

SPECIALLY PROTECTED AREAS REGIONAL ACTIVITY CENTRE (SPA/RAC)
Ad hoc Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM)
Fourth meeting
Teleconference, 21 March 2025

***Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM)**

Draft Programme of Work for 2025 and key priorities for 2026-2027

1. Recalling the AGEM mission and objectives

The primary mission of the *Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM) is to *provide scientific and technical guidance* to improve the Mediterranean network of Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in terms of coverage, representativity, connectivity and management effectiveness.

More concretely, the AGEM ultimate goal is to support the SPA/RAC in the implementation of the Post-2020 Regional Strategy for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in the Mediterranean (MCPA and OECM Strategy), adopted by the Barcelona Convention COP 22 (Antalya, Türkiye, 7-10 December 2021).

To this end, the Group will serve as a think tank addressing a wide range of topics of relevance to MPA planning, establishment and management, and OECM identification and reporting in line with the Barcelona Convention MCPA and OECM Strategy.

2. Main tasks of the AGEM until 2030

The AGEM will work to deliver scientific and technical advice regarding the achievement of the post-2020 MCPA and OECM Strategy of the Barcelona Convention. It should also keep a close watch on the Mediterranean network of MPAs with the view of providing assessments and ensuring the timely identification of gaps and hindrances that might impede the proper development of the network. It should deliver sound outputs, clearly drafted, and timely issued, based on the state of the art in terms of knowledge.

Based on the AGEM Terms of Reference reviewed and approved by the SPA/BD Focal Points via email in January 2025, the main tasks it would undertake are:

- Support the implementation of activities proposed by the “MCPA and OECM Strategy”.
- Guiding the process of the mid-term and final evaluations of the MCPA and OECM Strategy (due in 2026 and 2030, respectively) through its Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.
- Support the SPA/RAC in the elaboration of key documents requested in the framework of the SPA/RAC Programme of Work.
- Provide recommendations and guidance on how to narrow the gap between the North and South and West to East to achieve the 30x30 Target.
- Regularly review the state of Mediterranean MPAs by supporting the elaboration of the four-yearly status report of the Mediterranean network of MPAs, jointly led by SPA/RAC and MedPAN, with the view of evaluating the progress made by the Mediterranean countries towards achieving the 30x30 Target.
- Support through technical and scientific guidance the assessment of the representativity of the Mediterranean MPA network, in particular through a gap analysis to identify the ecosystems and other components of marine biodiversity that are under-represented and make recommendations to overcome the identified gaps.

- Assist in the assessment of the financial needs and gaps for MPAs and in proposing innovative funding approaches, including through proper marketing of the services and benefits generated by MPAs.
- Guide the identification of potential MPA/SPAMI sites including within the Mediterranean Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs).
- Participate in the identification of potential OECMs in the Mediterranean and assist the Parties in their reporting.
- Provide scientific advice in response to SPA/RAC requests from its Focal Points and other MPA stakeholders.
- Develop harmonized technical tools including guidelines, standards and indicators as relevant.

The *ad hoc* group of experts should liaise with the SPA/BD Focal Points through the SPA/RAC in carrying out the listed tasks, particularly when identifying potential MPA sites or OECMs, so that the Contracting Parties are directly involved in such processes.

3. AGEM periodic Programmes of Work

Each two years (in line with the periodicity of the biennial Programmes of Work of the Barcelona Convention), AGEM will develop a targeted Programme of Work (PoW) aligned with its overarching objectives and the evolving needs of the MPAs and OECMs in the Mediterranean.

These periodic PoWs will outline key priorities, thematic focus areas, and specific actions to support scientific guidance, policy recommendations, and capacity-building efforts. By adapting to emerging challenges and opportunities, AGEM aims to provide strategic expertise and facilitate collaboration among stakeholders to enhance marine conservation and governance in the region.

For the current biennium (2024-2025) and for the newly established AGEM in February 2025, the work programme will cover the remainder of 2025.

In early 2026, AGEM will work on developing its Programme of Work for 2026-2027, outlining specific activities and the timeline for each identified key priority, to ensure their effective and timely implementation.

4. Priority topics for AGEM in 2025

In 2025, the AGEM will focus on enhancing and strengthening the strategic framework for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in the Mediterranean. Emphasis will be placed on improving the identification and reporting of OECMs, and assessing the conservation impacts of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels. Additionally, AGEM will foster regional collaboration for coordinated research and transboundary conservation efforts, to support the effective implementation of the MCPA and OECM Strategy.

The following proposed deliverables to be guided by the AGEM are subscribed in the SPA/RAC PoW for 2024-2025 adopted by the Barcelona Convention COP23, and aim to strengthen regional cooperation, improve conservation outcomes, and support sustainable governance of Mediterranean marine biodiversity. The first and third deliverables will be carried out by SPA/RAC consultants, and AGEM will ensure guiding the process of their elaboration and their review. The second deliverable would be elaborated internally with the support of a specific AGEM Working Group on Enhanced Protection Levels.

In 2025, the AGEM is expected to guide and/or deliver the following key outputs:

- 1. Mediterranean Guidance for OECMs:** Supporting the development of a regional guidance document to apply OECM criteria and to establish processes for identifying OECM in the Mediterranean, accompanied by a regional webinar to disseminate the guidance, to be submitted to the forthcoming SPA/BD Focal Points Meeting on 20-22 May 2025 and subsequently to the Barcelona Convention COP24 in late 2025 for adoption.
- 2. Impact of MCPAs with Enhanced Protection Levels:** Documentation and communication of the ecological and socio-economic impacts of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels.
- 3. SPAMIs in ABNJs:** A study on facilitating collaboration among neighboring countries to coordinate joint research and identify potential Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) in Areas Beyond National Jurisdictions (ABNJs).

5. Proposed Programme of Work of the AGEM for 2025

Deliverable	Topic	Activity	Rational	Responsible	Timeline of Implementation	Comment
DELIVERABLE 1 (D1)	Mediterranean Guidance for OECMs	Supporting the development of a regional guidance document for identifying and reporting OECMs.	<p>SPA/RAC PoW2024-2025: Activity 2.2.1.a)</p> <p>MCPA & OECM Strategy Strategic Pillar 3: OECMs Action A.3.1.6 under Output 3.1 (<i>Awareness in Contracting Parties and stakeholders on OECMs enhanced and guidance for the application of OECM criteria provided</i>)</p> <p>➔ A.3.1.6 Develop sectoral and other guidance, such as tools and templates, for applying OECM criteria and establishing processes for identifying OECMs</p>	<p>AGEM</p> <p>SPA/RAC (with the support of a consultant)</p> <p>Specific WG on OECM (WG-OECM)?</p> <p>Invited OECM experts</p>	<p>Early March to late March 2025: guidance document drafting by the consultant.</p> <p>Late March: share the draft document with AGEM for comments.</p> <p>Early April 2025: discussion through specific AGEM online meeting.</p> <p>Mid-April 2025: finalisation of the draft document taking into account the AGEM feedback.</p> <p>18 April 2025: sharing the draft document with the FPs.</p> <p>20-22 May 2025: discussion of the draft document at the FP meeting</p> <p>October - November 2025: Pilot-test the guidance document with an interested country in OECMs, with support of WG-OECM.</p> <p>Mid-December 2025 (after COP 24, 2-5 December 2025): OECM webinar organization with contribution from AGEM.</p>	<p>This action is integrated into the SPA/RAC PoW for 2025.</p> <p>A consultant is engaged to develop the Mediterranean guidance on OECM criteria application and their identification.</p> <p>The AGEM is expected to guide the elaboration of this document to be submitted to the 17th meeting of the SPA/BD Focal Points on 20-22 May 2025, and in organizing a specific webinar to share the guidance in December 2025 (after the adoption of the guidance).</p> <p>It is also proposed to pilot-test the guidance with an interested country before the webinar.</p>

Deliverable	Topic	Activity	Rational	Responsible	Timeline of Implementation	Comment
DELIVERABLE 2 (D2)	Impact of MCPAs with Enhanced Protection Levels	Documentation and communication of ecological and socio-economic impacts of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels.	SPA/RAC PoW2024-2025: Activity 2.2.1.a)	AGEM Group	June - September 2025: elaboration of a first draft of the Impact of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels by the WG-EP.	It is proposed that the WG-EP lead the elaboration of the document.
			MCPA & OEEM Strategy Strategic Pillar 2: MCPA Network Expansion Action A.3.1.6 under Output 2.4 (<i>The number and coverage of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels is increased</i>) → A.2.4.4 Provide tools for monitoring, documenting and communicating impacts of MCPAs with enhanced protection levels	Specific WG on MCPA with enhanced protection levels (WG-EP)? Invited relevant experts? Specific organisations could be invited to collaborate, such as The MedFund, BlueSeeds or MedSea Alliance	October - November 2025: first draft shared with AGEM for comments and feedback. December 2025: finalization of the document.	This document could be shared with the AGEM for comments and then validated by email. Specific organisations such as MedPAN can support the preparation of the document since they have elaborated some tools on MCPA with enhanced and strict protection.

Deliverable	Topic	Activity	Rational	Responsible	Timeline of Implementation	Comment
DELIVERABLE 4 (D3)	SPAMIs in ABNJs	Study on facilitating collaboration among neighboring countries to coordinate joint research and identify potential SPAMIs in ABNJs.	SPA/RAC PoW2024-2025: Activity 2.2.2.e) MCPA & OECM Strategy Strategic Pillar 2: MCPA Network Expansion Action A.2.1.3 under Output 2.1 (<i>Areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services are identified</i>) → A.2.1.3 Collaborate with neighbouring countries to promote joint co-ordinated research in ABNJs and to identify potential MCPAs based on harmonized monitoring protocols	AGEM SPA/RAC (with the support of a consultant) Invited experts on ABNJs/international laws and regulation.	June - August 2025: first draft prepared by SPA/RAC consultant. September - October 2025: draft circulated to AGEM for feedback. November 2025: specific online meeting to discuss about the draft. December 2025: finalisation of the document.	The document is to be elaborated by SPA/RAC consultant (French Voluntary Contribution financial support). The AGEM will accompany the expert with guidance. Document should be discussed through specific online meeting.

6. Simplified timetable of the AGEM PoW 2025

N°	Topic	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
-	Kick-off of the AGEM: introduction and PoW2025	W2: <u>First AGEM Meeting (PoW)</u>	W3: finalization and submission to FP								
D1	Mediterranean Guidance for OECMs	W1-W4: Draft of the document	W1: <u>Second AGEM Meeting (OECM)</u> W3: Finalisation and submission to FP								W2: <u>OECM webinar</u>
D2	Impact of MCPAs with Enhanced Protection Levels				W1: Constitution of WG-EP and Start of work			W4: First draft of the doc	W1: Circulated to AGEM for feedback	W1: Integration of comments W3: <u>Third AGEM Meeting (ABNJ + Enhanced Protection)</u>	W3: Finalisation of the doc
D3	SPAMIs in ABNJs				W3: Expert recruited			W 4: First draft of the doc	W1: Circulated to AGEM for feedback	W3: <u>Third AGEM Meeting (ABNJ + Enhanced Protection)</u>	W3: Finalisation of the doc

7. Key priorities for AGEM during the biennium 2026-2027

Based on the draft 2026-2027 SPA/RAC Programme of Work, the AGEM Terms of Reference, and in line with the MCPA and OECM Strategy, the following key topics have been identified as priority areas for AGEM to focus on during 2026-2027 biennium, ensuring alignment with regional conservation objectives and ongoing initiatives.

7.1. The MCPA and OECM Strategy mid-term evaluation

Rationale:

- ➔ Decision IG.26/5 “Specially Protected Areas (SPAs), Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) and Ecosystem Restoration” of the Barcelona Convention COP23 (5-8 December 2023, Slovenia).
- ➔ The MCPA and OECM Strategy: Chapter 3 (Strategy implementation), Section 3.3: Monitoring and implementation; and the Strategy’s Evaluation and Monitoring Framework.
- ➔ Draft 2026-2027 SPA/RAC Programme of Work: Activity 5.1.2.a) Mid-term (2026) evaluation of the Post-2020 Regional Strategy for MCPAs and OECMs in the Mediterranean, through its Evaluation and Monitoring Framework, with conclusions and recommendations for the Strategy implementation by 2030 elaborated.

Objective:

- ➔ Guide and contribute to the Mid-term Evaluation of the Barcelona Convention Post-2020 Regional Strategy on MCPA and OECM in the Mediterranean through its Evaluation and Monitoring Framework:
 - Develop guiding principles for the MCPA and OECM Strategy evaluation;
 - Comment the Terms of Reference for the Strategy assessment consultation;
 - Review and contribute to the methodology and timeline for assessing the implementation of the MCPA and OECM Strategy;
 - Organize and participate in online meetings dedicated to the Strategy evaluation process;
 - Review and discuss the Strategy evaluation drafts during its development process;
 - Propose recommendations for the effective implementation of the MCPA and OECM Strategy for the remaining period until 2030.

Note:

- ➔ The Strategy assessment should be submitted to the 18th Meeting of the SPA/BD Focal Points in mid-2027. The preparation of this deliverable should start in early 2026 and finish not later than March 2027.

7.2. MPA Status report

Rationale:

- ➔ SPA/RAC draft PoW 2026-2027: Activity 2.2.1.i) Status report on the Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean elaborated and disseminated

Objective:

- ➔ Support the elaboration of the four-yearly status report of the Mediterranean network of MPAs, jointly led by SPA/RAC and MedPAN, with the view of evaluating the progress made by the Mediterranean countries towards achieving the 30x30 Target, contributing to the regular review of the state of Mediterranean MPAs:
 - Contribute to/review specific sections of the report;
 - Review and discuss the MPA Status draft reports during its development process;
 - Propose recommendations to enhance MPA coverage and the effective management of MPAs in the Mediterranean.

Note:

- ➔ The MPA Status report is jointly developed by SPA/RAC and MedPAN and will be presented during the 4th edition of the Mediterranean MPA Forum to be organized during 2027.

7.3. OECMs identification, recognition and reporting

Rationale:

- ➔ The MCPA and OECM Strategy: Strategic Pillar 3 (OECMs), Output 3.1: Awareness in Contracting Parties and stakeholders on OECMs enhanced and guidance for the application of OECM criteria provided & Output 3.2: OECMs identified, recognized and reported to regional and global databases by Contracting Parties and regional organizations

Objective:

- ➔ Promote the OECM recognition and identification, based on the “Guidance for Mediterranean OECMs: Identification and criteria application” that will be developed in 2025 with the support of AGEM and adopted by the Barcelona Convention COP 24 in December 2025:
 - Continue advancing the reflection and efforts on OECMs. This process will be guided by the framework and guidance under-preparation by SPA/RAC, to be submitted to the Barcelona Convention in December 2025 for adoption, with a focus on practical application and knowledge sharing among Mediterranean stakeholders.

Note:

- ➔ The OECM guidance will be developed in 2025, and it is proposed to put the focus on OECMs in 2026 and continue the efforts in 2027.

7.4. MCPA coverage and representativity:

Rationale:

- ➔ The MCPA and OECM Strategy: Strategic Pillar 2 (MCPA Network expansion): Output 2.1: Areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services are identified, Output 2.2: Distribution of MCPA systems across the Mediterranean Sea is balanced & Output 2.3: MCPA coverage in areas beyond national jurisdiction is increased

Objective:

- ➔ Narrow the gap and enhance the MCPA coverage in the Mediterranean and support through technical and scientific guidance the assessment of the representativity of the Mediterranean MPA network :
 - Identify the challenges and obstacles hindering the declaration of new MPAs;
 - Identify the marine biodiversity that are under-represented;
 - Provide tailored guidance and specific recommendations on how to narrow the gap, in particular between the North and South and West to East, to achieve the 30x30 Target.

Note:

- ➔ This work could be based on the MCPA and OECM Strategy assessment and on the MPA Status report that will be developed in 2026.