boosting Revenue from Ecotourism. Restored water ecosystems and rich biodiversity serve as powerful incentives for ecotourism development. Coastal regions can integrate conservation measures into their tourism strategies, stimulating local economic growth.

Opportunities for International Funding. Participation in international environmental initiatives enables countries to access funding from the European Union, the United Nations, and other organizations. Grants and investments in environmental projects not only contribute to nature conservation but also promote regional economic development.

For example, the SturNet project is funded under the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme, which supports both environmental initiatives and international cooperation in biodiversity conservation.

Funding of the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme (2014–2027)

The Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme is one of the key funding instruments for environmental conservation and regional cooperation.

Table 1

Funding Phases of Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin (2014–2027)

Period	Interreg Funds (€)	Funding Sources	Key Funding Areas
2014–2020	€49,038,597	ENI (European Neighbourhood Instrument)	Cross-border trade, ecotourism, environmental protection
2021–2027	€85,869,249	ENI, ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), NDICI – Global Europe (Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument), IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance)	Sustainable "blue" growth, climate adaptation, digital technologies

Key Changes in Funding (2021–2027)

- Doubling of the budget: Funding increased to €85,869,249 for 2021–2027.
- Diversification of funding sources: Instead of relying solely on ENI, new sources include ERDF, IPA III, and NDICI.
- Shift in focus: While the 2014–2020 program focused on cross-border trade and ecotourism, the 2021–2027 program prioritizes blue economy development and climate change adaptation.

Role of the European Commission and the Blue and Smart Region Concept in Water Conservation. The Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme is implemented with the support of the European Commission under Interreg NEXT. Its goals include:

- Improving water quality by reducing industrial and agricultural pollution.

- Restoring river and coastal ecosystems to support biodiversity.
- Creating international platforms for coordinating conservation initiatives.

The Blue and Smart Region concept is an integral part of this initiative, focusing on innovative water resource management, blue economy development, and digital monitoring technologies. It includes:

- Application of digital solutions – GIS mapping, satellite monitoring.
- Innovation in fisheries – sustainable aquaculture development.
- International funding attraction – supporting sustainable growth through grants and investments.

Conclusion. International cooperation in water resource conservation is a key factor in ensuring long-term environmental and economic stability. Collaborative efforts among governments, international organizations, scientific institutions, and the private sector enable effective solutions to environmental challenges, attract investments, and promote regional economic development. The Black Sea Basin Programme, the European Commission, and the Blue and Smart Region concept provide a strong platform for implementing conservation initiatives, ensuring ecosystem preservation and sustainable water resource management on a global scale.

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