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# Towards a multilevel governance of ecotourism in Mediterranean Protected Areas: **Key recommendations for policy making**

*Policy brief*  
*October*  
**2019**





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tourism in the Mediterranean region is highly concentrated, both spatially and seasonally, with most visits occurring during the summer season. Mass tourism in the Mediterranean can have serious negative impacts on both nature and local communities. Ecotourism is an alternative to mass tourism and numerous initiatives around the Mediterranean are being led to develop authentic travel experiences in a respectful and low impact way.

The EU-funded DestiMED & MEET projects<sup>1</sup> have tested a pioneering model to support and leverage ecotourism for sustainable development and conservation in Mediterranean Protected areas (PAs). This model implies the engagement of local stakeholders within Local Ecotourism Clusters and the development of ecotourism packages designed according to quality and sustainability standards and harmonised monitoring methods.

The project's results and experiences have highlighted the importance of ecotourism as a valuable alternative to mass tourism for PAs in the Mediterranean. When tourism flows exceed the carrying

capacity of a destination, custom-made policies and strategies are required for mitigating the impacts of overcrowding on the environment, infrastructures, coastal and rural landscapes, islands, local communities and culture.

However, in order to ensure the transferability of the project results and build on them at larger scale for more growth and better management of ecotourism activities in Mediterranean PAs, there is a need to:

- ▶ Establish multi-level and intersectoral governance to improve the collaboration between tourism and conservation policies;
- ▶ Improve the impact monitoring processes, using harmonised concepts, standards and methodologies;
- ▶ Promote sustainable ecotourism products at larger scale through training and private / public partnership at local level.

<sup>1</sup>MEET (Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism) project, financed by the ENPI-CBC- MED Programme in 2011-2015, continued in 2016-2019 with the DestiMED project financed by the Interreg MED Programme.



# TOURISM TRENDS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION AND IMPACTS ON COASTAL AND MARINE ENVIRONMENTS SUMMARY

According to the UN World Tourism Organisation, the Mediterranean region receives more than 300 million international tourist arrivals annually - half of these arrivals being in coastal areas - and is currently experiencing a growth rate of over 7% per annum in southern European Mediterranean countries<sup>2</sup>, which receive 193 million arrivals each year.

Within the European Union, out of 500 million tourist arrivals in 2016, Southern and Mediterranean Europe represented the most visited group of countries, and five out of top ten destinations in the world are located in France, Spain and Italy.

Forecasts show that coastal tourism is expected to maintain an upward trend over the next 15 years. More than 500 million of international tourist arrivals in the Mediterranean are forecasted by 2030. Moreover, coastal tourism has been

identified as one of the five priorities of the EU Blue Growth strategy.

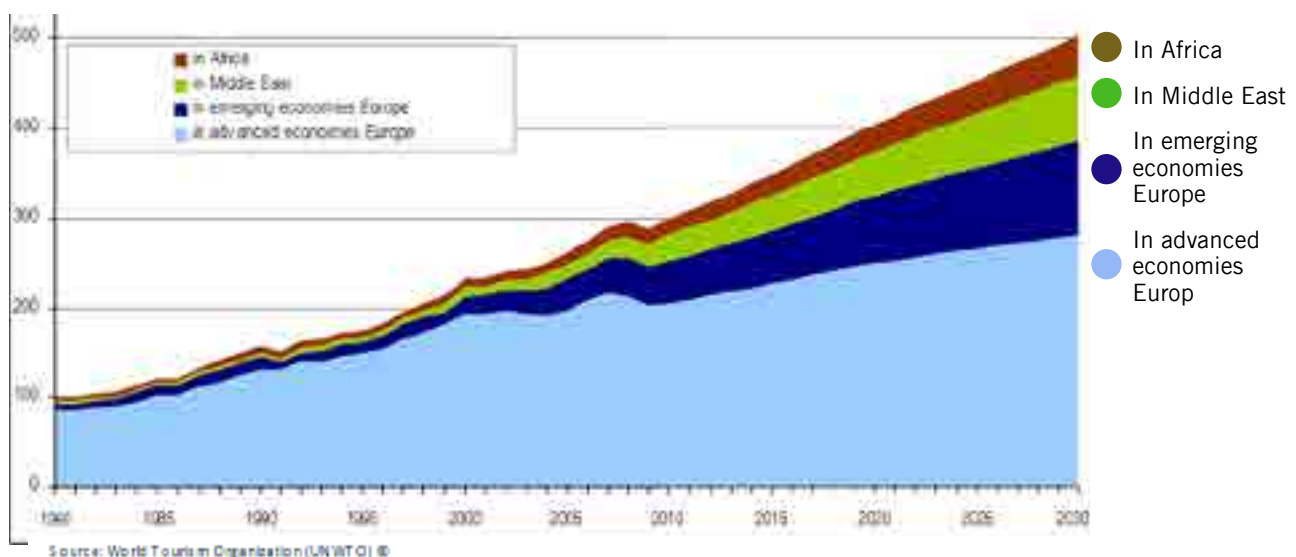
Tourism in the Mediterranean region is highly concentrated, both spatially and seasonally, with most visits occurring during the summer. About 2.2 million Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), are involved in the tourism sector, which represents 10% of the EU GDP and employs 2.5 million people. Tourism represents an important source of revenues and employment in the Mediterranean area. At the same time, it implies huge negative impacts for both nature and society.

This continuous development of tourism on coastal fringes has already caused major damage to coastal ecosystems and 3/4 of Mediterranean coastal sand dunes from Spain to Sicily have disappeared mainly as a result of urbanisation linked to tou-

rism development. The Mediterranean region has suffered from a 60% species depopulation in the last 40 years, with the potential to lose another 40% in the next 10 to 30 years. Over 500 plant species in the Mediterranean are threatened with extinction and are under intense pressure from tourism development in some overbuilt destinations.

According to WWF, the future development of the sector will be influenced by several factors, including the declining competitiveness of some Mediterranean tourism destinations, changes in tourist expectations and needs, cultural and environmental conservation and protection levels and the increasing impacts of climate change<sup>3</sup>.

## Tourism Towards 2030: international tourism in the Mediterranean. International tourist arrivals, million.



<sup>2</sup>UNWTO barometer 2019 // <sup>3</sup>Piante C., Ody D., 2015. Blue Growth in the Mediterranean Sea: the Challenge of Good Environmental Status. MedTrends Project. WWF-France. 192 pages.



# CHALLENGES FOR ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MEDITERRANEAN PROTECTED AREAS

Mass tourism activity has generated major infrastructure and behavioural changes, which have particularly affected the fragile biodiversity of Mediterranean PAs, at the heart of the successful Mediterranean sun sea and nature tourism products. Therefore, PAs need to be strengthened and financed, in order to respond to the pressures on their natural landscapes and habitats.

A sustainable approach to ecotourism destination strategic planning emphasises the need to collaborate with different categories of stakeholders, in order to pursue the development of sustainable tourism in ecological, economic, sociocultural benefits and political realms.

Tourists tend to demand more sustainable tourism products as an alternative to mass tourism, as well as individual and authentic tourism experiences. This alternative should help to minimise the impact of tourism on nature, to respect local cultures and to spread economic benefits among local communities. Ecotourism appears as an alternative, representing a form of tourism respectful of nature and cultures, which involves local people and provides them with significant economic benefits, but without the negative effects of mass tourism.

There is a well-developed network of PAs in the Mediterranean region. These PAs can act as a laboratory to test new methodologies and tools for the development of ecotourism in the region.

It is therefore important to tackle the diverse challenges and current gaps that impair the sustainability of ecotourism in a structured manner that addresses political, operational and funding issues, as explained here:

## A. Political/institutional

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- ▶ Need for a common policy framework at European/Mediterranean scale which looks at how conservation and tourism can be better integrated. The fragmentation of responsibility needs to be addressed not only at local level but also at Mediterranean regional and transnational level.

## B. Technical/operational

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- ▶ Need to strengthen the capacity of local stakeholders: park managers, local SMEs and public authorities.
- ▶ Need for structured guidelines and integrated management tools, to monitor the quality and sustainability of ecotourism activities at Mediterranean destinations scale.

## C. Funding

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- ▶ Need to identify the allocation of financial resources for ecotourism in PAs at national and European level.
- ▶ Need for promotion of ecotourism at country-level and transnationally in the Mediterranean, with a holistic approach.





# AN INSPIRING METHODOLOGY FOR DESIGNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATING ECOTOURISM PRODUCTS

*In the framework of the DestiMED and MEET projects, 44 Mediterranean PAs were involved in activities aiming at applying new standards on ecotourism and test a methodology to establish multi-sectorial local governance for the development of ecotourism, design ecotourism packages and monitor their impacts.*

**The methodology comprises 3 key steps:**

- ▶ The establishment of a local public-private partnership (Local Ecotourism Cluster - LEC) composed by key local stakeholders, which acts jointly to develop and manage ecotourism packages according to a common vision.
- ▶ The design of ecotourism packages following DestiMED criteria targeting the PA and its territory with a focus on nature and culture, which contributes positively to conservation and the local economy, and which has a minimal environmental impact.
- ▶ The monitoring of the quality of the ecotourism packages by organising package tests with industry experts and the assessment of their sustainability according to indicators including the ecological footprint.



By following DestiMED criteria and applying the recommendations received, any ecotourism package will be ready to enter into the promotion phase and be sold on the market.

From design to marketing, ecotourism products are a challenging enterprise. The keys to success are:

- ▶ Developing and strengthening a LEC, in order to have a common vision, support the conservation of the PA, reduce internal competition and increase the economic benefits going to the local community.

- ▶ Developing an ecotourism product focused on a Mediterranean PA, following the DestiMED & MEET criteria. Developing an innovative, well-structured ecotourism product, with an edge over traditional tours offered in the Mediterranean.
- ▶ Developing strategic alliances with private and public sectors, NGOs and development agencies, to gain access to financial and human resources, marketing and technology.
- ▶ Incorporating key elements of sustainability and conservation in the PA and in the product, including interpretation,

zoning for visitor use, visitor management strategies and contributing to the financial needs of the PA.

- ▶ Measuring and monitoring the sustainability and quality of the MEET ecotourism product on a regular basis using the MEET Ecotourism Standard and the Ecological Footprint calculator<sup>4</sup> so as to continually minimise environmental impact and maximise quality.

The strength of this methodology is based on the commitment of 44 LEC, which represent a strong pool of expertise.

<sup>4</sup> Ecological footprint calculator : <https://www.meetnetwork.org/calculator>



# THE WAY FORWARD

With the objective of upscaling the work done so far during the DestiMED & MEET projects with 44 Protected Areas and to spread the main results at larger scale, this document suggests the implementation of the following steps:

## SPREADING PROJECT RESULTS

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### *Clustering Process*

During the DestiMED Project, the establishment of LECs - as a successful model of public/private partnership, involving park managers, local tour operators and local tourism SMEs with a local governance - was aimed at developing and managing ecotourism packages according to a common vision.

Following this experience, the current LEC model, would gather more credibility at regional/national and transnational level, if it follows innovation clustering guidelines being developed through the EU cluster policy. The European Commission provides institutional support through the European Cluster Observatory and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform which can be related to the National park territories through broader sustainable tourism regional initiatives. In addition, the EU provides a service facility co-funded action under the COSME programme since 2016, aiming at developing trans-national (within Europe) and international (beyond Europe) collaboration and supporting the emergence of new value chains through cross-sectorial cooperation.

### *Monitoring Tools*

DestiMED worked on an innovative approach to measure and reduce the environmental impact of tourism on the natural resources that sustain PA communities. This new tool is based on the established Ecological Footprint framework, developed by the Global Footprint Network. The ecological footprint can help to measure and minimise the impact of ecotourism packages.

In order to go further, socio economic criteria should be further integrated in the monitoring process and upscaling at the destination level based on the 4 pillars of sustainability<sup>5</sup> should be included as well. In addition, a set of ecological footprint criteria has been developed but some improvements are necessary such as: simplify the process to collect data through the surveys, integrate climate change mitigation indicators, reach out to tourist SMEs, work towards a certification.

### *Promotion of the ecotourism packages*

The development of sustainable and competitive ecotourism packages in Mediterranean PAs, represents a major achievement of the DestiMED and MEET projects. The MEET Network gathers Mediterranean PAs willing to develop ecotourism activities. The network acts as a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) to promote the Mediterranean as a destination with a specific focus on ecotourism products in PAs. The MEET Network operates with the purpose of creating a strong brand to differentiate itself from other tourism products in the Mediterranean.

In order to go further, the packages developed and fine-tuned must enter into a marketing and promotion phase. They must demonstrate their viability by attracting clients. Packages should be flexible enough to fit the needs of the market. The role of the DMO is crucial to help the LEC to adapt their packages.

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<sup>5</sup>The 4 pillars of sustainability are: sustainable management, socioeconomic impacts, cultural impacts, environmental impacts.



# SCALING UP TO A REGIONAL LEVEL

*The establishment of a Mediterranean multi-level governing body of ecotourism in PAs is necessary to support a better coordination and promotion of common ecotourism packages across Mediterranean regions. This body should also be responsible for the definition and implementation of a Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan. It could be endorsed at EU level in the form of a transnational Meta cluster<sup>6</sup>.*

**Composition of the  
Mediterranean multilevel  
governing body:**



## 1

**National Ministries responsible for tourism and nature conservation – political level- (linked with European Commission and existing international mechanisms and processes foreseen in the policy frameworks), in order to:**

- ▶ Provide a common vision for the development of the ecotourism sector in PAs, with a top-down and bottom-up dimension;
- ▶ Strengthen the alignment at the EU policies and international principles, supporting the implementation of existing frameworks like the Barcelona Convention, the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable development, the Coastal and Maritime tourism for more growth and jobs, the Sustainable development of the blue economy in Western Mediterranean, the UN 2030 SDGs, the Union for Mediterranean on the Blue Economy;
- ▶ Minimise and mitigate risks of ecosystems and biodiversity deterioration and invest financial resources.

## 2

**Regional governing body (task force) – administrative and operational level - (linked with the national political level and transnational Steering Committee) in order to:**

- ▶ Draft and implement a structured and effective Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan – (MEMP) for the next 10 years
- ▶ Ensure a better intersectoral and inter institutional coordination (identify complementarities, synergies and common strategies)
- ▶ Deal with mass tourism pressure (Plans should follow two-step process 1 - Assess vulnerability, 2 - plan to improve resilience)<sup>7</sup>;
- ▶ Develop an effective conservation planning and assessment (tourism policies and plan need to acknowledge climate change. All too often, it is ignored or not seriously considered;
- ▶ Set up a common agenda to invest in skilled human resources and financial means<sup>8</sup>.

## 3

**Transnational Steering Committee – (scientific and technical level), (linked with EU institutions and policy framework mechanisms and processes), in order to:**

- ▶ Foster synergies as well as strategic transnational and cross boarder partnerships and alliances (institutional, political, operational) with key European and international organisations/networks involved in tourism (and ecotourism) activities across the Mediterranean region;
- ▶ Raise the collective voice of ecotourism stakeholders in Mediterranean PAs,
- ▶ Communicate and disseminate results and successful case studies.

<sup>6</sup>CAITO project, transnational tourism Meta cluster co-financed by Interreg Central Baltic Program 2014-2020. // <sup>7</sup>Study, TRAN Committee European Parliament, European Tourism: recent development and future challenges. October 2019 // <sup>8</sup>Study, TRAN Committee European Parliament, European Tourism: recent development and future challenges. October 2019.

# Potential strategic interlocutors to support the implementation of the Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan

*The following list of European networks and international organisations, shows possible strategic interlocutors, with whom the regional governing body can establish fruitful synergies and alliances to support the implementation of the Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan (MEMP), such as:*

Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (Secretariat), foreseen as an institutional body to ensure the implementation and monitoring of the MAP programme of the MMSD<sup>9</sup> at regional level.

WEST MED Task Force (Assistance Mechanism for the western Mediterranean), established in the framework of the Commission Communication (2017) 183 final, to support the implementation of priority actions such as the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity in the western Mediterranean region.

EUROPARC Federation, to ensure the respect of the 5 principles<sup>10</sup> of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas and the Jurmala Communiqué, a first step towards the creation of the Healthy Parks, Healthy People (HPHP) initiative Europe.

European Commission = DG ENVIRONMENT, responsible for Natura 2000 sites, a network of core breeding and resting sites for rare and threatened species, and some rare natural habitat types which are protected in their own right. It stretches across all 28 EU countries, both on land and at sea.

Travel Trade international Associations, dealing with sustainable development of tourism and social and environmental initiatives.

NECSTOUR, the European Network of regions on sustainable tourism, which is leading several initiatives at EU level, such as the Barcelona

Declaration on tourism and cultural heritage 'Better place to live, better place to visit', and the latest call for Action on 'Driving behavioural change for European sustainable destinations through trans-regional cooperation,' launched in September 2019.

EUROCHAMBRES, the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry. It represents 45 member organisations from 43 countries, which published in January 2019 a Study/Report on the Circular economy, that is expected to become one of the greatest societal and economical disruptors of our time, in order to define constructive strategies that support competitiveness, as well as social and economic resilience and prosperity.

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## International guidelines and EU policy framework to take into account

*The alignment of this policy document to the EU policy framework and international guidelines is encouraged to raise credibility and empower the ecotourism activities to be carried out by the Regional governing body.*

### International guidelines

The UN 2030 Agenda Programme - Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019<sup>11</sup>, focusing particularly on SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) to green the tourism supply chain, SDG 13 (Climate Action) to address climate change impacts on PAs, SDG 14 (Life below Water) to preserve the Mediterranean marine environment and SDG 15 (Life on Land) to support biodiversity conservation in PAs. This includes interaction with all other goals in the UN 2030 Agenda and in particular SDG 17 (Partnerships) which supports the MEET concept of collaborative governance;

The 2020-2030 UN Convention on Biodiversity post Aichi programme and its renewed attempt to address in this time frame the unprecedented anthropogenic crises of species and habitat loss as the global policy framework to manage eco-system sustainability at national, regional and local level; The Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development - MMSD 2016-2025. There

should be recognition of the role of PAs as focal points and catalysts for the implementation of the overarching flagship initiative of the MMSD under Objective 4 - Addressing climate change as a priority issue for the Mediterranean and under Objective 6 - 'Improving governance in support of sustainable development'.

### EU communications and legislation

In the framework of the Blue Growth Strategy<sup>12</sup>, particularly in the area of maritime, coastal and cruise tourism, there is a need to improve tourism products in the low season and reduce the high footprint and environmental impact of tourism in coastal regions, making use of ecotourism products and footprint indicators developed by the DestiMED project;

The European Strategy for more Growth and Jobs in coastal and Maritime tourism<sup>13</sup>, focusing on its action 9, in order to ensure environmental protection and sustainable development of EU coastal areas, promoting Maritime spatial planning; The Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in the Mediterranean (ICZM 2008), particularly its principle 6 which states that 'Appropriate governance allowing adequate and timely participation in a transparent decision-making

process by local populations and stakeholders in civil society concerned with coastal zones shall be ensured' and it reflects the approach of the LEC at territorial level;

The Initiative for the Sustainable Development of the Blue Economy in the Western Mediterranean<sup>14</sup>, which aims at reinforcing the regional dialogue taking place on Maritime Policy and the Blue Economy under the umbrella of the Union for the Mediterranean, the cooperation within the Barcelona Convention for the protection of the marine environment and coastal regions of the Mediterranean, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the efforts made in implementing the MMSD;

The EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy<sup>15</sup>, which takes all aspects of the production to consumption cycle with the aim of ensuring full integrated product design that deals with waste management, energy and environmental socio-economic impacts, in which ecotourism products and services are well placed to be best practice examples of the circular economy approach.

<sup>9</sup>Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016-2025 // <sup>10</sup>1) Giving priority to protection; 2) Contributing to sustainable development; 3) Engaging all stakeholders; 4) Planning sustainable tourism effectively; 5) Pursuing continuous improvements // <sup>11</sup>United Nations, New York 2019 // <sup>12</sup>COM (2012) 494 final // <sup>13</sup>COM (2014) 86 final // <sup>14</sup>COM (2017) 183 final // <sup>15</sup>COM (2015) 614 final

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING

*For ecotourism to become a viable alternative, there is a need for harmonised policies, concepts, standards, monitoring methodologies at Mediterranean scale. One of the main issues tackled in this document is the disconnect between tourism and conservation policies that currently does not allow the development of this harmonisation. National, transnational, sub-regional and regional cooperation is crucial to achieve this.*

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1

Involve national authorities who should: cooperate and support funding; involve regional governments for a better intersectoral coordination and governance; invest financial resources in line with EU political priorities on the New European Green Deal post 2020;

3

Support the development of the Local Ecotourism Clusters in Protected Areas to manage ecotourism in the Mediterranean, in a structured form of transnational ecotourism Meta Cluster (at sub regional level), to be endorsed by the European Commission, through EU transnational cooperation programmes;

5

Encourage all Protected Areas in the region to share and join the initiative at larger scale, to exploit their 'green' economic potential, minimise and mitigate environmental risks of ecosystems and biodiversity deterioration and develop an effective conservation planning and assessment;

2

Support a request to the European Parliament to define and provide a dedicated budget to support the implementation of the emergency Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan, including tourism and conservation fields;

4

Identify dedicated budget lines, to be financed by the European Commission and or other EU funding programs, international donors, public investments, SMEs economic incentives from chambers of commerce, encompassing the Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills, Smart specialisation strategies post-2020, Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme follow up, Structural Investments Funds (EMFF, ERDF, ESF), Life plus, Just Transition Fund, COSME programme, European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), Green Climate Fund;

6

Develop an integrated and common measurement framework/methodology for a qualitative/quantitative assessment of the ecotourism packages across the Mediterranean regions and for measuring the environmental impact on resources at destination level regions and for measuring the environmental impact on resources at destination level (Protected Areas), building on the tools already developed in the MEET/DestIMED projects (Ecological Footprint calculator).

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Project co-financed by the European  
Regional Development Fund

## PROJECT PARTNERS



The DestiMED project is a project co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund in the framework of the Interreg MED Programme, which ended in October 2019 after 3 years of activities.

The project focused on the development of ecotourism in Mediterranean Protected Areas. Through this project, ecotourism standards and monitoring tools to measure and improve the sustainability and quality of ecotourism in Mediterranean Protected Areas were developed and tested.

The project brought together 7 partners and 13 marine or coastal Protected Areas of France, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Albania and Greece.

The DestiMED project enabled to create exchanges between Mediterranean Protected Areas facing the same challenges of tourism development, to explore and test alternatives to mass tourism and to raise awareness among local stakeholders regarding tourism impact and the quality and sustainability of their services.

Published in October 2019 by **MedPAN**.  
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