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**Steps towards the designation of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) in the North-Western Mediterranean Sea**

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## Steps towards the designation of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) in the North-Western Mediterranean Sea

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### Abstract

This paper briefly describes the past, current and future steps which will lead to the discussion at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) proposal for the North-Western Mediterranean Sea. The different steps which took place since 2016 are presented, with a short summary of the various dedicated meetings and workshops.

A draft proposal, following the IMO guidelines, is currently under discussion and negotiation between France, Italy, Monaco and Spain and it is expected to be ready for stakeholders' meetings in May 2022. The final goal is to present a PSSA proposal at IMO MEPC 79 in December 2022 for their consideration.

The proposal considers the boundaries of the PSSA and several tentative associated measures do be discussed with stakeholders next May.

### Background information

Ship strikes involving large cetaceans represent a worldwide problem, causing both temporary and lethal wounds. The high collision rates reported for the isolated sub-populations of fin and sperm whales in the Mediterranean raise serious concern.

The 2016 Mediterranean Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) workshop, organized by the IUCN Marine Protected Areas Task Force in collaboration with ACCOBAMS, identified a total of 26 IMMAs, eight of which having large whales (fin and sperm whales) as primary species. These IMMAs can be used as tests to evaluate mitigation measures, by overlapping shipping routes using Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, to indicate areas with higher risk of ship strikes. In this context, the high-risk areas are defined as whale high density areas intersected by high traffic levels.

The joint workshop organized in April 2019 by the IWC, IUCN and ACCOBAMS to evaluate how the data and process used to identify Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) can assist the IWC to identify areas of high risk for ship strike reinforced the IWC67b Scientific Committee recommendation which “*recommends continued work to develop and evaluate mitigation measures, such as speed restrictions, that might be associated with the designation of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) in the Pelagos Sanctuary area*”. The workshop recommended to the ACCOBAMS Secretariat and ACCOBAMS Parties to further develop the process for the designation of a PSSA by IMO at a scale that includes the North West Mediterranean Sea, Slope and Canyon IMMA, plus potentially the Spanish Migration Corridor SPAMI, to take into account whale population movement and distribution. Zoning within the area with ship strike mitigation tools such as speed reduction and routing measures could be proposed as part of the Associated Protective Measures within the PSSA.

Following this recommendation, a resolution was adopted on ship strikes at the ACCOBAMS 7<sup>th</sup> MoP in 2019 (Resolution 7.12). On this occasion France invited Italy, Monaco and Spain to start discussing possible mitigation measure for the north-western Mediterranean also through the designation of a PSSA. The initiative was favourably welcomed by these other countries.

Since September 2021, the Ministry of Ecological Transition and the French Office for Biodiversity have organized two additional workshops, to further support and streamline this initiative. The first was organized on September 6, 2021, during the IUCN World Congress in Marseilles, France. This event facilitated a first contact between the actors concerned by this initiative and to initiate the cooperation between the countries. The second workshop took place on October 18 and 19, 2021, in Paris, France. It brought together nearly 70 participants, including representatives from Italy, Monaco, Spain and France, as well as many scientific players, NGOs, representatives of the economic sector and shipowners. At this workshop, Italy, Monaco, Spain and France confirmed their wish to work together on the preparation of the submission file of PSSA to IMO for the MEPC 79 to be held in December 2022. The first semester of 2022 has been dedicated to the drafting of the file and consulting of the various stakeholders.

This second workshop aimed to:

- a. draw up an overview of the various existing studies and data on the presence of cetaceans and on the maritime traffic in the Mediterranean Sea;
- b. discuss the associated protection measures that could be presented in the submission file;
- c. discuss the process to lead to a practical and solid proposal to be submitted to the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Three thematic working groups discussed the various steps for the preparation of the PSSA application.

- Group 1 - Work on the assessment of available knowledge to develop protective measures - aimed to define a precise perimeter and identify hotspots with a consideration of specific measures and to build on existing environmental data.
- Group 2 - Develop a governance for the IMO application submission - focused on the need to strengthen diplomatic links in order to obtain support from the IMO representatives by:
  - a. developing a consensus between the major stakeholders and the European Union;
  - b. deepening transboundary cooperation between pilot areas;
  - c. strengthening the support of Mediterranean Countries.
- Group 3 (Work on defining appropriate Associated Protective Measures) discussed:
  - a. speed reduction and/or zone of avoidance;
  - b. presence of a specialized observer on vessels<sup>1</sup>;
  - c. a key point to be strengthened to support the case for scientific knowledge: the definition of a clear system of evaluation and impact of mitigation measures.

The most recent workshop was organized by the Italian Ministry of the Ecological Transition (IMET) in collaboration with the Pelagos Agreement Permanent Secretariat on December 17 in Roma, Italy, to respond to commitments taken by relevant Countries in the context of the implementation of their decision within the Pelagos Agreement (Resolution 7.6 and Resolution 8.7), ACCOBAMS (Resolution 7.12) and in line with relevant activities funded by IMET within the Barcelona Convention framework (i.e. the “Mediterranean seminar on PSSAs” and the “Adriatic region workshop on PSSAs” held in Albania in December 2019). This workshop was aimed at stimulating the discussion among relevant authorities and concerned stakeholders from France, Italy, the Principality of Monaco and Spain, to progress on the PSSA proposal. In particular, two specific aspects related to any PSSA proposal were thoroughly discussed:

1. the perimeter and potential zoning that the PSSA should have, and
2. the potential associated measures identified by the scientific community (e.g., IWC 2016, Panigada *et al.* 2019).

This meeting capitalised on the progress made in two previous meetings. It presented an update on progress made particularly on understanding the specific issue of ship strikes, whose mitigation is among the priorities of the Pelagos Agreement. The Pelagos Agreement and ACCOBAMS were proposed as technical and scientific catalysts for the preparation of the final PSSA proposal.

A preparatory study for submission to the IMO, which served as a base for international exchanges for the drafting of the proposal to designate this PSSA, was prepared by Cerema<sup>2</sup>. This preparatory study allowed the preparation of a submission file in IMO format, which is currently under finalisation.

### **Current status of play on the North-Western Mediterranean PSSA**

The proposed North-Western Mediterranean PSSA includes the whole Pelagos Sanctuary and Spanish cetacean migration corridor - two Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMI) under the Barcelona

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an Associated Protective Measure as it is not something regulated by the IMO, but it can be an accompanying measure.

<sup>2</sup> Cerema (Centre for Studies and Expertise on Risks, the Environment, Mobility and Urban Planning) is the major French public agency for developing public expertise in the fields of urban planning, regional cohesion and ecological and energy transition for resilient and climate-neutral cities and regions.

Convention dedicated to cetaceans - and the 'North West Mediterranean Sea, Slope and Canyon', the 'Shelf of the Gulf of Lion' and the 'Western Ligurian Sea and Genoa Canyon' Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs). The proposed area also includes most of the existing Strait of Bonifacio PSSA.

These areas have a set of geomorphological and oceanographic features that favour productivity levels of extraordinary biological and ecological importance for the region. In particular, the proposed PSSA area overlaps important habitats for the endangered Mediterranean fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*), the endangered sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), the vulnerable Cuvier's beaked whales (*Ziphius cavirostris*), the Habitats Directive Annex II bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) and the endangered Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*). All cetacean species are also listed in Annex IV of the Habitats, Fauna and Flora Directive 92/43/EEC (animal and plant species of Community interest that require strict protection).

France, Italy, Monaco and Spain have nominated in 2022 two group of experts to finalise the draft document strengthening it based on the best available knowledge and to identify a set of proposed associated measures to be discussed with all stakeholders.

The final goal is to present the final PSSA proposal to be discussed at IMO MEPC 79 in December 2022. To this end the PSSA proposals must be submitted several months in advance to meeting (likely June 2022).

## References

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