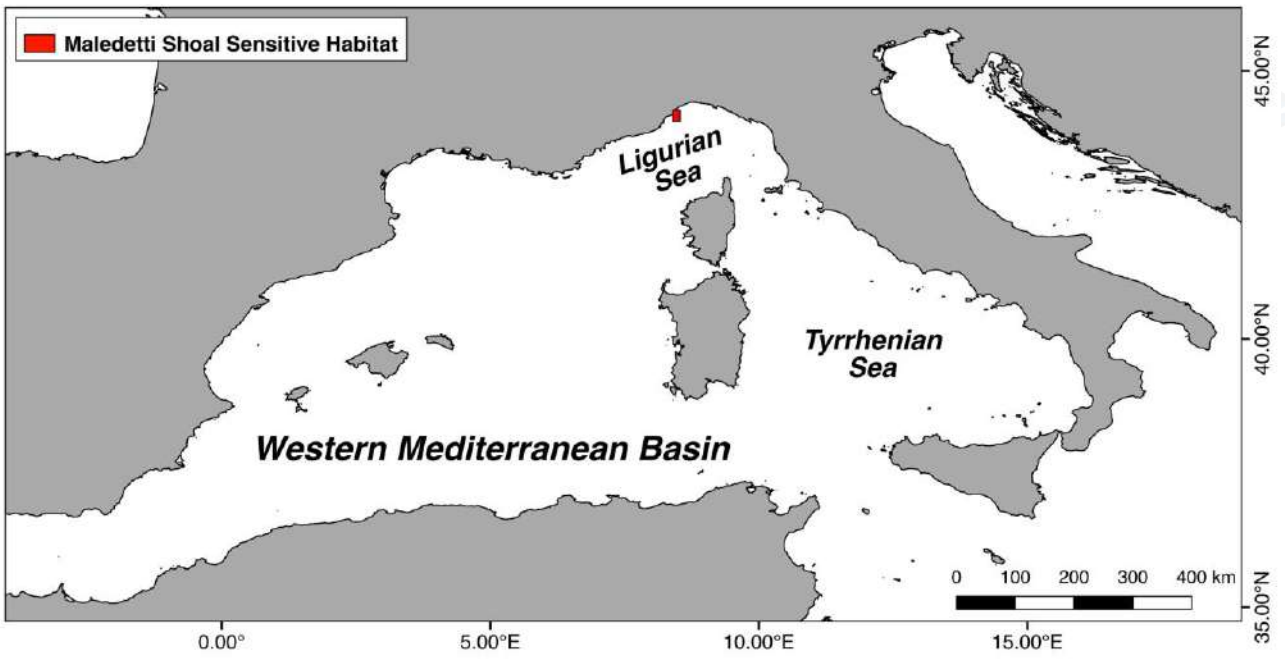
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MEDAC opinion on the proposal to establish a Fisheries Restricted Area (FRA) in the Ligurian Sea: "Maledetti Shoal Sensitive Habitat"

The MEDAC was officially commissioned by the Italian Fisheries Administration (with a letter registered as Prot. 5230 of 25th March 2019) to prepare a contribution and an opinion on the proposal to establish a Fisheries Restricted Area in the Ligurian Sea, presented to the GFCM on 11th February 2019 by the Department for the Earth, Environment and Life Sciences of the University of Genoa.

The points that were raised during the MEDAC debate are that the promoters of the FRA did not organise a consultation with the stakeholders, (which is why the Italian administration directed it request for collaboration to the MEDAC before proposing this FRA). During the GFCM WG meeting on MPAs (Marine Protected Areas), held last February, it was highlighted that the promotors had contacted 41 fishers (not identified) who operate in the area in question and had interviewed 13 fishers.



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EXTRACT FROM FRA PROPOSAL[1]:

"Therefore, we propose to permanently close this area to any demersal fisheries, in order to safeguard a unique ecosystem and rebuild its stocks, in particular spiny lobster and European lobster, allowing for the long-term sustainability of the local fisheries. The establishment of this FRA would be a pioneering case study for the mesophotic Mediterranean region, prone to restoration and monitoring activities and would clearly be in accordance to the Ecosystem Approach, in line with the management objectives of GFCM, and based on the best available scientific information."

"In summer 2018 an interview survey was carried out in the main marines of the area, allowing to quantify fishing effort in 25 fishing grounds included between Finale Ligure and Vado Ligure (FLAG PromoRiviere di Liguria, 2018). A total of 41 professional fishermen are reported from the harbor of Finale Ligure, Noli, Vado Ligure and Savona. Generally, fishermen work alone, and some of them own two or, in one case, three boats. Thirteen interviewed fishermen reported that, nowadays, the number of artisanal vessels operating in the area between Noli and Vado Ligure does not exceed 20 vessels, and that this number has been gradually decreasing since the 1980s. Four artisanal fishermen are known to fish on the Maledetti Shoal. This site is considered easily accessible (2 and 3 NM from the harbor of Noli and Vado Ligure, respectively). Here, the traditional trammel net called "aragostara" represents the main *métier*, targeting the spiny lobster *Palinurus elephas* and the European lobster *Homarus gammarus*. Gillnets are also employed on the flat muddy plateau at the base of the vertical wall, down to 100 m depth. Fishermen declared to frequent the site no more than 10-30 times per year, mainly during summertime, when sea conditions are optimal. Indeed, due to the complex topography of the shoal and the strong bottom currents, fishermen consider difficult to operate on this fishing ground. The name "Maledetti", which means "damned" in Italian, refers to the easiness to entangle on the sea bottom with the net and to the high likelihood to break it or lose it. Interviewed fishermen declared to strongly entangle on the bottom 2-5 times per years (up to 20) and at least three fishermen reported losing the gear. Data collected from scientific observer (Enrichetti *et al.*, in press), report on average up to 3.2 entanglement events per fishing set, generally followed by gear breakage."

EXTRACT FROM GFCM WG REPORT (Marine Protected Areas) meeting 18-21 February 2019

58. Mr Francesco Enrichetti, PhD candidate from the Università degli Studi di Genova (Italy), presented a new FRA proposal: deep-sea sensitive habitats from the Ligurian Sea (north-western Mediterranean). VMEs are characterized by peculiar topographical and biocoenotic features, which make them particularly sensitive and poorly resilient to mechanical damages, such as those inflicted by demersal fishing activities. Spatial management is considered among the most effective measures for the protection of VMEs and for improving the long-term sustainability of commercial stocks. In particular, the protection of nurseries and spawning grounds has been advocated as an urgent measure, particularly the closure of fisheries in areas identified as sensitive habitat and essential fish habitats. The Maledetti Shoal – sensitive habitat, located in the GSA 9 (Ligurian Sea and North Tyrrhenian Sea), is herein proposed as fisheries restricted areas due to the unique

[1] "Maledetti Shoal Sensitive Habitat" submitted by Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra, dell'Ambiente e della Vita, Università degli Studi di Genova, on 11 february 2019

topographic and biocoenotic characteristics, including the largest mesophotic red coral population of the Ligurian Sea, and for its important role in supporting relevant assemblages of commercial and non-commercial species. The proposed area has been selected on the basis of: i) extensive scientific knowledge about the benthic biocoenosis inhabiting the shoal; ii) the ecological and biological relevance of the assemblages thriving here, including species with critical life history stages; and iii) the strong impact of demersal fishing activities on vulnerable habitats and species, highlighted by ROV explorations and direct assessment. Therefore, the permanent closure of this area to any demersal fisheries, would safeguard a unique ecosystem and its stocks, in particular spiny lobster and European lobster, allowing for the long-term sustainability of the local fisheries. The establishment of this FRA would be a pioneering case study for the mesophotic Mediterranean region, prone to restoration and monitoring activities and would clearly be in accordance with the ecosystem approach, in line with the management objectives of GFCM, and based on the best available scientific information.

59. The WGMPA noted that most of the impact on these sensitive benthic habitats was deriving more from ghost nets (traps and trammel nets) than from direct active fishing gear. Mr Thompson underlined that the coralligenous habitat was still well conserved apart from the strong occurrence of ghost nets that became encrusted with sessile organisms, including corals.

60. Mr Enrichetti underlined that the lost nets were affecting the gorgonian community, with colonies significantly smaller than in adjacent unfished areas. He also confirmed that the area, due to its particular topography, was well-known for destroying fishers' gears and that the name of the shoal "Maledetti" was chosen for this reason as in Italian it means "damned". Fishers were progressively leaving the area because they often lost their expensive fishing gear. Only around 4 of them were still fishing there. Mr Enrichetti also added that a project to clean the area from lost gear was currently in progress (FEAMP 2014-2020 Measure 4.63). The cleaning would be done by divers and ROVs paying particular attention not to impact coral assemblages.

61. Some participants noted that the area proposed as a FRA was very small (0.52 km2) and entirely located within national waters and considered that the protection of this area from fisheries could be achieved with internal bilateral communication between the University of Genova and the Italian Authorities. Possible management options included the establishment of a Zona Tutela Biologica (ZTB) (biological protected zone), which could act like a FRA, or the inclusion of the Maledetti shoal area within the boundaries of the adjacent MPA of Isola di Bergeggi.

62. Mr Enrichetti explained that the process to establish a FRA was considered more straightforward and simple as the only target of the proposal is to close the area to all fisheries (professional and recreational) and therefore the FRA tool matched fully with the proponent's conservation objective.

63. The GFCM Secretariat clarified that neither the total surface area of a FRA or its location within national waters would prevent a proposal from being submitted to the GFCM and that the procedure was monitored properly in the case of the Maledetti shoal FRA proposal. It was recalled that the mandate of the WGMPA was to assess the proposal from a scientific point of view only. Management measures and socioeconomic aspects of the proposal should be further analysed at the level of subregional committees, and in this case at the upcoming Subregional Committee for the western Mediterranean (SRC-WM), recalling that the next meeting of the SRC-WM would take place in France in April 2019.

64. Experts from the Italian administration present on the first day of the meeting provided information in relation to the FRA proposals in the Otranto Channel, Bari Canyon and in the Maledetti shoal, as follows: in relation to the Otranto Channel and Bari Canyon, they recalled that the Italian administration had not been contacted by the proponents since the presentation of the initial proposal in 2018 and that the involvement of Italian stakeholders in providing feedback was non-existent or limited. In relation to the proposal for the Maledetti shoal, dialogue with the Italian administration had not been initiated yet.

OPINION

The MEDAC reiterates that it is essential to envisage consultation with the sector to obtain economic data from the fishers operating in the area in question and thus have a clearer picture of the possible socio-economic impact that establishing this FRA would have.

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