

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

## ***Terms of reference***

### **I. The *Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM): Rationale and objectives**

1. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are recognized as an efficient tool for the conservation of the marine environment as well as for the management of living resources. Their role in delivering ecosystem services and ensuring sustainability of a wide range of human activities (tourism, fisheries, recreation, education, etc.) is also increasingly recognized. The benefits generated are visible especially when MPAs are managed effectively and have sufficient resources to address local management issues.

2. In the Mediterranean, MPAs exhibit a remarkable diversity in both nature and typology, often closely tied to the legislative frameworks and national and international regulations. Most MPAs were established as standalone sites rather than as part of a cohesive network, which limits their ability to adequately protect the different components of the Mediterranean marine biodiversity. This has resulted in significant gaps in the protection of various critical ecosystems and species.

3. According to the most recent inventory of Mediterranean Marine Protected Areas conducted in 2020 by SPA/RAC and MedPAN, 8.3% of the Mediterranean Sea (209,303 km<sup>2</sup>) is designated as MPAs. This includes national MPAs, European marine Natura 2000 sites, and the Pelagos Sanctuary (established through an international agreement). Among the 1,087 designated MPAs, 39 are listed on the List of Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMI List), representing 5.5% of the Mediterranean Sea (138,464 km<sup>2</sup>). Notably, these MPAs are unevenly distributed across regions, with 97.3% located in European Union (EU) waters.

4. Additionally, to date, no marine Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) have been reported for the Mediterranean. For most of these sites, there is limited information on the implementation of management measures. Even when such measures are in place, their effectiveness in achieving conservation targets remains uncertain.

5. It is clear that while the Mediterranean network of MPAs plays a significant role in safeguarding biodiversity hotspots and in protecting numerous natural sites from the adverse effects of human activities, it requires stronger development and implementation efforts. Additionally, most Mediterranean States are committed under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to establish comprehensive, well-managed, effective, and equitably governed systems of ecologically representative and well-connected MPAs and OECMs. This commitment aligns with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) Target 3, which aims to conserve and manage at least 30% of marine and coastal areas by 2030 through well-connected and equitably governed systems of Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs).

6. Achieving this target necessitates increasing the total surface area covered by MPAs by extending the boundaries of existing ones, creating new coastal and off-shore MPAs, and establishing additional MPAs in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ). It also involves integrating other areas of usage restrictions that could enhance biodiversity conservation, such as fisheries reserves.

Furthermore, improving the management and governance systems of MPAs is essential for their effectiveness and achieving the target mentioned above.

7. In other words, the major challenge for national authorities responsible for MPA planning and management, as well as for the relevant international organizations, in the coming years, will be to enhance the Mediterranean network of MPAs and OECMs in terms of coverage, representativeness, connectivity, and management effectiveness. Additionally, MPAs need to be better integrate into their social and economic contexts, by promoting their recognition in the context of country-led maritime spatial planning and the delivering of ecosystem services such as fisheries, tourism, and resilience to climate change.

8. Addressing these challenges requires that MPA governance be based on the best available knowledge, leveraging expertise and experience from a diverse range of disciplines. This can be accomplished by establishing an *ad hoc* Group of experts that, based on the regular assessment of the status of Mediterranean MPAs, provides guidance to SPA/RAC so as to effectively support countries and international organizations on strengthening the Mediterranean MPA network, ensuring a proper and timely achievement of the GBF, the Post-2020 SAPBIO, and the Post-2020 Regional Strategy for MCPAs and OECMs targets. Additionally, it would help meet the Good Environmental Status for the Mediterranean Sea as outlined by the Barcelona Convention Ecosystem Approach process, along with other regional objectives.

9. The initiative to establish an “*ad hoc* Group of experts” stems from the need for a multidisciplinary think tank that can offer guidance and timely recommendations on the planning and management of MPAs. This “*Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean” (AGEM) was initially created on a pilot-basis in 2018-2019 and was officially adopted by Decision IG.24/6<sup>1</sup> during the 21<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention (COP 21; Naples, Italy, 2-5 December 2019).

10. According to the COP 21 Decision, the AGEM is a multidisciplinary *ad hoc* Group of experts for marine protected areas in the Mediterranean set up to support the SPA/RAC Secretariat and the Contracting Parties to progress with the 2020 and post-2020 marine protected areas agenda in the Mediterranean and to work on related issues such as preparing guidelines, setting up definitions and measurable indicators, and tailoring global concepts and approaches to the Mediterranean context.

11. One of the primary contributions of the AGEM will be to monitor progress in implementing the “Post-2020 Regional Strategy for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures in the Mediterranean” (“the MCPA and OECM Strategy”) adopted by COP 22 to the Barcelona Convention (Decision IG.25/12<sup>2</sup>) and its Monitoring and Evaluation Framework adopted by COP 23 (Decision IG.26/5<sup>3</sup>), including the Strategy’s two main objectives:

- **By 2030, at least 30 per cent of the Mediterranean Sea is protected and conserved through well connected, ecologically representative and effective systems of marine and coastal protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, ensuring adequate geographical balance, with the focus on areas particularly important for biodiversity.**
- **By 2030, the number and coverage of marine and coastal protected areas with enhanced protection levels is increased, contributing to the recovery of marine ecosystems.**

<sup>1</sup> Decision IG.24/6: [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/31704/19ig24\\_22\\_2406\\_eng.pdf](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/31704/19ig24_22_2406_eng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Decision IG.25/12: [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/37134/21ig25\\_27\\_2512\\_eng.pdf](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/37134/21ig25_27_2512_eng.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Decision 26/5: [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/44718/23ig26\\_22\\_2605\\_eng.pdf](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/44718/23ig26_22_2605_eng.pdf)

12. It will also act as a think tank to identify the best approaches for achieving the five Strategic Pillars and their related Strategic outcomes of the MCPA and OECM Strategy (as adopted by COP 22) and its Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (as adopted by COP 23):

- **Strategic Pillar 1: MCPA and OECM Governance**  
→ **Strategic Outcome 1:** Governance arrangements for MCPAs and OECMs are inclusive and effective in delivering conservation and livelihood outcomes
- **Strategic Pillar 2: MCPA Network Expansion**  
→ **Strategic Outcome 2:** MCPA coverage increased through the expansion of soundly-designed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of MCPAs
- **Strategic Pillar 3: Strategic Pillar 3: Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures**  
→ **Strategic Outcome 3:** Marine and coastal OECMs in the Mediterranean are identified, recognized and reported towards post-2020 global and regional targets
- **Strategic Pillar 4: MCPA Management Effectiveness**  
→ **Strategic Outcome 4:** MCPAs are effectively managed and their conservation outcomes successfully delivered
- **Strategic Pillar 5: Government and Stakeholder Action and Support**  
→ **Strategic Outcome 5:** Actions and support for MCPAs and OECMs are mobilized

13. The ad hoc Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM) is set to play an instrumental role in supporting SPA/RAC and the Contracting Parties in meeting the ambitious 30x30 conservation target by 2030. This Group's expertise will be vital in identifying priority actions to expand, effectively manage, and connect Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs), as well as Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) across the Mediterranean. AGEM's guidance not only steers SPA/RAC in critical decision-making but also fosters coherence in conservation efforts at regional and national levels. Its strategic insights will help bridge scientific expertise and policy needs, ensuring a more integrated, adaptive approach to conservation that aligns with international objectives under the CBD post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. In the coming years, AGEM will continue to support the development of a resilient, well-connected network of protected areas and OECMs, reinforcing the Mediterranean's role as a model of sustainable marine management and biodiversity conservation.

## II. The Mediterranean ad hoc Group of experts for MPAs (AGEM): Terms of reference

### A) Mission and objectives

14. The primary mission of the *ad hoc* Group of experts is to provide scientific and technical guidance to improve the Mediterranean network of MCPAs and 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 on 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.

## B) Tasks

15. The *ad hoc* Group of experts will work to deliver scientific and technical advice regarding the achievement of the “the MCPA and OECM Strategy” of the Barcelona Convention. It should also keep 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. 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.
- Assess 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.
- Assess the financial needs and gaps for MPAs and propose innovative funding approaches, including through proper marketing of the services and benefits generated by MPAs.
- Identify potential MPA sites including within the Mediterranean Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs).
- Identify 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 SPA/BD Focal Points through the SPA/RAC in carrying out the listed tasks, particularly when identifying potential MPA sites or OECMs, so that Contracting Parties are directly involved in such processes.

## C) Membership/Composition

16. To be effective the *ad hoc* Group of experts should include a wide range of expertise and ensure a fair, geographically and gender balanced representation of the Mediterranean sub-regions. It will be made of 21 members, including 16 specialists of the following disciplines (2 members/discipline):

- MPA management
- MPA planning
- Marine Biology/Ecology
- Law and regulation
- Socio-economics (other than fisheries and tourism)
- Fisheries
- Nature-based tourism
- MPA Financing

17. The 16 disciplinary specialist members of the *ad hoc* Group of experts will be designated for a period of four (04) years by the SPA/BD Focal Points. To this end, SPA/RAC will propose a list of at least 32 qualified experts and their CVs (4 experts for each of the 8 disciplines referred to in paragraph 16). The SPA/BD Focal Points may also propose experts and their CVs.

18. Furthermore, each of the 5 following organisations will be invited to designate one representative to be member of the *ad hoc* Group of experts, from scientific bodies or staff:

- The Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of GFCM;
- The Scientific Committee of ACCOBAMS;
- IUCN/WCPA marine;
- The Scientific Committee of MedPAN;
- WWF.

19. The chair may decide to invite representatives of other organizations or additional experts to speak on specific topics, either on their own initiative or at the request of a Group member.

20. Contribution to the *ad hoc* Group of experts should be on a voluntary basis and the group members will contribute in their personal capacity, and not as representatives of their countries or organizations. They will not receive compensation for their contributions or input to the Group's work.

#### **D) Working languages**

21. The working languages of the *ad hoc* Group of experts will be English and French.

#### **E) Functioning modalities**

22. At each of its first meetings after the appointment of members, the *ad hoc* Group of experts shall elect from among its members a chair and a vice-chair. SPA/RAC will designate one of its officers to provide backstopping services to the AGEM. The backstopping officer will act as the Secretariat of the AGEM and ensure liaison between the *ad hoc* Group of experts and SPA/RAC.

23. Should financial support be available, the *ad hoc* Group of experts will meet physically at least once every year and will exchange electronically on a frequent and regular basis using appropriate means. The work of the *ad hoc* Group of Experts will be mainly through remote meetings and webinars with the support of SPA/RAC.

#### **F) Reporting and record-keeping**

24. The conclusions and recommendations of each meeting of the AGEM will be adopted by the attending members and will be made available on the website of SPA/RAC. Furthermore, the Chair and/or Vice-Chair of AGEM will attend the meeting of the SPA/BD Focal Points to report about the AGEM works and to present each of the outputs it issued during the covered period.