

MPA NEWS



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Perspective | Safeguarding MPAs amid the Mediterranean's growing Blue Economy: Recommendations from the PHAROS4MPAs project

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The **PHAROS4MPAs** project, coordinated by WWF over the past two years, has explored how Mediterranean MPAs are affected by several maritime sectors, and how the environmental impacts of those sectors can be prevented or minimized.

The sectors studied were maritime transport, offshore windfarms, cruises, leisure boating, small-scale commercial fisheries, recreational fisheries, and marine aquaculture. The project has released a set of practical recommendations – excerpted below – for MPA managers, maritime spatial planning (MSP) authorities, and businesses.

Competition for space

Except for commercial fisheries, each of the maritime sectors mentioned above has been developing significantly in the semi-enclosed Mediterranean Sea in recent decades, and is expected to keep growing. (Commercial fisheries have been declining in the Med for several years now, due to overexploitation of fish stocks.) At the same time, Mediterranean countries need to reach global conservation targets by designating new MPAs. And at the site level, MPA managers must deal increasingly with new or expanding uses, which requires new capacities and skills. Competition for maritime space is thus increasing, reflecting the pressing need to manage our waters more coherently.

The Mediterranean Sea hosts a multitude of areas of important ecological value that deliver a wide range of ecosystem services and are rich in biodiversity. Some ecologically or biologically significant areas (EBSAs) in the Mediterranean are already identified under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. This web of valuable areas needs to be linked by so-called *blue corridors* – connecting important ecological features like stepping stones and currents, and free of disconnecting factors like physical infrastructure, noise barriers, polluted areas, heavily used shipping lines, and regular trawling grounds.

The region's existing MPA network covers part of this web of important areas. MPAs are the best-known and most effective tool developed so far to protect marine ecosystems. However, marine management and planning needs a much broader perspective that will accommodate not only MPAs but all other areas of high ecological value, too.

Including MPAs in spatial planning

European countries are required to [prepare maritime spatial plans](#) by April 2021. Under EU law, those plans should apply an ecosystem-based approach, and the PHAROS4MPAs project has shown it is important to include MPA networks – and all other areas of high ecological value – as a central component. MPAs should be treated as an essential function for maintaining critical ecosystems and marine resources, not as simply another marine sector to be accommodated along with the others. To date this has not happened widely enough in European MSP, and there needs to be a change in attitude.

Effective MSP can significantly complement the aims of MPAs by using spatial and/or temporal regulations for specific areas (such as maritime transport regulated areas, marine concessions for aquaculture development, no-mooring zones for leisure boating, or seasonal fisheries closures) and carefully managing the spatial distribution of competing maritime sectors. MSP should:

- Play a critical role in achieving [Good Environmental Status](#) in Mediterranean waters.
- Avoid negative impacts on priority areas.
- Minimize negative effects in larger areas with important ecological value.

In or near MPAs, priority in decision-making needs to be given to impact-avoidance strategies. Avoiding impacts means siting an activity, marine use, or sector in an area where the pressures it generates will not impact valuable ecosystems. While this may seem in some cases to place heavy constraints on decision-makers, it is a cost-effective long-term approach: when impacts are avoided in the first place, business sectors will not face mitigation costs, and legal risks are minimized or canceled. Such an approach can take many forms: for example, locating offshore wind farms outside significant bird areas, fish farms away from sensitive habitats, and maritime shipping routes outside key habitats for marine mammals, as well as forbidding ships from anchoring on *Posidonia* meadows, and so on.

Project recommendations to national and regional authorities

- Apply thoughtful, ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning to avoid putting new pressures on existing MPAs.
- Where economic activities do take place, mitigate their impacts in an appropriate manner, taking into account cumulative impacts and the carrying capacity of local ecosystems.
- Implement legislation to sustainably regulate the interactions of the sectors with MPAs.

Project recommendations to MPA managers

- Engage in planning processes (MSP and integrated coastal zone management) that concern the MPA and surrounding areas.
- Monitor the impact of Blue Economy activities within and in proximity to their MPA.
- Integrate recommendations on the interactions between economic sectors and the protected areas in MPA management plans.
- When relevant, advocate for adequate buffer zones around MPAs to avoid pressure from economic activities along their borders.

Project recommendations to maritime business sectors

- Endorse and implement sustainability best practices in and around MPAs.
- Cooperate with national and MPA authorities to co-develop strategies to avoid impacts on marine ecosystems and biodiversity.

Recommendations for each of the seven maritime sectors can be found here: <https://pharos4mpas.interreg-med.eu/>.

For more information:

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