

The operational aim of the first phase was to prepare a list of Mediterranean marine areas lying in the open seas, including the deep seas, that could be, wholly or partially, candidates for the SPAMI List.

In this context, operational criteria were crafted to further adapt the criteria for the choice of areas that could be included in the SPAMI List to the specific issues of open sea areas, including the deep seas. On the basis of these criteria, a biogeographic classification process was conducted to identify priority conservation areas.

Definition of the operational criteria for identifying potential SPAMIs in the open seas, including the deep seas

The common criteria for selecting Protected Marine and Coastal Areas that could be included in the SPAMI List appear in Annex I to the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean. These criteria were adopted by the Meeting of Plenipotentiaries held in Monaco on 24 November 1996.

In terms of operational prospects, RAC/SPA considered other pertinent ecological criteria, among them:

- Criteria adopted in 2008 by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to identify marine areas of ecological or biological importance that should be protected in open sea water and the habitats of the ocean depths;

- A set of criteria to identify habitats of importance for Mediterranean fisheries, taking into account the new orientations promoted within the framework of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) for establishing Fisheries Restricted Areas, including in the high sea.

These operational criteria, as validated by the Project's Steering Committee, are organized in four main categories:

i.- General criteria: According to the SPA/BD Protocol, to be eligible for inclusion on the SPAMI List, an area must meet at least one of the general criteria listed in Article 8 Paragraph 2 of the SPA/BD Protocol

ii.- Criteria concerning the area's regional value: According to the SPA/BD Protocol, regional value is a basic condition for an area's being put on the SPAMI List. The criteria for this category must therefore permit in-depth assessment of the ecological features of the area that is a candidate to be an SPAMI

iii.- Criteria concerning scientific, educational or aesthetic interest: The SPA/BD Protocol sets out criteria that take into consideration the main aspects related to the site's knowledge

and landscape value

iv.- Other features and factors that are seen as favourable: These include criteria that concern the reduction/neutralisation of threats and the opportunities for ecosystem management of the Protected Areas, including the possibility of the public's and local communities' participation in managing the area. These criteria are divided into:

- **Sustainable use criteria:** The criteria listed in this category aim at assessing (i) the threats engendered by human activities to the marine environment and the use of the marine environment and the living resources of the area, and (ii) the importance of the area for human well-being, including the sustainable use of living marine resources and the other services provided by the ecosystems

- **Feasibility criteria:** These criteria aim at assessing the constraints that could occur in the process of preparing the proposal of a SPAMI and in implementing protection and management measures. These criteria include geopolitical issues, conflicts of sovereignty, customary use and logistical aspects.

These adapted operational criteria were used in the process of identifying priority conservation areas.

Implementation of a biogeographic classification process

In 2009, the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention adopted the “Regional working programme for the coastal and marine protected areas in the Mediterranean including the high seas” which aims to support the establishment of a comprehensive and coherent Mediterranean network of coastal and marine protected areas.

To achieve that objective, the regional working programme provides a three-step hierarchical planning approach:

1 – At the widest scale, that of the Mediterranean basin, the first stage recommended when designing an ecological network to identify large-scale ecological units. The aim is to recognize the ecological distinctions between the different parts of the Mediterranean Sea.

2 – At the next level, priority conservation areas must be identified within each ecological unit; these areas do not constitute MPAs as such but are focal areas for networks of individual MPAs. These areas can present high biodiversity or marine species of conservation concern (vulnerable or rare species or species with high marine value) or can offer a unique or unusual combination of marine habitats.

3 – Once these priority conservation areas have been identified, it is possible to start the task of identifying sites to develop real ecological networks. The individual MPAs within these networks must protect what is ecologically most important, and must highlight habitats in which a concentration of ecological processes leads to high species diversity. To become a network it is not only necessary to create MPAs to protect these key areas but also to maintain the ecological links between them.

Following this methodological approach, the first two stages were completed in the Project's first phase; the Mediterranean was divided up into big ecological units and priority conservation areas were identified. The aim of the Project's second phase will be to finish off the last phase and lead to the identifying of MPAs with a view to developing ecological networks.

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