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MEDITERRANEAN ACTION PLAN

Eleventh Meeting of Focal Points for SPAs

Rabat, 2-5 July

**Progress report of the activities of the “Joint Management Action
of the European Community (EC) with the United Nations
Environment Programme/ Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP)
for identifying and creating Specially Protected Areas of
Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) in the open seas, including
the deep seas” (MedOpenSeas Project)**

Delegates are kindly requested to bring their documents to the meeting

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1. Project context and mandate

Despite its high biodiversity value the deep sea continues to be one of the least protected regions, not least in the Mediterranean. Areas beyond national jurisdiction currently make up the largest part of the Mediterranean with 2.5 million km², including areas of relatively high productivity. The MedOpenSeas project has since 2008 contributed to the establishment of a representative network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the open sea, including areas beyond national jurisdiction, as mandated by several international decisions including the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) and the Aichi Targets (CBD X/2, 2010). The overall project aim is to facilitate the establishment of deep sea MPAs in the Mediterranean, for example through ecological surveys, spatial mapping, legal analyses and stakeholder negotiation. The Barcelona Convention and its Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean (SPA/BD) provide a suitable legal and institutional framework for the development of MPAs in the High Seas as well as national waters, and thus the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA) has been implementing the project since the beginning. The project is financially supported by the European Commission, and is now in its third phase.

Political support for the project has been documented by a number of decisions, such as the 2008 Almeria Environmental Ministerial Declaration and the 2009 Marrakesh Ministerial Declaration. In addition, Contracting Parties have throughout the process stated their interest in actively participating in the MedOpenSeas project in order to develop sites within or close to their national waters as Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs). However, given the challenge of establishing protected areas in the global commons of the High Seas, strengthened political support is urgently needed for the project to achieve its ambitious objective of MPA establishment in the Mediterranean High Seas. To date only one SPAMI covers deep sea habitat in the Mediterranean: the Pelagos Sanctuary (France, Italy), which was established in 2001. There is a dedicated project website for the MedOpenSeas project, including all project publications, at: <http://medabnj.rac-spa.org/>

2. Overview of the first (2008-2009) and second project phase (2010-2011)

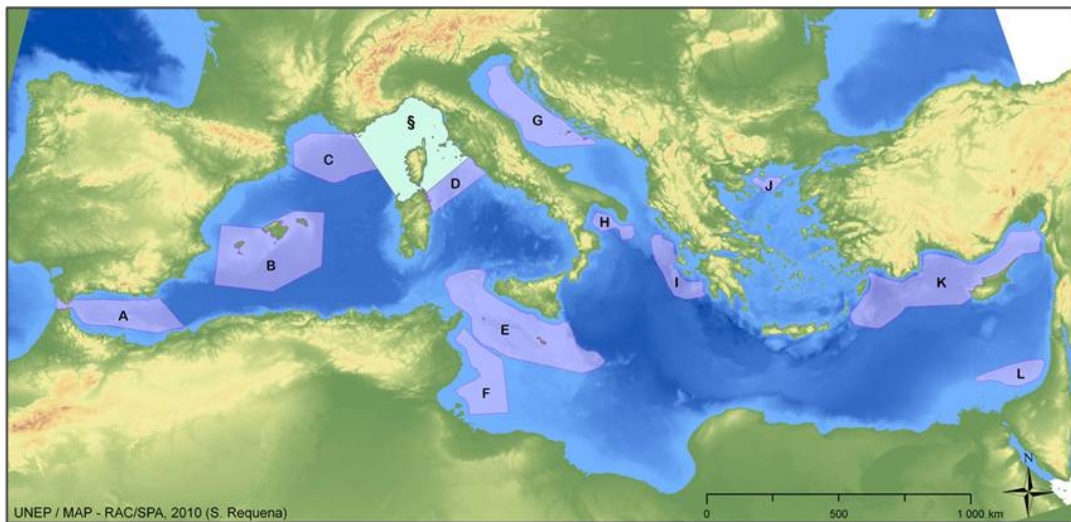
The first phase of the project, completed in late 2009, led to the identification of twelve priority conservation areas in the open seas, including the deep seas (see Figure 1). These priority areas are potential candidates for SPAMI listing and/or inclusion in other frameworks, such as Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs) developed under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In order to spatially plan and identify the priority sites a number of studies on vulnerable ecosystems for fisheries, birds and other species were compiled, as well as a Global Information System developed to facilitate the analysis (UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA 2010a,b and c). Geological features (e.g. seamounts, canyons) and oceanographic features (e.g. fronts, currents) were also taken into account. For a full overview of the scientific process employed for priority site development, see UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA 2010e. Furthermore, the international legal instruments relevant to the conservation of marine biodiversity and the practicalities of their implementation were evaluated

during the first project phase to guide the institutional development of SPAMIS in areas beyond national jurisdiction (UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA 2010d).

A Steering Committee to guide the MedOpenSeas project and review outputs was established and started to meet in 2009, with more than ten regional and international organizations participating. For a full list of committee members, see UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.359/Inf.5.



Priority conservation areas in the open seas, including the deep seas, likely to contain sites that could be candidates for the SPAMI List



A: Alborán Seamounts; B: Southern Balearic; C: Gulf of Lions shelf and slope; D: Central Tyrrhenian; E: Northern Strait of Sicily (including Adventure and nearby banks); F: Southern Strait of Sicily; G: Northern and Central Adriatic; H: Santa Maria di Leuca; I: Northeastern Ionian; J: Thracian Sea; K: Northeastern Levantine Sea and Rhodes Gyre; L: Nile Delta Region (§: Pelagos Sanctuary declared as SPAMI in 2001)

Figure 1 Map of the twelve priority sites identified during the first MedOpenSeas project phase.

The aim of the project's second phase, completed in December 2011, was to support neighbouring Parties of the above-mentioned priority areas in evaluating and potentially presenting these sites as candidate(s) for inclusion in the SPAMI List, in accordance with the provisions of the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean. The RAC/SPA has been facilitating this preparatory work, including oceanographic surveys, legal expertise support and stakeholder negotiations. The programme of work of the second phase included the establishment and meetings running of *ad hoc* working groups, composed of representatives from the countries bordering the Alboran Sea (Algeria, Morocco, Spain) and Gulf of Lions (France, Spain) priority areas. For the Gulf of Lions a number of surveys on fisheries, cetaceans, seabirds and habitat ecology have been compiled and published to facilitate the establishment of SPAMIs within this area (UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.6 - 9). For a full report on the second phase, see UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.371/4.

3. Objectives of the third phase (2012-2015)

The current third phase focuses on the spatial planning and evaluation of three priority areas (see Figure 1, Table 1 and 2): Adriatic Sea, Alboran Sea and the Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau areas. The process in the Alboran Sea benefits from initial preparatory work and a stakeholder meeting in 2011 conducted during the second project phase (UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.371/4). With regard to the work already undertaken for preparing SPAMIs in the Gulf of Lions during the second project phase, the core ecological and legal documentation is ready for consideration by countries, specifically France and Spain.

Table 1 List of neighbouring countries for the three priority sites targeted by the third project phase.

Priority areas addressed during 3rd phase	Neighbouring countries
Adriatic Sea	Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro and Slovenia
Alboran Sea	Algeria, Morocco and Spain
Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau	Italy, Libya, Malta and Tunisia

The marine ecology reports foreseen for the Adriatic Sea, Alboran Sea, Sicily Channel and Tunisian Plateau will be of the same structure as those prepared for the Gulf of Lions (see UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.6 – 9). Consultants have been engaged by RAC/SPA for all of the areas, with specific thematic reports foreseen for fisheries (including bycatch, e.g. turtles, sharks), cetaceans and seabirds, which will all be joined into one overall marine ecology report, including spatial mapping on benthos, geology and oceanography.

Facilitation meetings are currently being organized as part of the third project phase for each of the three groups of neighbouring countries (Tables 1 and 2). The above-mentioned ecology reports will form the foundation to guide the delineation of specific sites for SPAMI listing and stakeholder negotiations.

The development of MPAs embracing open seas is a challenging task, thus close collaboration between key agencies with a mandate to manage marine biodiversity and resources is a core part of the third phase. A joint strategy between the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS) under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), IUCN and RAC/SPA for addressing the management of the three priority sites is part of the project. The third phase further foresees the production of best practise guidelines for the design, establishment and management of SPAMIs in the open seas, including areas beyond national jurisdiction (Table 2: objective 8).

Table 2 Timeline indicating the core objectives for the third project phase (green: meetings).

Project objectives	April 2013	May 2013	June 2013	July 2013	Aug. 2013	Sept. 2013	Oct. 2013	Nov. 2013	Dec. 2013	Spring 2014	Summer 2014	Autumn 2014	Winter 2014/2015
1. Participative MPA mapping (using online SeaSketch)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
2. Alboran Sea: meetings for SPAMI development							Green				Green		
3. Alboran Sea: compilation/review marine ecology report			Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow			
4. Adriatic Sea: meetings for SPAMI development								Green				Green	
5. Adriatic Sea: compilation/review marine ecology report			Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow			
6. Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau: meetings							Green					Green	
7. Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau: marine ecology report			Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow			
8. Best practise guidelines								Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
9. Partner strategy: ACCOBAMS, GFCM, IUCN	Yellow	Yellow		Yellow					Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow

4. Activities carried out since the 10th Meeting of Focal Points for SPAs (May 2011)

As part of the second phase of the MedOpenSeas project the working group for the Gulf of Lions region (France, Spain) met in Barcelona on 19-20 December 2011. The various thematic reports prepared on the ecology of the region were presented and reviewed. Outputs are presented as documents: UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.6; UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.7; UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.8; UNEP(DEPI)/MED WG.382/Inf.9.

A further legal document (after document UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA. 2010d) examining the legal implications of establishing SPAMIs beyond national jurisdiction or in areas where the limits of national sovereignty or jurisdiction has not yet been defined, was produced (UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA. 2011), bearing in mind the relevant international framework.

Since 2011 oceanographic surveys are foreseen for parts of the Alboran Sea to assist the identification of areas which are most valuable in terms of biodiversity. Currently only limited data are available to prepare documentation on the ecology of the region in certain zones, in order to guide the designation of SPAMIs. Unfortunately, these surveys have been delayed. Without adequate support by relevant authorities this delay may continue indefinitely. Oceanographic surveys

within the Alboran Sea, including the areas Seco de los Olivos / Banco de Chella, have been conducted by OCEANA, which have assisted in shedding light on these parts of the deep sea.

In December 2011 the second phase of the project came to an end. The results fed directly into a number of international policy debates, most notably on Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Across the world's ocean basins EBSAs are currently being identified, with the Mediterranean fully engaged in the process not least thanks to the outputs of the MedOpenSeas project.

An information document was compiled by the RAC/SPA and together with the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) submitted to the 16th Meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) of the CBD (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/16/INF/8). During the following 17th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the CBD, regional coordination and follow-up work was recommended to the region regarding the CBD listing of the proposed 10 sites as EBSAs (decision UNEP/CBD/COP/DEC/XI/17):

Paragraph 5:

Noting that, during their 17th Ordinary Meeting, held in Paris from 8 to 10 February 2012, the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean and its Protocols adopted decision IG.20/7 regarding the conservation of sites of particular interest in the Mediterranean and requested the Secretariat of the Barcelona Convention to contact the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in order to present the work carried out regarding the description of areas that could meet the criteria for ecologically or biologically significant marine areas in the Mediterranean, takes note of the Synthesis Report, as contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/16/INF/8, and its conclusion regarding the continuation of the work in close cooperation with Mediterranean countries and relevant organizations, in order to finalize the description of areas that meet the criteria for ecologically or biologically significant marine areas in the Mediterranean region;

Paragraph 6:

[...] requests the Executive Secretary to include the summary reports on the description of areas that meet the criteria for EBSAs, prepared by SBSTTA16 and contained in the annex to this decision, in the repository [...] and [...] to submit them to the UNGA and particularly its Informal Working Group on Marine Biodiversity;

Paragraph 9:

Affirms that scientific description of areas meeting scientific criteria for EBSAs and other relevant criteria is an open and evolving process that should be continued to allow on-going improvement and updating as improved scientific and technical information becomes available in each region;

Paragraph 11:

Takes note of the particular need for a regional workshop to be organized in the Mediterranean region in order to finalize the description of areas that meet the criteria for ecologically or biologically significant marine areas in time for its report to be considered by a meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice prior to the twelfth meeting of the Conference of the Parties;

Relevant areas were listed in a table titled “*Description of areas that could meet EBSA Criteria in the Mediterranean region*” within the Annex to SBSTTA's recommendation to COP11 (REC/XVI/4)

RAC/SPA started preliminary contacts with CBD officers in charge of organizing relevant meetings for the definition of EBSAs in different regions. The need for regional cooperation reinforcing in this field, as stated in the “Paris declaration”, was transmitted by RAC/SPA to the UNEP MAP Secretariat. Further organizational exchanges remain tributaries to the exchanges among CBD and UNEP/MAP Secretariats in order to agree the celebration of one of such meetings for the Mediterranean regions.

Since 2011 RAC/SPA was actively pursuing the follow-up funding for the third phase of the MedOpenSeas project, which was successfully selected for financial support together with an ecosystem approach component later in 2012. After RAC/SPA signing of the related agreement with UNEP headquarters at Nairobi in November 2012, funding was made available to RAC/SPA on December 2012. Since the start of the third phase, RAC/SPA has developed an online workspace for the MedOpenSeas project using the [SeaSketch MPA spatial mapping tool](#).

All RAC/SPA Focal Points, MAP Focal Points and a number of selected experts were invited to join, use and review this online workspace in February 2013. Available GIS layers for the priority sites can be viewed by all stakeholders and draft MPAs sketched online, which is particularly useful in the preparatory phase before a meeting as well as during intersessional periods.

Neighbour parties to the areas concerned by the project were also officially contacted to propose the organization of exchange meetings starting in Spring 2013. However, and in order to ensure a full commitment from the side of Parties and better availability of representative officers, RAC/SPA was kindly asked to consider a rearrangement on the timeline to undertake them after the summer 2013.

A meeting of country representatives for the Alboran Sea (Algeria, Morocco and Spain) is foreseen for October 2013, in collaboration with IUCN Med. In parallel a marine ecology report covering fisheries, cetaceans, turtles, seabirds and benthos will be presented, building up on existing work produced through RAC/SPA - IUCN Med collaboration. The format will be equivalent to the one produced for the Gulf of Lions (France, Spain) during the 2nd project phase. Discussions on SPAMI development in the Alboran open seas already started in 2011 and an *ad hoc* working group has been set up.

For the other areas targeted during the 3rd phase discussions between neighbouring countries are foreseen to start with meetings and the setup of *ad hoc* working groups in October-November 2013. In the meantime marine ecology reports in the standard format are produced for the Adriatic Sea (considering data on Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro and Slovenia) and Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau (considering data on Italy, Libya, Malta and Tunisia).

An online survey is currently being designed to collect feedback from those countries which have so far engaged in the MedOpenSeas project during the 2nd phase (Algeria, France, Morocco, Spain) in order to apply lessons learnt to the 3rd phase.

Concerning the pursuing of a joint strategy for open seas MPAs among GFCM, ACCOBAMS, IUCN and RAC/SPA, collaboration took place with GFCM and ACCOBAMS regarding the enhanced sustainability of living resources using areas based management tools, leading to the *“GFCM Parties Resolution GFCM37/2013/1 on area based management of fisheries, including through the establishment of Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs) in the GFCM convention area and coordination with the UNEP-MAP initiatives on the establishment of SPAMIs decision”*.

Such resolution of the Thirty-seventh session of the GFCM (Split, Croatia, 13-17 May 2013) allows for better institutional coordination as well as clear GFCM institutional framing at GFCM Secretariat level regarding synergies on marine areas conservation and management.

Further collaboration of the above institutions on pursuing a joint strategy will continue along the project, benefitting from preliminary discussions.

The production of best practice guidelines will start once the stakeholder negotiations in the current working areas are launched.

5. Difficulties encountered and measures taken in response

The workload required to successfully implement the MedOpenSeas project is sizable and has thus during the first and second project phases benefitted from a backstopping officer to support the RAC/SPA in Tunis. Within the framework of collaboration with the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) the Associate Scientific and Technical Officer of the CMS has thus been providing technical input and coordination to the third phase of the MedOpenSeas project. The officer reported on duty in December 2012 in Tunis at the RAC/SPA offices and is continuing to contribute to the MedOpenSeas project until September 2013 before returning to UNEP CMS headquarters in Bonn, Germany.

In early 2013 the first stakeholder meetings for the Adriatic Sea and Sicily Channel/Tunisian Plateau, as well as a follow-up meeting for the Alboran Sea, had been foreseen for mid-2013. Notifications were sent to Parties accordingly. However, the relevant neighbouring countries did not showed ready to respond favourably for such timeframe, thus exchange meetings are currently foreseen for autumn 2013. This timing would in any case be within the realms of the original project timetable. Starting with the Alboran Sea, where discussions are most advanced, exchange meetings are now scheduled for October and November 2013 (as reflected in Table 2).

Regarding a pending oceanographic survey in Alboran Sea from the second phase, not further advances were achieved in spite of face to face contacts undertaken by the direction of RAC/SPA, so the further availability of the funds allocated to that survey is currently considered on stake.

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