

## **Social Research Call**

*Title: Who benefits and who bears the costs? Social equity outcomes of marine protected areas in Portugal*



**Acronym:** EQUIMAR

**Project leader:** João Garcia Rodrigues

**Host organisation:** CIIMAR – Centro Interdisciplinar de Investigação Marinha e Ambiental

**Main purpose of the project:** EQUIMAR provides a quantitative assessment of how marine protected areas (MPAs) affect small-scale fishers in Portugal. It asks who bears the costs of protection, who shares the benefits, who has a voice in decisions, and whose practices are recognised in policy.

**Design/methodology/approach:** EQUIMAR captures social equity's dimensions through three complementary quantitative approaches: quasi-experimental analysis of fisheries administrative data (distributive equity), structured content analysis of governance documents (procedural and recognition equity), and a survey of fishers (perceived equity).

**Potential results:** EQUIMAR will produce the first national-scale evidence base on how MPAs affect livelihoods, economic outcomes, and governance experiences of small-scale fishing communities. It will synthesise these findings into a typology of MPAs based on their social equity performance, and deliver an interactive equity map letting policymakers, communities, and the public explore each MPA's equity profile.

**Social relevance of the research:** The European Union has committed to protecting 30% of its seas by 2030, an ecologically necessary and widely supported goal. But environmental policies can carry hidden social costs, falling hardest on already marginalised communities. Marine conservation is no exception: expanding MPAs can restrict access to waters coastal communities depend on. EQUIMAR will provide the evidence to ensure that ocean protection is not only effective, but fair.

**Originality/value of the project:** EQUIMAR reframes MPAs from conservation tools judged on ecological performance, to policy instruments with social consequences. Its innovation is methodological: it brings rigorous causal methods from policy evaluation to test the common "win-win" claim about MPAs. This shifts attention to how MPA design shapes who benefits, who decides, and whose knowledge is recognised.