

Recommendation GFCM/44/2021/14

on the mitigation of fisheries impacts for the conservation of sea turtles

The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM),

RECALLING that the objective of the Agreement for the establishment of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM Agreement) is to ensure the conservation and sustainable use, at the biological, social, economic and environmental level, of marine living resources in the GFCM area of application;

CONSIDERING that the incidental catch of sea turtle species in relation to fishing activities may seriously affect sea turtle populations in the GFCM area of application;

RECALLING the recommendations by the second performance review of the GFCM to develop conservation measures and management plans, making full use of the science-policy interface provided by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries (SAC), and to initiate, within five years, appropriate interim management measures to conserve fisheries, stocks and habitats targeted by the different fisheries, comprising the small-scale fisheries sector;

RECALLING the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean (SPA/BD Protocol) of the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention) and the listing of several marine reptile species occurring in the convention area therein;

RECALLING Recommendation GFCM/29/2005/3 prohibiting the use of driftnets for fisheries of large pelagic species and Recommendation GFCM/35/2011/4 on the incidental catch of sea turtles in fisheries in the GFCM area of application;

RECALLING the GFCM 2030 Strategy for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, in particular its Output 1.3 “Efficient area-based conservation measures, technical and nature-based solutions strengthened to conserve biodiversity and enhance the productivity of marine living resources” that “also addresses the use of other area-based management measures as well as bycatch- and impact-reduction technical measures, such as those aimed at improving fishing selectivity, deterring depredation and decreasing the mortality of incidentally caught vulnerable species;

RECALLING that the 2017 Malta MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration requires, in the context of establishing an ecosystem-based fisheries management framework, to ensure adequate protection of vulnerable species and sensitive habitats;

AIMING to reduce the bycatch of sea turtles in the GFCM area of application, thus contributing to improve the conservation status of these animals, in line with an ecosystem approach to fisheries management;

RECOGNIZING the need to collect more data and technical information in order to fully assess the advantages and risks associated with the possible adoption of other types of measures modifying the characteristics of fishing gear, as well as any other potential impact on fishing activities;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the conclusions of the second meeting of the Working Group on Fishing Technology (online, April 2021) and, in particular, the need to increase the selectivity of fishing gear to reduce bycatch and ensure a better conservation status of sea turtles;

ADOPTS, in conformity with Articles 5 b), 8 b) and 13 of the GFCM Agreement, the following recommendation:

PART I Objectives

1. Contracting parties and cooperating non-contracting parties (CPCs) shall encourage further actions to improve the conservation status of sea turtle species and measures to mitigate or eliminate the risk of incidental catch of sea turtles in fishing operations and/or the associated mortality.
2. The CPCs shall enhance the reporting of data and information on the incidental catch rates of sea turtles in line with the technical manual of the GFCM Data Collection Reference Framework (DCRF).
3. The CPCs are encouraged to take the necessary steps to implement existing legislation and mitigation measures to mitigate and, where possible, eliminate the incidental catch of sea turtles during fishing operations, such as but not limited to:
 - fishing gear modifications and alternative fishing gear types;
 - time-area fishing restrictions and closures, such as those based for instance on spatial recognition measures to identify sea turtle presence;
 - improvements in fishing gear marking and detection, including acoustic reflectivity, such as the use of coloured nets, light passive reflectors, thicker twine diameter, corks or other materials within the net, metal compounds that have acoustic detection features such as barium sulfate, and illuminating nets with battery-operated light sticks;
 - implementation of maximum potential bycatch thresholds and use of turtle excluder devices with sorting and shepherding devices; and
 - modifications in fishing behaviour and strategies, such as reduced soaking time, retrieving gear during daytime and setting hooks deeper than turtles most common depth range (40–100 metres).
4. The CPCs are encouraged to facilitate the implementation of measures to avoid entanglement during depredation activity and to reduce post-release mortality, through appropriate guidelines¹ and training.
5. In 2026 at the latest, the CPCs shall notify to the GFCM Secretariat at least two mitigation measures adopted pursuant to paragraphs 3 and 4 in order to improve the conservation status of sea turtles, mitigate and, where possible, eliminate the risk of incidental catch of sea turtles during fishing operations and the associated mortality. In this regard, the areas and fleets with higher risks of interactions should be taken into consideration.

PART II Scientific monitoring, adaptation and revision

6. The SAC shall compile, assess and evaluate all available data and information collected under the DCRF pursuant to Recommendation GFCM/35/2011/4 as well as any source of additional information including, but not limited to, scientific literature, surveys at sea and research projects.

¹ FAO and ACCOBAMS. 2019. *Good practice guide for the handling of sea turtles caught incidentally in Mediterranean fisheries*. Leaflet. (available at <http://www.fao.org/3/i8951en/I8951EN.pdf>)

7. Upon request of CPCs and with the assistance of the GFCM Secretariat, the GFCM shall establish, in 2023 at the latest, pilot projects with a view to strengthening existing observation and monitoring programmes to collect additional data and ensure compliance with the conservation and management measures contained in this recommendation.
8. At its twenty-sixth session in 2025, the SAC shall report to the GFCM on the progress accomplished thereon and on identified gaps in knowledge and provide the necessary elements for setting out future measures to enhance the conservation of sea turtle populations in the GFCM area of application.
9. At its forty-eighth session in 2025, upon receipt of advice from the SAC, the GFCM may consider, if appropriate, adopting further measures allowing for the achievement of the objectives of this recommendation.
10. The provisions contained in this recommendation are without prejudice to additional or stricter measures adopted or that could be adopted by the CPCs.

