

Artisanal fishers, future guardians of the Mediterranean Sea?

Fish stocks in world seas and oceans are being depleted

There was a time when the fish resources of the world's vast oceans were thought to be inexhaustible, but as the fishing industry expanded and technology made larger catches possible and more areas of the ocean exploitable, it soon became clear that this was not the case.

Now, with a third of the world's fish stocks overfished and more than half of them fished at their maximum level of production (FAO 2016), the planet is facing a global fishery crisis. Fish stocks in the Mediterranean Sea are deteriorating at an alarming rate: a recent analysis shows that 93% of the assessed fish stocks are overexploited, and a number of them are on the verge of depletion. In addition, the Mediterranean Sea has lost 41% of its marine mammals and 34% of the total fish population over the past 50 years (source ec.europa.eu).

Decades of a top-down approach in fisheries management has failed to safeguard the Mediterranean marine ecosystem and has been unable to create a widespread sense of ownership and self-investment amongst Mediterranean fishers, despite small pockets of community-based management experiences (e.g. *prud'homies* in France and *Cofradías* in Spain). We are struggling to effectively safeguard our precious Mediterranean marine resources, and have suffered the consequences of largely ignoring a key component of managing marine resources – the fishers. Those who spend each and every day at sea, who know the sea better than anyone else and depend on its resources have a wealth of local knowledge that should be an integral part of how we manage our seas.

Empowering small-scale fisheries to create more sustainable models

To make sure that marine resources are used more responsibly and enough protein is provided to support our growing populations we must find solutions. Some of the world's most renowned fisheries experts have suggested that small-scale fishers can play an important role in the world's market to solve the fully-fledged fishery crisis. Indeed, there are many successful examples of well managed small-scale fisheries throughout the world, who put sustainability at the heart of their management, and their replication could go a long way towards overcoming the global crisis of fisheries.

In the Mediterranean, small-scale fisheries constitute more than 80% of the fishing fleet (Source FAO/GFCM) and play a significant social and economic role. They directly employ over 137,000 fishers and generate jobs for another 150,000 people. What if we were to harness this enormous power and turn the tide of fisheries mismanagement and destructive practices? It is in the best interests of the Mediterranean Sea, and in the best interests of the men and women who make up this considerable workforce.

Small-scale fisheries have the potential to impact far less on the marine environment than large-scale fisheries (for instance trawling) and could be more equitable. But this is the case only when properly managed. We are convinced that empowering small-scale fishers to take an active part in fisheries management and the protection of ecosystems can make fisheries more sustainable and ensure that small-scale fishers have a brighter future. By working with responsible fisheries practices and regulations, small-scale fishers can help to ensure the recovery of fish stocks and create a prosperous future.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as marine laboratories

We want to demonstrate the potential of this model in a number of marine 'laboratories', in this case Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), throughout the Mediterranean. Indeed MPAs afford more protection than their surrounding waters for biodiversity conservation or fisheries management purposes and provide the perfect testing grounds for improving the state of fish stocks and the prosperity of small-scale fishers.

MPAs account for 6.5% of the area of the Mediterranean Sea (Source PISCO - Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans) with the majority of MPAs in EU countries. In many of the first-established MPAs, management plans tended to be imposed from the top down without giving a voice to those local stakeholders whose livelihoods depended on the resources being managed. As a result, local people often saw MPAs as a threat to their well being, with some – fishers in particular – actively opposing them. The key to success, then, is to turn the tide on traditional top-down management and to work towards involving and winning the trust of this influential group.

It is increasingly clear, for all involved, that involving fishers in management decisions, for example, about allowable gears and number of days allotted for fishing, provides the opportunity for more effective management and has led fishers to see MPAs as tools that are not there to hinder their activities, but to sustain them. For fishers the benefits of well-managed Marine Protected Areas can be considerable. For example, the size of a catch in fishable areas of an MPA that functions well can be many times greater than outside it (MPAs usually include a no-take area and a buffer zone where small-scale fisheries are allowed). One good day in the fishable part of a protected area can net a catch worth 4 times more than outside (Source PISCO - Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans).

Although we still have far too few MPAs in the Mediterranean, those that are effectively managed are proof that seemingly disparate groups can come together to set informed policy, and demonstrate that small-scale fisheries can be sustainable and support livelihoods. This is the future of fishing in the Mediterranean.

Involvement of fishermen in management of MPAs and the co-management approach

"Involvement" and "co-management" are the terms we want to hear more of when referring to fisheries management in the Mediterranean. They point to the sharing of management responsibility and authority between public administrations and the stakeholders that make use of the resources. It may seem to be common sense, but it's not that common.

Around the Mediterranean, many small-scale fishers disregard rules that they feel are arbitrarily imposed. With such a small percentage of the Mediterranean under protection, the vast majority of the Sea and its resources are governed by policies crafted far from coasts and communities.

The "co-management model" strives to restore the health of the marine environment through more equitable decision-making and better outcomes for fishers. A co-management approach allows us to find common ground, and it's proving to be more sustainable and more profitable. We see tremendous opportunity in working with fishers to protect the region's livelihoods, culture and environment.



The FishMPABlue project is implemented in 11 pilot sites in the Mediterranean (Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece).

The FishMPABlue2 project

The FishMPABlue2 project is testing the most promising co-management approaches, building good working relationships between Marine Protected Areas managers and fishers in 11 pilot sites throughout 6 countries of the Mediterranean basin, striving for better managed and connected protected areas and more involved fishers. The project creates partnerships between protected areas, a Mediterranean network of small-scale fishers and key policy makers at national and international level.

The project is building best practices of collaboration between protected areas and small-scale fisheries. These governance best practices aim to recover fish stocks, reduce impacts on ecosystems and secure livelihoods for local communities. We want to consolidate and scale-up these best practices and mainstream them to the whole region.

If this "experiment" works in pilot MPAs, there's no reason why we can't replicate the initiative in the rest of the Mediterranean, regenerating one of the world's most important seas and leaving a priceless resource for future generations.

Project partners: