

Resolution GFCM/44/2021/3

on a roadmap for the establishment of a fisheries restricted area in the southern Adriatic Sea (geographical subarea 18)

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 all measures formulated by the GFCM shall be based on the best scientific advice available, taking into account relevant environmental, economic and social factors;

CONSIDERING that the GFCM shall apply the precautionary approach in accordance with the United Nations Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks of 4 August 1995 and the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO);

FURTHER CONSIDERING that the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries provides that states “should apply a precautionary approach widely to conservation, management and exploitation of living aquatic resources in order to protect them and preserve the aquatic environment, taking account of the best scientific evidence available. The absence of adequate scientific information should not be used as a reason for postponing or failing to take measures to conserve target species, associated or dependent species and non-target species and their environment”;

HAVING REGARD to Article 8 b) ii) of the GFCM Agreement aiming to minimize the impacts of fishing activities on marine living resources and their ecosystems;

HAVING REGARD to Article 8 b) iv) of the GFCM Agreement aiming “to establish fisheries restricted areas for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems, including, but not limited to, nursery and spawning areas ...”;

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 identifies “new fisheries restricted areas and, once established, enhances their efficiency and monitoring in order to manage the significant adverse impacts of fisheries on vulnerable species, ecosystems and essential fish habitats”;

FURTHER RECALLING the 2017 Malta MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration, in particular its paragraph 38 whereby the signatories commit to further develop fisheries restricted areas and marine protected areas;

CONSIDERING that an ecologically or biologically significant area under the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity has been identified in the southern Adriatic Sea;

NOTING the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 14 “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources” and Target 14.5 “By 2020, conserve at least 10 percent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information”;

NOTING Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5 on a multiannual management plan for sustainable demersal fisheries in the Adriatic Sea (geographical subareas 17 and 18) and the high overexploitation of these stocks as identified by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries (SAC) at its twenty-second session (online, June 2021);

FURTHER NOTING in particular the critical state of European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) due to a low biomass in the recent years;

RECALLING the importance of protecting vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) and essential fish habitats (EFHs) as well as juvenile phases and areas of spawner aggregations in order to support the objective of reaching maximum sustainable yield by 2026 for the key Adriatic demersal stocks managed under Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5;

RECALLING paragraph 22 of Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5, which requires that fisheries restricted areas (FRAs) shall be established for the conservation and management of stocks in the Adriatic Sea;

FURTHER RECALLING that relevant contracting parties and cooperating non-contracting parties (CPCs) should possibly submit the necessary data for the evaluation of FRAs at the latest one month ahead of the session of the Subregional Committee for the Adriatic Sea (SRC-AS) and support the work for the assessment of FRAs in line with the roadmap outlined in Annex 2 of Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5;

CONSIDERING that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRC-AS could not be convened in 2020 and the roadmap in Annex 2 of Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5 could not be followed;

FURTHER CONSIDERING that the SAC, at its twenty-second session, reiterated the importance of establishing new FRAs in the Adriatic Sea and recommended developing a roadmap to this end;

ADOPTS, in conformity with Articles 5 and 8 of the GFCM Agreement, the following resolution:

1. The GFCM Secretariat, with the support of relevant CPCs, should launch, in 2022, a pilot project to underpin the biology and ecology of bamboo coral in the Adriatic Sea, including a quantification of the interactions between *Isidella* and bottom contact fisheries and the determination of their footprint, within the framework of the Working Group on Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems, including a session on essential fish habitats.

2. The GFCM Secretariat, with the support of relevant CPCs, should support, in 2023, the implementation of the roadmap towards the establishment of an FRA in the southern Adriatic (geographical subarea 18) as outlined in paragraph 3.

3. The CPCs should implement technical actions to advance towards complying with the requirements of Recommendation GFCM/43/2019/5 with a view to establishing additional FRAs in the southern Adriatic, including:

- a) investigating the monitoring activities needed to identify a possible FRA (fleet behaviours, impacts on sea bottom, observers on board) in the southern part of geographical subarea 18;
- b) implementing an ad hoc socio-economic survey covering the fleets operating in the area;
- c) designing an ad hoc scientific survey for a better definition of VMEs to identify a possible FRA; and
- d) ensuring that the key components of a future proposal include VMEs, EFHs, spatial fishing fleet dynamics and socio-economic impacts, as provided by the national administrations.

4. In 2023, on the basis of the data collected under paragraph 3, CPCs should jointly evaluate the possibility of establishing an FRA with the aim of protecting relevant VMEs and EFHs identified, following a bottom-up approach and engaging with relevant stakeholders.
5. In 2023, the GFCM Secretariat should organize, ahead of the SRC-AS meeting, a workshop with scientists and stakeholders to discuss the preparation of an FRA proposal, with a view to achieving the objectives of paragraph 4.
6. In 2023, the SAC should evaluate the possible FRA proposal in the southern Adriatic Sea and the GFCM should examine such proposal at its annual session in 2023.