

Governance shift required for the world's first high seas MPA, the Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals

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What is the Pelagos Sanctuary?

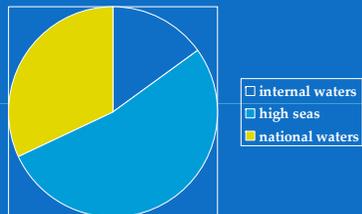
The Pelagos Sanctuary, a large protected area trilaterally declared by France, Italy and Monaco for the conservation of marine mammals, extends over 87,500 km² of Mediterranean waters – in large part in the high seas - between south-eastern France, Monaco, north-western Italy and northern Sardinia.

The Sanctuary illustrates how MPA design can be reconciled with the dynamic nature of oceanic systems, because its spatial scale was defined by the location of the Ligurian permanent frontal system (red line, below):



The Pelagos Sanctuary was initially designated due to the fact that it was discovered as being a key area for Mediterranean cetaceans.

More than 50% of Pelagos Sanctuary's waters lie in the Mediterranean high seas, in areas beyond national jurisdiction:



Marine mammals calling Pelagos home



The Sanctuary contains important foraging and breeding habitats for the entire complement of cetaceans regularly occurring in the Mediterranean, supports resident, genetically distinct populations, and provides "umbrella" protection to other marine predators. In addition, the Sanctuary contains what was once suitable habitat for the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal.

What threatens cetacean survival in the area

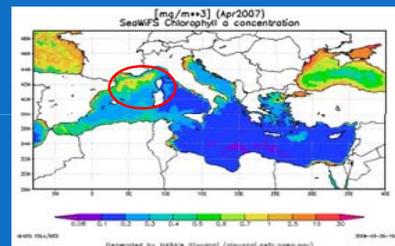
Cetacean populations living in the Pelagos Sanctuary are threatened by intense human pressures mostly deriving from:

- fisheries,
- shipping,
- military exercises,
- coastal construction,
- industrial and agricultural activities onshore.

What is special about the Pelagos Sanctuary

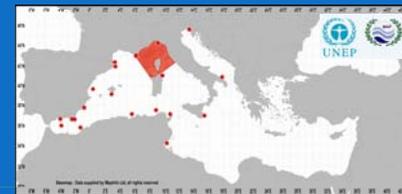
The landmark Pelagos Agreement, which came into force in 2002, resulted in the world's first high seas MPA, and was thus met with much acclaim in the marine conservation community.

The Pelagos Sanctuary was designed to protect the cetacean species that rely on the food supported by the productive pelagic waters, having the highest primary productivity anywhere in the Mediterranean:



The regional significance of the Pelagos Sanctuary

Having been adopted as a *Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance* (SPAMI) by the Barcelona Convention in 2001, the Sanctuary's tenets apply to most Mediterranean riparian countries beyond the three original signatories of the Agreement, thereby extending *de facto* protection to the Mediterranean High Seas.



SPAMIs in 2009

What could the Pelagos Sanctuary achieve

Effectively mitigating threats to cetacean survival in the area would require, among other things:

- creating a zoning scheme to mediate amongst conflicting uses and needs,
- establishing precise regulations to address and mitigate impacts exerted on the local cetacean populations by pressures deriving from human disturbance, shipping, noise, chemical pollution, and bycatch,
- implementing a regular monitoring programme,
- ensuring that regulations are enforced.

Why is this not happening?

In the seven years since its establishment, the Pelagos Sanctuary has failed to fulfil its main goal of significantly improving the conservation status of the area's marine mammal populations.

Management and conservation actions within Sanctuary waters are severely limited by the unwillingness of the Agreement's Contracting Parties to mandate such actions to an adequately empowered management body, endowed with sufficient means and human resources.

Currently, in a condition of vagueness about roles and responsibilities, management functions are demanded from the Agreement's Secretariat, which is powerless and cannot function as a surrogate management body.

Beacon for Mediterranean protection or failed park?

The Pelagos Sanctuary represents an extraordinary opportunity for innovative marine conservation in the Mediterranean and elsewhere.

Under a broader perspective, the Sanctuary Agreement can be seen as an element of the trend towards a closer cooperation among Mediterranean States in the exercise of a "prime responsibility" for the environmental preservation of their common regional heritage.

The Agreement took over a decade of lengthy negotiations to come into force; now however, without a strong political impulse to make it work, the risk of failure is ever-increasing.

Conclusion and recommendations

To avoid the failure of Pelagos, amending the Agreement is recommended, or adding to it a specific Protocol, to strengthen management action by giving an *ad hoc* body a clear mandate and the necessary human and financial resources.

A *Maritime Spatial Planning* approach currently envisaged by the EC could further buoy the "spirit" of the Pelagos Agreement, whereby a valuable pelagic ecosystem is protected while allowing the orderly coexistence of infeasible human activities in the area.

This might eventually contribute to bring back to life the political will that existed at the time of the Pelagos' negotiations.

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