

The road towards the realisation of a comprehensive mid-term strategy (2017-2020) for the sustainability of Mediterranean fisheries

Recognizing that urgent action was needed to address the alarming status of fish stocks in the Mediterranean Sea, the GFCM has undergone a series of transformations in recent years to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of its work. Stemming from a performance review, initiated in 2009, a Task Force was established to modernize the GFCM's legal framework through a concerted and bottom-up approach that involved all relevant stakeholders. To support the work of the Task Force GFCM launched a Framework Programme for the years 2013-2017. The modernization process thus culminated in the 2014 adoption of the amended GFCM Agreement, endowing the Commission with modern legal tools to better manage and conserve living marine resources in its area of application. Together, and thanks to the Framework Programme, these changes also led to the adoption of a number of new measures, such as sub-regional management plans and roadmaps for the fight against IUU fishing.

With the upcoming conclusion of the Framework Programme and armed with a modernized legal framework, GFCM has devised a mid-term strategy (2017-2020) to address the existing challenges facing Mediterranean fisheries, thereby seeking to effectively combat the negative impacts these challenges have on the sector, on coastal livelihoods and on food security. This strategy has been elaborated in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 and FAO Strategic Objective 2 and defines a comprehensive course of action to sustainably develop fisheries in the region, including the enhancement of scientific knowledge for defined priority species among small-pelagic and demersal species. It is programmatic and multiannual in nature and provides guidance for the work of GFCM, based on priority actions identified by the GFCM subsidiary bodies. The implementation of this strategy is expected to ensure that by 2020 greater sustainability of commercially exploited stocks is ensured by meeting the following targets:

T1: Reverse the declining trend of fish stocks through strengthened scientific advice in support of management

T2: Support livelihoods for coastal communities through sustainable small-scale fisheries

T3: Curb illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, through a regional plan of action

T4: Minimize and mitigate unwanted interactions between fisheries and marine ecosystems and environment

T5: Enhance capacity-building and cooperation

Management of iconic pelagic species, accounting for natural fluctuations, in the Adriatic Sea through a multi-annual management plans:

Sardine and anchovy are the two main iconic small pelagic species in the Mediterranean. Both species sustain a large volume of catches all across the Mediterranean, with the majority of the catches intended for local and direct human consumption. One of the areas within the Mediterranean with the longest history of sardine and anchovy fisheries is the Adriatic Sea, where these species have been fished for centuries. Based on the conclusions of the GFCM Scientific Advisory Committee for Fisheries (SAC), both of these species are overexploited in GSAs 17 and 18 (Adriatic Sea) and a decrease in fishing mortality has been advised.

Management of these iconic species is especially difficult, however, due to a number of challenges, including their natural fluctuations and their concentration on high density aggregations (“schools”). Furthermore, the number of different actors in the Adriatic adds an additional layer of challenges to managing this sea. Policy differences between EU and non-EU member countries come into play, as well as historical and current differences in the capacity of the fleets of the different countries involved. For example, Italy was the first country to develop a large fleet capacity, while Croatia began developing its fleet after the war. Slovenia, Albania and Montenegro, instead, have a comparatively much smaller fleet.

To address these challenges and to improve stock status, a multi-annual management plan has been adopted. Since 2013, management plans have been instituted, and subsequently updated for small pelagic species in the Adriatic Sea, adding emergency measures as required (Recommendations GFCM/37/2013/1, GFCM/38/2014/1, GFCM/39/2015/1 and GFCM/40/2016/1). The most recent recommendation, adopted in 2016, seeks to ensure that exploitation levels of small pelagics in the Adriatic Sea are at maximum sustainable yield by 2020. It declares that catches of these species in this area shall not exceed the level of catches exerted in 2014, it sets in place a reduction in fishing effort which shall not exceed 180 days per year, it applies spatio-temporal closures to protect nursery and spawning areas and additional closures for vessels over 12 metres in length, and finally, it ensures that the fleet capacity does not exceed the capacity from 2014. Measures to improve scientific monitoring and control measures are also set forth.

The outputs expected from instituting these measures include an improvement in small pelagic stocks to safe biological limits, the establishment of adequate fleet capacity, more stable catches and further socio-economic benefits for those whose livelihoods depend on these resources.

Protecting iconic demersal species from overexploitation in the Strait of Sicily through the application of multi-annual management plans:

Hake has long been considered an iconic species of the Mediterranean. As it is found throughout the region and makes up a high volume of total catches, it is critical for sustaining many different Mediterranean fisheries. In the Strait of Sicily, this species is predominantly captured in trawl fisheries together with a large number of other demersal species, including the deepwater rose shrimp, another iconic, high-value species. This fishery in particular has been subject to high fishing pressure for quite some time and urgent measures were needed to alleviate this pressure. Indeed, the GFCM Scientific Advisory Committee for Fisheries (SAC) had recurrently considered both of these iconic stocks – hake and deepwater rose shrimp – to be in overexploitation in the Strait of Sicily.

Recognizing the need for urgent action, the GFCM adopted Recommendation GFCM/40/2016/4 establishing a multiannual plan for the fisheries exploiting hake and deepwater rose shrimp in the Strait of Sicily (GSAs 12-16). This recommendation recognizes the particular challenges in this area – including the geopolitical situation, involving both EU and non-EU countries, as well as different fleet and capacity development issues – and it puts forth a plan for addressing the management of these fisheries.

The management plan adopted applies to bottom trawls over 10 metres in length whose catch of hake and deepwater rose shrimp represents at least 25 percent of the catch in live weight or value. It is an integrated management plan which includes management measures of different nature and which seeks to apply a precautionary approach to ensure exploitation levels are at maximum sustainable yield by 2020 while also protecting nursery areas, eliminating discards and adjusting fishing capacity.

Through this plan, spatio-temporal closures are instituted, such as the establishment of three new Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs) in the Strait of Sicily. This action complements the GFCM's 2005 pioneering decision to prohibit the use of towed dredge and trawler fisheries at any depth greater than 1 000 metres in its entire area of application (REC.CM-GFCM/29/2005/1).

Complementing these measures in the management plan are a series of additional measures to address IUU fishing activities, such as designating landing ports and prohibiting the landing or transshipment of these species anywhere other than in the designated landing ports. The recommendation also includes provisions to improve monitoring, control and surveillance and to ensure adequate annual scientific monitoring is carried out.

It is expected that this recommendation will contribute to healthier stocks, particularly for the iconic demersal species in the Strait of Sicily, and the establishment of adequate fleet capacity. Such improvements could potentially increase future catches and improve livelihoods for fishers dependant on these stocks.