BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR MEDITERRANEAN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES
THE RPOA-SSF IN ACTION
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WWF

WWF is an independent conservation organisation, with more than 35 million followers and a global network active through local leadership in over 100 countries. WWF’s mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world’s biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

Cover Image: Small-scale fisherman, Greece
In addition, until small-scale fishing © Claudia Amico / WWF Mediterranean

2. https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/Midterm-strategy/Target%202/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fmidterm%2Dstrategy%2FTarget%202%2FHigh%2DLevel%2DConference%2020%2FSSF%2FPRPOA%2FSigned%2020%20RPOA%2DSSF%202021%20inc%3DEgypt%2Dpdf&parent=%2Fmidterm%2Dstrategy%2FTarget%202%2FHigh%2DLevel%2DConference%2020%2FSSF%2FPRPOA&p=true&ga=1
3. Resolution GFMC/45/2022/3 on the implementation of the Regional Plan of Action for
5. https://www.wwfmmi.org/what_we_do/fisheries/transforming_small_scale_fisheries/

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INTRODUCTION

A unique tool to support small-scale fishers

Travel round the small-scale fishing communities of the Mediterranean, and – despite the many different people you’ll meet and cultures you’ll experience – you’ll hear the same stories everywhere you go. Increasing environmental pressures and structural economic obstacles mean it’s a daily challenge to make a living in this fast-changing sea.

The Regional Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea (RPOA-SSF)\(^1\) is designed to be a game-changer. Launched by a Ministerial Declaration\(^2\) signed by 18 countries and the European Union in 2018 and endorsed again by the GFCM 2030 Strategy and a GFCM resolution\(^3\) in 2022, it sets the course to an environmentally, ecologically and socially sustainable future for small-scale fisheries in the region.

It adapts the global Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) Guidelines\(^4\) to suit the specific conditions in the Mediterranean, and is a historic – and globally unique – tool and political commitment to support small-scale fishers.

Historically, small-scale fishers have had little or no say in the decisions that have affected their livelihoods, and their interests have been widely ignored even as the challenges they face have multiplied. But the RPOA-SSF puts the fishers back at the heart of things. It identifies the most pressing issues they face, and it explores what fishers can do in response – and how other stakeholders can support them.

WWF is running projects at more than 30 sites in 10 Mediterranean countries\(^5\) to drive wider adoption of the RPOA-SSF. Here is a summary of the themes it targets, the solutions it aims to enable, and some real-world examples of how it’s working in the field.
Sustainable fisheries management depends on science – and science starts with research. The more that’s understood about the interactions between small-scale fishers and marine resources, the more effectively those resources can be managed. Research can also throw light on the socioeconomic aspects of the SSF sector, showing its impact on communities and giving focus to much-needed social protection measures for fishers and their families.

The RPOA-SSF calls for more research on SSF interactions with other sectors like recreational fisheries, and on environmental considerations such as reducing bycatch of vulnerable species, and how climate change and invasive species are changing marine ecosystems and the fisheries that depend on them.

Crucially, the RPOA-SSF recognizes the importance of the fishers themselves being involved in monitoring, using their invaluable ‘local ecological knowledge’ wherever possible. They have an enormous amount to contribute, because they spend more time than anyone else out on the water.

WWF and other stakeholders are working directly with small-scale fishers on research programmes around the Mediterranean.

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Video: The scampi of the Velebit Channel, Croatia
A frequent problem for SSF is a lack of visibility in fisheries management planning. Not all Mediterranean countries maintain complete registers of small-scale vessels, and catches frequently go unrecorded. Data on shore-based activities is scarce, and the contribution of women is widely overlooked.

This lack of information is a big obstacle to design and develop sustainable management, and it means that fishers can be left statistically invisible, excluded from decisions that affect them. In addition, until small-scale fishing effort is comprehensively quantified, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing will be impossible to fully detect and control. It’s essential that SSF are fully integrated into national fleet registers, data collection systems, and multi-annual plans.

Quality data is a key requirement in designing and monitoring effective marine protected areas (MPAs). Catch data from local fishers is needed to inform planning and adaptive management, and economic data can help balance trade-offs between conservation objectives and community livelihoods.

- Digital innovation to support small-scale fishers in the Mediterranean in data collection
- The green box system now collects data on vessel movement in all Spanish SSF
- The Starfish 4.0 project pilots vessel tracking and eLog books in Greece
Properly managing fisheries is key to secure a sustainable future, and the GFCM resolution on RPOA-SSF states that SSF should be formally included in existing and new long-term management plans at regional level. Beyond maintaining healthy stock levels, preserving essential habitats is important, as are efforts to minimize discards and the bycatch of vulnerable species. When best practices are identified, they need to be shared – a resilient sea is good for everyone.

Getting fishers involved in planning management measures is the best way of ensuring successful outcomes, and their sense of ownership over the adopted measures boosts compliance. Their local knowledge can be the decisive factor in creating effective spatial protection. And it’s the fishers who are best placed to spearhead participatory monitoring, control and surveillance schemes – for adaptive management, and to combat IUU fishing.

SSF are relatively low-impact, so it’s really important that they can compete on an equitable basis. Management needs to ensure that small-scale fishers have access rights to fishing grounds; and well equipped landing sites where they can moor up, ice their catches, and transfer them directly into an efficient distribution infrastructure.

IUCN shares successful management solutions for SSF in MPAs

Fishers and authorities work together to co-manage protected areas

Small-scale fishers from across the Mediterranean learn about participatory surveillance schemes in Türkiye

Video: Guardians of the Sea
Current markets favour large-scale production, leaving SSF at a disadvantage – but by looking again at the SSF value chain, fishers are finding new ways of increasing the value of their catch. The RPOA-SSF encourages innovative approaches and direct SSF involvement in sales, with fishers joining up in cooperatives to reduce their reliance on middlemen.

WWF is working with fishing communities on a wide variety of value chain projects, and successful ideas are beginning to spread. In some locations fishers have formed producers’ associations and created certified brands to guarantee the quality and sustainability of their products, like in Spain where QR codes allow shoppers to trace individual fish back to the boats that caught them. In others, fishers can post their catches in real time on an app for buyers before the boat is even back in port. Fish box delivery schemes are increasing.

New revenue streams can be created too, by diversifying markets to make the most of local produce – including the invasive species that are spreading through Mediterranean fisheries and unbalancing established ecosystems. We’re helping fishers to work with processors to develop new products, with town halls to run regional seafood festivals, with chefs to put new local dishes on menus.

Spanish fishers develop quality assurance labelling scheme

Abalobi app brings shoppers on board to buy straight from the source

‘Worthless’ fish turned into new product for local markets

Video: How SSF value chain modernisation has led to substantial development in Spain
Historically, fisheries management has been a centralised process in most parts of the Mediterranean, with the small-scale fishers who the decisions would affect shut out of the process. This meant that fishers were unable to contribute any of their considerable expertise into management planning, despite their first-hand experience of local fisheries built up over generations.

Compliance, too, was frequently a problem: when decisions are imposed without any consultation with the people they’re going to affect, unpopular rules may well get ignored. The centralised governance structure also left fishers unable to flag up issues that were affecting them, meaning the issues stayed unaddressed.

Co-management – where fishers are brought into the heart of the decision-making process – is a totally different approach, and encouraging it is one of the main aims of the RPOA-SSF. The core principle is simple: to manage an area’s shared marine resources, bring all the local stakeholders together and get them to agree on how to do it most effectively. Decisions are reached by discussion, compromise and consensus.

WWF has played a leading role in the creation of co-management committees in 10 countries across the region. The model is increasing in popularity, and there’s a growing body of best-practice examples to guide its development. Since the adoption of the RPOA SSF, 43% of the countries responding to a survey in 2022 say they have now put in place co-management or similar participatory processes. However much remains to be done to embed the regional structural change at national and local level in all countries.

The RPOA-SSF identifies capacity-building as a key ingredient for a sustainable future, and singles out women and young people as being in need of particular attention. A key initiative has been the launch of the SSF Forum, a regional platform developed by the Friends of SSF (not only GFCM and WWF) where small-scale fishers can share knowledge and innovations, and get expert training in a range of important areas. Workshops were held virtually through the Covid-19 pandemic, but now the SSF Forum is moving back towards in-person courses, as well as organizing exchanges and field trips for fishers.

SSF Forum sessions have recently focused on key aspects of SSF capacity-building. These include the stakeholder-policy interface – the goal is to empower fishers to be active drivers of management and policy – as well as a focus on the next generation, to provide young people with the professional tools and training they need to succeed in the sector. How to reduce the bycatch of vulnerable species has also been in the frame for discussions at the Forum.

Investment has a big role to play in capacity-building, for new gear and onboard technology to make fishing more efficient and sustainable, to the costs of diversifying into pescatourism or some other entrepreneurial activity. For this reason WWF has been working to help small-scale fishers access money from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF 2014-2020) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF, 2021-2027), and we’ve also supported many of the business ventures they’ve launched.
From the hazards of being out on an unpredictable sea in a small craft to the health impacts of working long hours in difficult physical conditions, there are many real threats to the welfare of small-scale fishers: it’s vital that more is done to protect them both at sea and ashore – and, indeed, the families that depend on them.

Fishers need financial and technical support to ensure their vessels are properly equipped and pose no avoidable risks to crews. Growing knowledge of safer working needs to be shared through the small-scale fleet.

The issue of on-board safety is compounded by the relative lack of social protection available. Because the sector widely lacks formal employment contracts, many fishers find their ‘unofficial’ status means they’re excluded from social support structures. This makes it harder to access health, unemployment and pension services. Some Mediterranean states perform far better than others on social protection metrics for their fishers and fish workers.

There’s no quick fix for this situation, but strong and inclusive worker organisations are a good start: by joining their voices together, fishers can make a lot more noise. Detailed and reliable data is also vital: the GFCM is working to ensure that its members maintain official fleet registries with comprehensive details of their small-scale sectors, making tailored support programmes easier to create and administer.
Women fill jobs and make essential contributions all along the SSF value chain, and many male fishers depend on the (unpaid) support of their partners to make a viable living. Women take care of sales, of marketing and book-keeping; they process fish and mend gear; they diversify income streams in a myriad of ways. In some areas, women run shore-based fisheries, ‘gleaning’ for cockles and other shellfish.

But much of the work women do in the small-scale sector remains invisible, ignored in analysis that has no access to gender-disaggregated data. Many women are also excluded from legal frameworks and social protection structures, since there’s no legal definition of the ‘partner’ role they fulfil.

Gender equity is as important in small-scale fisheries as in any other sector. Women need to be able to play a full part in every way, and have their needs acknowledged and their efforts fairly compensated. The GFCM is beginning to gather gender-disaggregated data to provide the basis for targeted support programmes that address the real issues that affect women, and fully reflect the contribution they make to the SSF sector. WWF, meanwhile, is backing a number of initiatives to empower women in SSF, training them in everything from gear maintenance to pescatourism.
Climate change is everybody’s problem – and that’s even more so the case in the Mediterranean, which is warming 20% faster than the global average. Other environmental pressures – such as plastic waste, ‘ghost gear’ and chemical pollution – are also having an increasingly severe impact.

There are serious knock-on effects on marine biodiversity – and on the catches of the small-scale sector. Species that supported fishers for generations are moving to cooler waters; while more than 1,000 non-indigenous species have colonized the warming basin. Some are devastating native ecosystems. Herbivorous invaders such as rabbitfish graze down complex habitats once rich in biodiversity, displacing fish communities and leaving behind vast barren expanses. The carnivores, such as Lionfish are decimating native stocks and destroying established fisheries. Meanwhile, jellyfish are thriving, eating vast numbers of commercial fish larvae and competing with them for food.

Invasive species are here to stay and should be managed, so the RPOA-SSF is helping fishers create new markets for them. Targeting the invaders can control their numbers while providing new revenue streams, and in some areas profitable new fisheries have been created.

Just as important is to ensure ecosystems remain resilient in changing conditions. Fishers can play their part in this by fishing sustainably, as well as working on circular economy projects and other initiatives to cut down on pollution and marine litter.
OUR MISSION IS TO CONSERVE NATURE AND REDUCE THE MOST PRESSING THREATS TO THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE ON EARTH.