

MEDAC Advice relevant for the GFCM SRC-Central Mediterranean

During the meeting of the FG on Strait of Sicily, held on 26 February 2026 in Rome, the expert Fabio Fiorentino presented “Light and shade on the state of resources and the management of demersal fishing in the Strait of Sicily”.

Background

The management of demersal resources in the Strait of Sicily is a major challenge for the sustainability of fisheries in the central Mediterranean. This area is a significant biodiversity and biological productivity hotspot, as well as being one of the main fishing grounds for demersal species of high commercial value, including deep-water shrimps (Jarbouï et al., 2022; Fiorentino et al., 2024). In recent years, various management tools have been introduced at regional level, with the aim of improving stock status and ensuring the sustainable use of resources. However, while these measures have been overall effective, there are still some critical issues that need to be addressed (Fiorentino, 2026).

Among the positive signs, the most recent scientific assessments indicate a gradual improvement in the status of demersal stocks in the area, as reported in FAO (2025). This trend indicates that the management policies implemented in recent years, including the strong reduction in fishing pressure from certain fleets, are contributing to the recovery of several stocks and an improvement in their biological indicators.

It is encouraging to note that the number of European fleet vessels operating in the Strait of Sicily has been reduced. This has led to a decline in fishing pressure from EU operators, allowing for more effective management of fishing mortality through the implementation of technical measures, without the need for further significant reductions in fishing effort by the EU fleet. In this context, tools such as gear regulations, mesh sizes and seasonal closures can contribute significantly to the sustainability of fishing activities (Lucchetti et al., 2021; Russo et al., 2019).

It is also important to note the introduction of spatial and temporal management measures adopted by both the European Union and the GFCM, including the spatial and temporal closures provided for in Regulation (EU) No 266/2026. These tools are a central element of the modern approach to fisheries management, as they enable the protection of sensitive habitats, spawning grounds and nursery areas that are vital for the recruitment of fish stocks. If such measures are properly designed and implemented, they have the potential to contribute significantly to the resilience of stocks and the stability of catches in the medium to long term.

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Considerations and concerns of the MEDAC

Alongside these encouraging signs, however, the MEDAC notes that several critical issues remain that limit the overall effectiveness of management policies. One of the primary concerns pertains to the fishing capacity and effort exerted by Third-country fleets operating in the area. In the absence of an effective and coordinated control and regulatory system, such activities can generate levels of fishing pressure that are incompatible with sustainability objectives, undermining the results of measures adopted by EU operators (Marsaglia et al., 2024). The shared nature of the resources in the Strait of Sicily therefore makes it essential to strengthen international cooperation and multilateral governance mechanisms.

A further critical issue raised up by the MEDAC is the lack of Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs) on in the southern part of the Strait of Sicily. The absence of protected areas in these sectors limits the ability to effectively safeguard essential habitats, such as the breeding and juvenile rearing grounds of numerous demersal species. As outlined in previous studies (Garofalo et al., 2018), the introduction of FRAs in these areas, accompanied with proper monitoring systems to assess compliance and effectiveness, has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the conservation of resources and the stability of exploited stocks. Therefore, MEDAC supports the inclusion of the protection of southern nurseries areas for hake and key relevant species, as permanent spatial closures (ref. advice 107/2025)¹.

From a strategic perspective, MEDAC deems appropriate a need to strengthen the integration of the ecosystem approach into Multiannual Management Plans (MAPs). As Jarboui et al. (2021) have highlighted, these instruments sometimes lack explicit and measurable ecosystem conservation objectives, such as the protection of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems. This limits their ability to address interactions between species, habitats and anthropogenic pressures in an integrated manner. The integration of ecosystem indicators and clearer biological targets would represent a significant step towards more comprehensive and sustainable management.

At an operational level, the MEDAC finds a number of ambiguities that have also been identified in the compilation of the list of vessels authorised to fish for deep-water demersal resources (DWDS). In particular, the inclusion of trawlers operating under a mixed-fishing regime may reduce the effectiveness of the temporary closures envisaged for this specific activity. In such cases, vessels classified as 'mixed trawlers' may continue to operate during the closure period, thereby maintaining fishing pressure on the target stock and rendering the management measure provided for in the Plans less effective.

¹ EAA, IFSUA, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF call for the extensions of the trawling ban in this area from 1,000 m to 800 m depth, to avoid alteration of pristine and low impacted seabeds (ref. Advice 74/2024).

Conclusions

Finally, the MEDAC deems that a key issue is the definition of the biological objectives of the temporary closures in DWRS fisheries. The effectiveness of such measures depends on the accurate identification of the life cycle stages to be protected. In line with Fiorentino (2024), the protection of juvenile stages and nursery areas is generally more effective, from a biological and management perspective, than the protection of mature adults, as stated in the current MAP of GFCM for the deep-water red shrimps in the Mediterranean, which are, moreover, those of greatest commercial value. Consequently, the strategic implementation of temporary closures for the protection of recruits can contribute more significantly to stock recovery and the long-term sustainability of the fishery.

In conclusion, the management of demersal resources in the Strait of Sicily is showing encouraging signs, as evidenced by the improved status of certain stocks and the introduction of increasingly sophisticated management tools. However, to consolidate these results, MEDAC deems necessary to strengthen coordination between the European Union and third countries, improve the consistency and clarity of management measures, and fully integrate the ecosystem-based approach into management plans. Furthermore, the long-term phase of the Strait of Sicily MAPs should require that all vessels > 15 m length shall be equipped with active AIS on board, to increase fisheries transparency and a level-playing field between EU and non-EU fleets operating in the area.

MEDAC also considers vital to pay particular attention to the design of spatial and temporal measures based on sound biological objectives, supported by adequate data collection and monitoring programs to assure compliance and assess their effectiveness. These measures must be capable of ensuring effective protection of the most vulnerable stages of the life cycle of target species and species of conservation interest. It is vital to understand that only through an integrated and cooperative approach will it be possible to ensure the long-term sustainability of demersal resources in the Strait of Sicily and the socio-economic stability of the fishing communities that depend on them.

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