

The Mediterranean fishing area: State of play

SUMMARY

The Mediterranean Sea boasts a particularly high biological diversity, including more than 500 fish species, many of which are unique to the region. However, several factors have contributed to the disturbance of the sea's habitats, with consequences for the living organisms and, hence, for the fisheries in the region. Pollution from land and sea sources, climate change, invasive species, overexploitation and the growing competition for space are among the main challenges.

Traditional small-scale fishing vessels make up the vast majority of the EU fleet in the Mediterranean and account for more than half of employment in the sector. The sector as a whole is at risk of losing its economic and cultural importance, given that vessels, catches, employment and profits have all been decreasing for years.

Given the high number of countries bordering the Mediterranean, it is regulated by numerous organisations and agreements in an effort to reconcile the interests of the various countries and sectors involved. The presence of numerous EU- and international-level initiatives indicates a high level of awareness regarding the problems facing the Mediterranean.

While efforts to keep the exploitation of fish stocks at a sustainable level have shown results for some species, the European Parliament has repeatedly underlined the urgent need for additional action.



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Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea is characterised by extremes: on the one hand, it is particularly rich in biodiversity, but on the other, it is disproportionately affected by detrimental factors such as pollution, overfishing and the effects of climate change. While conservation efforts at EU and international level have shown some positive results for specific species, serious environmental issues, especially the high level of pollution, persist despite decades of international awareness and cooperation. These problems affect entire ecosystems and food chains, and in the long term, they could jeopardise protection measures and thereby put natural habitats and ultimately fisheries at risk.

The Mediterranean's main characteristics

The Mediterranean is a semi-enclosed sea, connected to the Atlantic Ocean via the Strait of Gibraltar, the Black Sea via the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles Strait, and the Red Sea via the Suez Canal. It is made up of several smaller seas, each with its own name, including the Ionian Sea, the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Adriatic Sea, the Ligurian Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Alborán Sea, the Balearic Sea, the Levantine Sea and the Libyan Sea. The Mediterranean has two basins (western and eastern), which are connected via the Strait of Sicily (see Map 1). It has an average depth of about 1 500 metres, making it relatively deep. Its water is also characterised by a high degree of salinity (approximately 38 g of salt per litre), due to high evaporation from wind and sun, which rain and inflow from rivers and the less salty Atlantic Ocean cannot offset.

Map 1 – The Mediterranean Sea and the countries bordering it



Source: EPRS.

The Mediterranean is home to a particularly high number of living species and was recognised as one of the first global [biodiversity hotspots](#). It also holds the highest rate of [endemism](#) worldwide, with 20–30 % of its species not found anywhere else in the world. Seagrass meadows and Coralligene reefs are among the most iconic – and threatened – Mediterranean marine ecosystems.

The Mediterranean is bordered by more than 20 countries – including eight EU Member States – spread across three continents. Its coasts are home to more than 150 million inhabitants and comprise more than 450 ports and terminals that together account for approximately 15–30% of global sea-borne trade. During the tourist season, up to twice as many people live on the Mediterranean coasts.

Environmental challenges

While the Mediterranean is particularly rich in biodiversity, it also has a very high proportion (over 30 %) of threatened marine [habitats](#), with 21 % listed as vulnerable and 11 % as endangered. [Seagrass meadow habitats](#), for instance, which are home to many fish species, are rapidly diminishing. The loss of these habitats would have further significant impacts on ecosystems and regional fisheries.¹

Between 1950 and 2011, the Mediterranean lost around 40 % of its top predator species, including marine mammals. Fish species declined by 34 %, with consequences for the entire food web and fisheries.

Projections suggest that more than 30 endemic species will become extinct by the end of the century. Major threats for natural habitats and biological diversity in the Mediterranean include **pollution** from both land and sea sources, **climate change**, **invasive species** and **overexploitation**. More recently, **competition for space** has become another relevant factor.

Pollution

Due to the Mediterranean's natural characteristics as a semi-enclosed basin with limited water exchange, it is particularly vulnerable to the accumulation of potentially harmful substances and acts as a trap for litter. With an estimated 230 000 tonnes of land-sourced plastic leaking into the sea on a yearly basis, plastic litter accounts for 80–90 % of marine litter in the Mediterranean and has become a particularly severe problem.

The pollution sources in the region are diverse and include both land and sea-based activities ranging from waste disposal, agricultural and industrial activities, sewage discharge, intense maritime traffic, oil and gas extraction, to abandoned fishing gear and aquaculture. A 2023 [study](#) for the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development (REGI) concludes that most of the marine pollution is caused by waste production and its lack of appropriate management. Marine pollution in the Mediterranean comprises physical, chemical and biological substances, as well as emerging substances, such as nanoparticles and pharmaceuticals. Together, these are possibly affecting all organisms along the food chain, including humans.

Climate change

Temperatures in the Mediterranean region are [rising](#) 20 % faster than in the rest of the world. A rise in water [temperatures](#) has a negative impact on marine biodiversity and dependent human activities. For example, increased water temperatures worsen the living conditions for cold-water affinity species and lead to higher mortality, as migration to cooler areas is limited in an enclosed sea such as the Mediterranean. Rising temperatures in the Mediterranean could for instance jeopardise the long-term recovery of the [bluefin tuna](#) population. Furthermore, alien warm-water-affinity species can spread more easily and supersede indigenous species, with changes in ecosystems and disruptions of marine food webs as possible consequences. Moreover, [ocean acidification](#) resulting from increased CO₂ absorption by the sea can reduce the availability of calcium carbonate, making it more difficult for organisms such as corals, mussels, sponges and some plankton to produce and maintain their calcareous body parts.

Invasive species

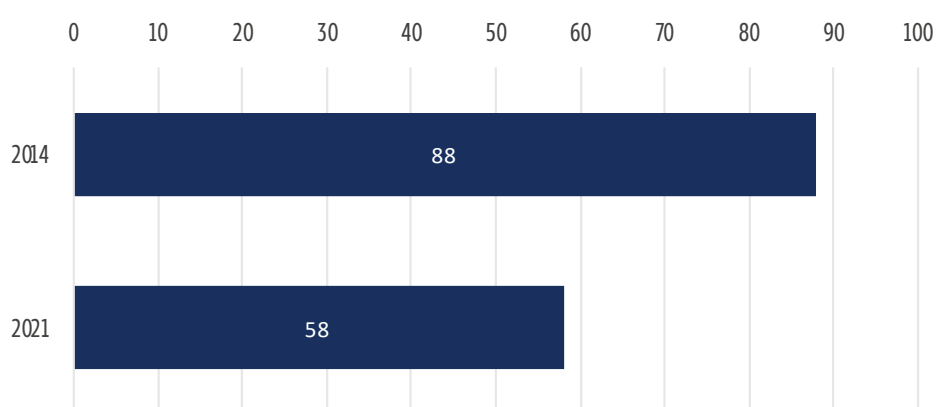
Around 1 000 non-indigenous species have been identified in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. According to a [report](#) by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), over half of them have established permanent populations and are spreading. Invasive alien species are considered one of the biggest causes of [biodiversity loss](#) and species' extinction, and can be a threat to food security. Many species have been introduced via shipping routes, such as the Strait of Gibraltar or the Suez Canal, often attached to the hull of ships or inside ballast waters. Others, such as the Pacific cupped oyster and the Japanese carpet shell, have escaped from aquaculture and

managed to colonise Mediterranean [ecosystems](#). Established populations of non-indigenous species potentially destabilise surrounding ecosystems and can have negative economic implications for fisheries, tourism or human health. On the other hand, there are also examples of invasive alien species representing new economic [opportunities](#) for commercial fishing.

Overexploitation

More than half of the fish stocks assessed in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are being fished beyond biologically sustainable limits. However, according to a 2023 FAO [report](#), the percentage of overexploited fish stocks in the region has decreased from 73 % in 2020 to 58 % in 2021.² The exploitation rate is particularly [critical](#) in the eastern Mediterranean, but a 2024 [report](#) by the environmental NGO Oceana highlights that overfishing remains an issue in the western part of the Mediterranean as well. Fish species being exploited at a critical rate include the European eel, sardine and anchovy, the European hake, the common sole, the Norway lobster, the red mullet, the deep-water shrimp and the swordfish. On the other hand, the once critically endangered [bluefin tuna](#) stocks have recovered considerably since 2006. Although the full extent of illegal, unreported and unregulated ([IUU](#)) fishing in the Mediterranean is not yet known, it can be assumed that its impact on fish stocks and marine resources is considerable.

Figure 1 – Percentage of overexploited stocks in the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) area of application,* 2014–2021



Data source: FAO, [The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries](#) 2023, p. 23.

*NB: The GFCM area of application covers the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and their connecting waters.

Competition for space

In the context of the [Blue Economy](#), the Mediterranean Sea, like other marine waters, is under growing pressure to accommodate a number of space-demanding activities. Economic sectors such as fisheries and aquaculture, shipping, wind farms, coastal tourism and oil and gas extraction, have to be reconciled with nature protection within a limited space. [Maritime spatial planning](#) (MSP) is an emerging requirement for the entire Mediterranean region and is essential for the implementation of the Barcelona Convention (see below). According to a 2023 [report](#) by the World Wildlife Fund, the EU's maritime spatial planning in the Mediterranean, as reflected in the implementation of the relevant [legislation](#) is lagging behind. The report points in particular to a lack of consistency at the national level that may jeopardise the overall goal of achieving a sustainable balance between nature³ and human activities.

Fisheries in the Mediterranean in figures

The EU's Mediterranean [fishing fleet](#) consists of over 30 000 vessels, accounting for 42 % of all EU vessels in 2022. The Italian and Greek fleets each make up about one third of this total.⁴ In terms of landings measured in weight, the Italian fleet is the most dominant (39.1 %), followed by Croatia (18.9 %), Spain (18.4 %) and Greece (17.5%). These four countries, together with France, account for 99 % of the total landed weight and almost 98 % of the value of landings from the EU Mediterranean basin.

Collectively, in 2022 the Mediterranean fleet contributed 9 % of the EU landings in weight and 23 % in value.

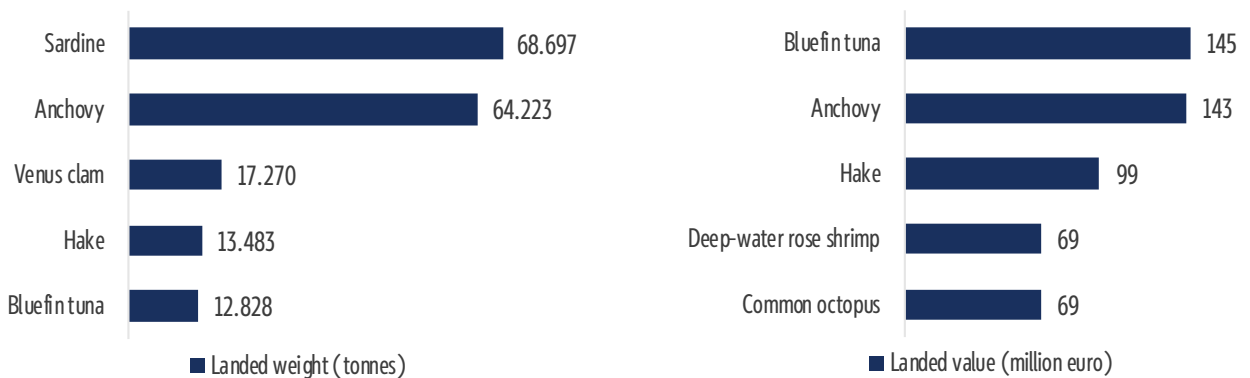
In 2022, there was a decrease in the overall number of vessels and jobs by 4 % and 12.4 %, respectively, compared to 2021. Similarly, the weight and value of landings decreased by 1 % and 7 % respectively, compared to 2021.

Small-scale vessels make up 80 % of the total EU fishing fleet in the Mediterranean, creating more than half of the employment in Mediterranean fisheries. These small-scale operations rely on [slim profit](#) margins and limited social protection benefits, as they are typically family-based enterprises.

The **large-scale fleet** makes up around 20 % of the EU's Mediterranean fleet, with Italy, Spain, Croatia and Greece accounting for the highest share. Large-scale vessels contributed 85 % of the landings' weight and 73.5 % of the landings' value in 2022. The main large-scale fleet vessels are Italian, Spanish and Greek demersal trawlers between 12 and 40 metres.

In 2022, the main species (by landed weight) were the **European pilchard** (sardine) followed by the **European anchovy**, **the striped Venus**, **the European hake** and the **Atlantic bluefin tuna**. By value, the most landed species were the Atlantic bluefin tuna, the European anchovy, the European hake, the deep-water rose shrimp, the common octopus and the European pilchard.

Figure 2 – Top five species in landed weight and value, for EU Member States' fleets operating in the Mediterranean (tonnes, €)



Data source: The 2024 annual economic report on the EU fishing fleet (STECF 24-07), 2024, p. 148.

Management and main legislation

EU fishing activities in the Mediterranean are subject to the EU's common fisheries policy ([CFP](#)), which aims to ensure that EU fisheries are sustainable from an environmental, economic and social point of view. The transboundary impacts of maritime activities in the Mediterranean also call for cooperation between EU and non-EU Mediterranean partners.

Mediterranean fish stocks management under the CFP has started quite recently,⁵ and a number of measures result from decisions taken at international level.

The long-term management of fish stocks under the CFP is reflected, in particular, in [multiannual plans](#). The overall objective of these plans is to restore and maintain fish stocks above levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield, i.e., the highest amount of fish that can be taken from a stock without affecting its reproduction.

For the Mediterranean, the multiannual plan for the fisheries exploiting [demersal stocks in the western Mediterranean Sea](#) was adopted in 2019. It covers six marine species: the blue and red shrimp, the deep-water rose shrimp, the giant red shrimp, the European hake, the Norway lobster, and the red mullet.⁶

A multiannual plan on small pelagic fisheries in the Adriatic Sea, proposed in 2017, was [withdrawn](#) by the Commission in 2020. Instead, such a plan is now managed at the level of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM – see below).

Furthermore, every year, the Council sets catch limits (fishing opportunities) for the following year. The setting of **total annual fishing opportunities** (i.e. catch and fishing effort limitations) for a particular geographical area is a prerogative of the Council and is not subject to the ordinary legislative procedure. The fishing opportunities take into account multiannual plans and international obligations.

Given the multitude of countries bordering the Mediterranean, the management of fish resources requires international cooperation at a regional level, which is reflected in particular in the EU's membership in [regional fisheries management organisations](#) (RFMOs). For Mediterranean fisheries, the EU's participation in the [General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean](#) (GFCM) is of particular importance. This organisation, under the auspices of the FAO, has the authority to adopt compulsory decisions, which the EU as a contracting party is bound to transpose into EU law. The GFCM draws up multiannual management plans aimed at ensuring the sustainable exploitation of fishery resources. It furthermore establishes fisheries restricted areas to protect specific stocks, habitats and deep-sea ecosystems. The GFCM has already adopted 11 [multiannual plans](#) in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In the context of the GFCM, the EU is a party to the 2017 [MedFish4Ever declaration](#), an agreement between Mediterranean countries aimed at improving the sustainability and welfare of the fisheries and aquaculture sector, as well as the conservation of Mediterranean marine ecosystems.

The EU is also a contracting party to the RFMO [International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas](#) (ICCAT), responsible, among others, for the management of the stocks of Atlantic bluefin tuna and swordfish in the Mediterranean. Like the GFCM, ICCAT adopts decisions for the fisheries resources under its purview, which the EU as a member has to transpose into EU law. With regard to fish stocks in the Mediterranean, ICCAT has adopted a multiannual management plan⁷ for the bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and a multiannual recovery plan for the Mediterranean swordfish.

Furthermore, the EU is a contracting party to the [Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean](#) (the 'Barcelona Convention'), adopted in 1976 under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme's [Mediterranean Action Plan](#). Together with its seven implementing protocols, the Barcelona Convention constitutes the principal regional legally binding [Multilateral Environmental Agreement](#) in the Mediterranean.

The role of European Parliament

The European Parliament has played an important role as a co-legislator in the field of fisheries' management in the Mediterranean. Below is an overview of Parliament's most significant achievements in recent years.

On 20 June 2019, Parliament, together with the Council, adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/1022](#) establishing a multiannual plan for fisheries exploiting demersal stocks in the western Mediterranean

Sea. This regulation is the only multiannual plan for the Mediterranean established at the EU level since the Commission withdrew its [proposal](#) for small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic Sea in 2020.

Additionally, Parliament has adopted legislation that transposes decisions by international fisheries organisations (more specifically ICCAT and GFCM) to which the EU is a contracting party, into EU law.

On 20 June 2019, Parliament and the Council adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/1154](#) on a multiannual recovery plan for Mediterranean swordfish. It transposes the ICCAT multiannual recovery plan for swordfish in the Mediterranean Sea into EU law.

On 13 September 2023, Parliament and the Council adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2053](#) establishing a multiannual management plan for bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean, transposing the ICCAT eastern bluefin tuna management plan into EU law.

On 4 October 2023, Parliament and the Council adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2124](#) on certain provisions for fishing in the GFCM Agreement area.

On 13 March 2024, Parliament adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/897](#) amending Regulation (EU) 2017/2107 laying down management, conservation and control measures applicable in the Convention area of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and Regulation (EU) 2023/2053 establishing a multiannual management plan for bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, Parliament has highlighted its position in several resolutions on subjects related to Mediterranean fisheries.

In its [resolution](#) of 25 March 2021 on the impact on fisheries of marine litter, MEPs highlighted the serious threat marine litter poses to marine animal species, fishermen and consumers.

In its [resolution](#) of 6 October 2021 on rebuilding fish stocks in the Mediterranean: assessment and next steps, Parliament stressed that the high proportion of overexploited fish stocks in the Mediterranean requires more action to preserve biodiversity and ensure the survival of the fishing sector.

A January 2023 [resolution](#) focused on the situation of small-scale fisheries in the EU, referring repeatedly to the situation in the Mediterranean.

On 18 January 2024, in a [resolution](#) on the EU Action Plan: protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries, MEPs stated that more progress is required in EU marine ecosystems, particularly in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

Outlook

On 30 April 2024, the Commission published a [proposal](#) on certain provisions for fishing in the GFCM Agreement area. The proposal is meant to transpose GFCM measures adopted in 2021 and 2022 into EU law. It addresses issues related to the sustainable conservation and management of fisheries as well as the impact of fishing activities on certain marine species in the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas. The proposal includes measures for fisheries targeting small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic Sea.

On 16 September 2024, the Commission submitted its [proposal](#) for a Council regulation on fixing the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Mediterranean and Black Seas for 2025. The proposal includes measures for the continued implementation of fishing measures established in the [Western Mediterranean MAP for demersal stocks](#), which will become permanent as of 1 January 2025. Additionally, the proposal includes GFCM measures agreed upon in 2023, such as the MAP for the common dolphinfish and the extension of the GFCM plans for the blackspot seabream and the deep-water shrimp. It also includes steps for the implementation of the GFCM MAPs for demersal and small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic Sea.

Further decisions regarding the red coral and the European eel, as well as the implementation of the Adriatic MAPs, are expected after the GFCM annual session in November 2024.

On 9-10 December 2024 the Council will establish the allocation of fishing opportunities to be applied as of 1 January 2025.

MAIN REFERENCES

Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean: [The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries 2023](#) – Special edition, Rome 2023.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Mediterranean Action Plan and Plan Bleu: [State of the Environment and Development in the Mediterranean](#), Nairobi 2020.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Moreover, a loss could also contribute to a [climate](#) cascade, as seagrass meadows can store up to twice as much carbon as the world's temperate and tropical forests.
- ² Representing the lowest rate observed since the trend in overexploitation was first reversed a decade ago.
- ³ According to the report, less than 10 % of the Mediterranean Sea is covered by protected areas, while the EU biodiversity strategy strives for at least 30 % of European marine and coastal areas to have protected status by 2030.
- ⁴ The figures reflect the representation of EU vessels in the Mediterranean Sea. Taking into account the total number of fishing vessels in the area, the four leading countries are Tunisia, Greece, Italy and Türkiye, which together make up 58 % of the [total fishing fleet](#).
- ⁵ The first technical measures were introduced in 1994, while the real management policy for the Mediterranean fish stocks started applying only in [2006](#).
- ⁶ In July 2024, a first [implementation report](#) was published.
- ⁷ Replacing the bluefin tuna recovery plan when the respective measures showed positive results.

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