

### **MEDAC advice relevant for the GFCM SRC-Eastern Mediterranean**

Based on discussions held at the FG East Med meeting (Naples, 26 February 2026) and building upon MEDAC previous advice, including Ref. 113/2025, this document provides updated recommendations on key strategic priorities for fisheries management in the Eastern Mediterranean. This advice reflects the transition from a pilot and planning phase (2023–2025) to a more operational and adaptive management phase (post-2026), in line with:

- The objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to ensure environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially responsible fisheries;
- The GFCM multiannual management frameworks for demersal species and deep-water resources in the Eastern Mediterranean;
- The increasing relevance of ecosystem-based fisheries management and adaptive approaches in response to climate change and biological invasions.

#### **Considering:**

- The growing environmental variability and climate-driven changes affecting stock dynamics;
- The increasing impact of Non-Indigenous Species (NIS) on ecosystems and fisheries;
- The continued gaps in scientific knowledge and data availability;
- The strong socio-economic dependence of coastal communities on fisheries, including small-scale fisheries (SSF);

#### **Given that:**

##### **1. *Aristaeomorpha foliacea* (giant red shrimp – Ionian Sea)**

The fishery will enter the long-term management phase (post-2026) following a transitional period (2023–2026) aimed at stabilising exploitation and improving scientific knowledge;

Current scientific indicators suggest that fishing mortality is below target levels and biomass is around sustainable reference points, reflecting improvements achieved through recent management measures;

The stock is highly influenced by environmental variability and recruitment fluctuations, creating uncertainty in short-term trends;

Recruitment remains highly variable and environmentally driven;

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The main risk identified is not stock collapse, but management instability driven by uncertainty, potentially leading to abrupt regulatory changes;

The adoption of Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) is considered useful to ensure stable, predictable and robust long-term management.

## 2. *Merluccius merluccius* (European hake – Eastern Mediterranean)

The species is of high commercial importance, with fisheries operating mainly through bottom trawls, longlines and gillnets;

Landings vary significantly across GSAs, with concentration in GSA 22 (~4000 t) and much lower catches elsewhere;

Stock assessment remains highly uncertain, with only limited qualitative evaluation available and indications of possible overexploitation;

Significant data gaps exist, including incomplete catch reporting, lack of representative biological data and insufficient coverage of fleets and gears;

The Eastern Mediterranean remains scientifically under-assessed compared to other regions, requiring urgent improvement of data collection and modelling approaches.

## 3. Non-Indigenous Species (NIS)

The Eastern Mediterranean is a hotspot for NIS, with more than 775 species recorded, driven by the Suez Canal and climate warming;

NIS are significantly altering ecosystems, catch composition and fishing practices, creating both ecological risks and socio-economic impacts;

The establishment of a regional NIS Observatory in Türkiye is underway and is considered a key step toward coordinated monitoring and management. A pilot study (PS-NIS-EM) has been launched, including monitoring systems, Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK) and ecosystem-based approaches;

Certain NIS species present dual roles, acting both as ecological threats and as potential economic resources (e.g. *Siganus* spp., *Pterois miles*), while others require strict control (e.g. *Lagocephalus sceleratus*);

The Eastern Mediterranean fisheries context is characterised by:

- Increasing environmental variability and climate-driven changes affecting stock dynamics;
- Limited and fragmented scientific knowledge for several key stocks;
- The need to move from short-term reactive management to long-term adaptive strategies;
- Strong dependence of coastal communities on fisheries and emerging resources;

**In this context, MEDAC considers that:**

1. On *Aristaeomorpha foliacea* (Ionian Sea)

a) The transition to the long-term management phase should prioritise stability and predictability, avoiding abrupt changes in fishing opportunities;

b) The implementation of Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) should “*begin with a discussion among stakeholders, including managers, administrations and representatives of the fishing sector, to clarify the priorities guiding the evaluation of management options. Possible priorities may include maximizing average catches, ensuring biological safety of the stock, improving stability of catches over time, or increasing the efficiency of harvesting activities (e.g. catch relative to fishing effort). The WGMSE noted that clarifying these priorities before examining simulation results is essential for interpreting performance indicators in a consistent manner*” (GFCM Working Group on MSE (WGMSE) on Mediterranean stocks Session I & Session II – Conclusions and recommendations). The discussion with stakeholders by now is not based on information made understandable for them.

c) Greater emphasis should be placed on:

- Understanding stock connectivity across GSAs,
- Identifying essential habitats (spawning and nursery grounds),
- Strengthening cooperation between scientists and fishers for data collection (including Local Ecological Knowledge - LEK),
- Communication of results of the MSE analyses in a language and format allowing proper understanding for all stakeholders involved, and facilitating decision-making process

d) Assessment approaches, and subsequent management, should recognise that natural variability in recruitment may drive fluctuations in catches, and avoid misinterpreting these as solely fishing-induced changes.

2. On *Merluccius merluccius* (Eastern Mediterranean)

a) MEDAC stresses the necessity to:

- Initiate stock assessments in currently unassessed GSAs,

- Develop integrated assessment models, including climate change effects.

b) Crucial management measures should include:

- Spatial and temporal protection of nursery and spawning areas<sup>1</sup>;
- Gear selectivity improvements.

c) Given current uncertainties and, on the basis of the MEDAC members knowledge, special attention should be paid to a common level playing field until the scientific assessment will be based on robust data;

d) Awareness initiatives, and monitoring and control programs, should be promoted to discourage the capture and consumption of juveniles.

3. On Non-Indigenous Species (NIS)

a) MEDAC reaffirms the urgent need to operationalise the NIS Observatory in the Eastern Mediterranean, ensuring:

- Strong regional collaboration with EU Member States and the other GFCM CPCs,
- Active involvement of stakeholders, including small-scale fishers;

b) The Observatory should function as a regional competence centre, providing:

- Early detection and rapid response;
- Data coordination and dissemination;
- Support to ecosystem-based management.

c) NIS management should follow a flexible and adaptive approach, recognising:

- The ecological risks posed by invasive species,
- The potential for sustainable commercial exploitation of selected species,
- The need for targeted removal and control measures where necessary;

d) MEDAC supports:

- Selective fishing strategies for NIS, including in specific regulated contexts;
- Development of new markets and value chains for commercially viable NIS;
- Exploration of alternative income opportunities (e.g. eco-tourism, targeted fisheries).

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<sup>1</sup> EAA, IFSUA, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF add “including extending the the trawl ban from 1,000 m to 800 m depth, to avoid alteration of pristine and low impacted seabeds”.

#### 4. Cross-cutting: Stakeholder Engagement, SSF and EAF implementation

Building on MEDAC 113/2025 advice, stronger emphasis should be placed on structured stakeholder engagement and ecosystem-based management:

a) Stakeholder participation should be strengthened through:

- Co-design approaches (focus groups, community forums);
- Inclusion of SSF, women, youth, NGOs and recreational fisheries;

b) Capacity building and knowledge transfer should be enhanced, including:

- Simplified communication of scientific advice;
- Support for informed participation in management processes;

c) The Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) should be further operationalised through:

- National pilot projects;
- Locally adapted management measures;
- Data collection and monitoring programs of key ecosystem elements (species and habitats) interacting with fishing activities,
- Integration of socio-economic considerations;

d) Small-scale fisheries (SSF) should be supported through:

- Improved data collection;
- Value chain development and eco-labelling;
- Recognition of their role in sustainability and coastal livelihoods;

e) Recreational fisheries should be better integrated into data collection and NIS monitoring frameworks.

**It is the MEDAC's view that:**

a) The Eastern Mediterranean is entering a critical phase where fisheries are no longer facing only overexploitation challenges, but also environmental variability, data limitations and ecosystem transformations driven by non-indigenous species.

b) Fisheries management in the Eastern Mediterranean should progressively shift toward ecosystem-based and adaptive management frameworks.

- c) Uncertainty must be explicitly integrated into management decisions, avoiding short-term reactive measures.
- d) Enhanced regional cooperation is essential, given the transboundary nature of stocks and ecosystems.
- e) Stronger integration between scientific knowledge and fishers' experience (Local Ecological Knowledge – LEK) should be promoted.
- f) The priority is to build robust, long-term and adaptive management systems capable of ensuring both sustainability of resources and stability of fishing communities with the active involvement of the stakeholders.

