



The Regulatory Framework for Scientific Diving in Italy

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Between 2024 and 2026, the Italian legislator intervened twice on professional underwater activities, with measures that directly or by analogy affect those who dive for science: the Environment Ministry (MASE) Decree of 5 March 2024 (operational scientific diving guidelines for Environmental Agencies) and Law 9/2026 (provisions on safety of underwater activities); moreover a bill (2855) on the valorisation of the sea resource, which separate scientific from recreational-tourist diving is under parliamentary review.

Although the MASE decree specifically refers to the training required for scientific divers according to the European Scientific Diving Panel, which the Italian standard UNI 11948-2:2024 conform to, the Law 9/2026 does not provide a clear distinction between scientific dives and underwater work. The interpretative key lies in its Article 18(1), which limits Chapter IV to «underwater and hyperbaric works» carried out by professional operators and companies, and in Article 19(2), whose clause «within the scope referred to in paragraph 1» limits the applicability of the regulation to technical-scientific personnel called upon to participate in ongoing underwater works. Autonomous scientific research does not constitute underwater work in the sense of the law and therefore falls outside Chapter IV.

In this fragmented framework, the MASE decree tends to be extended to all underwater scientific activities, introducing unnecessary operational limits, while an unjustified broad interpretation of Law 9/2026 would risk equating all scientific dives with underwater work, thus applying approaches inappropriate for science.

Several authors emphasize how science, increasingly based on models and past data analysis, is losing touch with direct experience. Scientific diving remains one of the most effective and irreplaceable means of direct observation. Protecting its regulatory perimeter means actively countering field-science erosion. All this makes it urgent to reach a consultation table between the parties and possibly to issue interpretative circulars or implementing decrees from the authorities.