

# An essential fish habitats network to rebuild mediterranean fisheries

## PROTECTING JUVENILE FISH, A SEA OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE GFCM

General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) 2020-2021

In 2017, the [MedFish4Ever](#) Ministerial Declaration was adopted by 16 countries and the European Union. It contained a forward-thinking commitment, not seen anywhere else, to protect Essential Fish Habitats (EFH) in the Mediterranean Sea and support fish stock rebuilding. This commitment was later translated into a GFCM decision to create a network of Mediterranean EFHs (GFCM/41/2017/5). Since then, progress has been slow, as only 3.5% of the Mediterranean Sea has been protected via this network ([Table 1](#)). The case of the Jabuka/Pomo Pit Fishery Restricted Area (FRA) demonstrates an example of successful regeneration effects on fish populations.

The GFCM Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) call to reduce excessive fishing mortality has been continuously ignored. Consequently, fish populations managed by the GFCM remain severely overexploited: 80% of assessed stocks were considered to be outside biologically safe limits in 2019.

Protecting EFH helps reduce the high fishing rates on juveniles that characterize most Mediterranean demersal fisheries. Since the adoption of the EFH Decision, GFCM fisheries experts recommended and supported protecting juveniles “*as a direct way to achieve reduction of fishing mortality*” ([SAC, 2019](#)) notably through the establishment of “*FRA to protect essential fish habitats*” ([SAC, 2018](#)).

Table 1. Areas designated under the GFCM EFH network (GIS calculation).

EFH Spatial restrictions	Surface [km <sup>2</sup> ]	% of Mediterranean Sea
East of Adventure Bank <sup>A</sup>	811	0.03
West of Gela Basin <sup>A</sup>	814	0.03
East of Malta Bank <sup>A</sup>	644	0.03
Pomo Pit <sup>A</sup>	3,159	0.13
Coastal closure Adriatic <sup>T</sup>	40,982	1.63
Gulf of Gabes <sup>T</sup>	42,051	1.67
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>88,462</b>	<b>3.52</b>

T: Temporal closures; A: Annual closures (FRA)

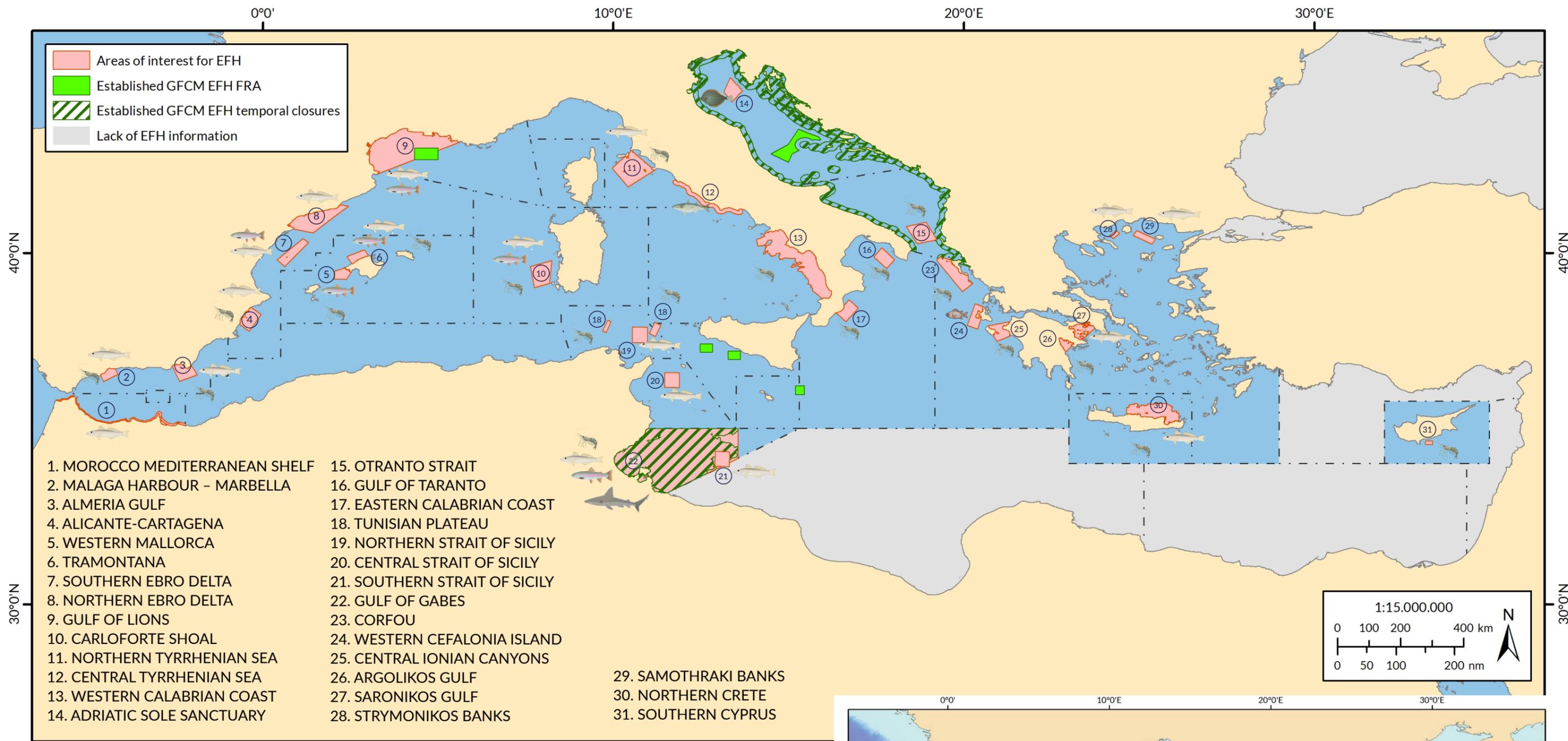
Measures to protect EFH have been insufficiently implemented, as to date, only two subregions have adopted some measures to protect juveniles: the Strait of Sicily and the Adriatic Sea, both through adoption of spatial management measures integrated into Multi-Annual Plans (MAPs). The GFCM has however adopted 4 other MAPs which do not include any binding measure to protect juvenile aggregations or spawning grounds ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Current EFH provisions adopted in GFCM MAPs.

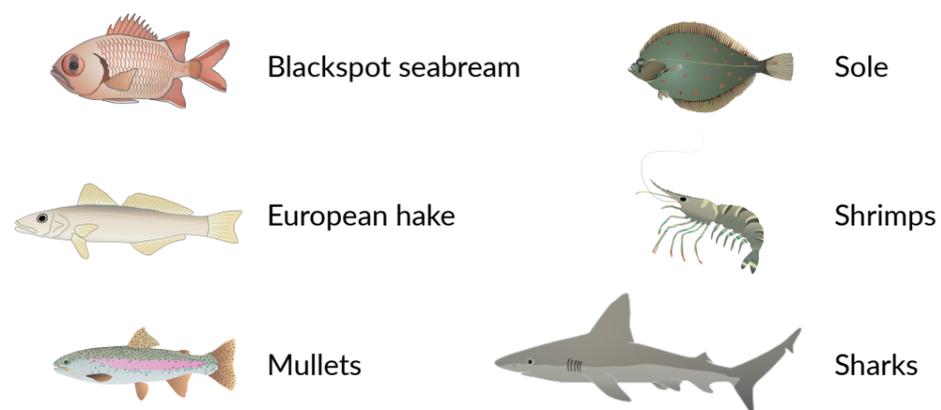
Multiannual Plan	GSA	GFCM Decisions	Target species	EFH Spatial restrictions (at GFCM level)
Demersal Adriatic	17-18	Rec GFCM/43/2019/5	European hake Norway lobster Common sole Deep-water rose shrimp Red mullet	<b>1 FRA</b> <b>1 temporal coastal closure</b>
Demersal Strait of Sicily	12-16	Rec GFCM/43/2019/3	European hake Deep-water rose shrimp	<b>3 FRAs</b>
Seabream Alboran Sea	1-3	Rec GFCM/43/2019/2	Blackspot seabream	<b>None</b>
Turbot Black Sea	29	Rec GFCM/41/2017/4	Turbot	<b>None</b>
Shrimps Ionian Sea	19-21	Rec GFCM/42/2018/4	Giant red shrimp Blue & red shrimp	<b>None</b>
Shrimps Levant Sea	24-27	Rec GFCM/42/2018/3	Giant red shrimp Blue & red shrimp	<b>None</b>

Oceana supports the integrated approach of EFH protection provisions in MAPs and urges GFCM Contracting Parties to consistently apply it for all MAPs, including by updating existing ones. The Strait of Sicily and Adriatic regions should not be an exception but rather examples to follow and reinforce (e.g., with additional target species).

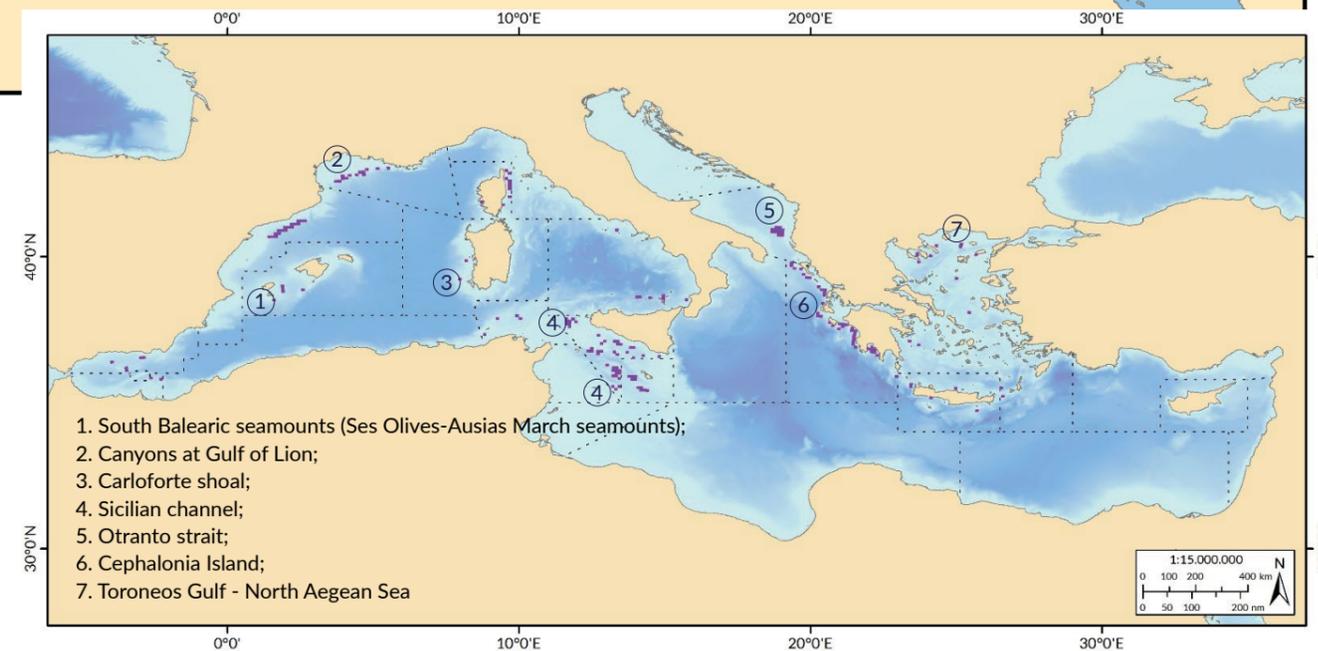
Map 1. Areas of interest for protection of Essential Fish Habitats for demersal species according to available scientific information.



KEY SPECIES/STOCKS CONCERNED\*



(\*) Symbols are courtesy of the Integration and Application Network, University of Maryland, Center for Environmental Science.



Map 2. Known occurrence of the bamboo coral *Isidella elongata* based on scientific information available (purple) collected in the GFCM VME database (2019) and priority VME sites for *Isidella elongata* as presented at the WGVM (2018).

Oceana has advocated for the protection of EFH for years, by showing how much valuable scientific information is available either from surveys, research projects or local ecological knowledge (LEK) (Map 1).

Yet, the potential benefits of EFH protection for fisheries management in GFCM remain largely untapped. Some individual Contracting Parties –such as Italy or Turkey - have adopted national protection measures for EFH (see Oceana’s [interactive map](#)). Oceana recommends that GFCM adopts a reporting mechanism for national EFH closures to contribute to the regional EFH network.

## VME occurrence to support the establishment of the EFH network

Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs) can be classified as EFH because of their characteristics, such as “functional significance of the habitat” when they are “*necessary for the survival, function, spawning/reproduction or recovery of fish stocks, particular life-history stages (e.g. nursery grounds)*” (FAO). Many of the coral species covered by the GFCM Decision on the establishment of a set of measures to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems formed by cnidarian (coral) communities in the Mediterranean Sea (GFCM/43/2019/6) fulfil those criteria. Hence, some of those VMEs play a role as EFH and should also be considered when designating the EFH network (Map 2). Species like *Isidella elongata*, *Lophelia pertusa*, *Madrepora oculata* and several black corals are known to create complex habitat structures which serve as a refuge and breeding areas for juvenile fish, and spawning grounds for commercial species like European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*), shrimps (*Aristaeomorpha foliacea*, *Aristeus antennatus*) or blackspot seabream (*Pagellus bogaraveo*).

Spatial management measures to protect EFHs and VMEs are central to delivering an ecosystem approach to fisheries in the Mediterranean Sea. To achieve this objective, Oceana recommends that GFCM Contracting Parties:

- adopt a [renewed objective in the GFCM Strategy 2021-2025](#) to complete the EFH network by 2025 at the latest, and to develop a clear roadmap for each sub-region by 2021;
- include [binding EFH provisions](#) (e.g. FRAs and other closures) in each GFCM Multi-Annual Plan and revise already adopted MAPs to do the same;
- speed up the [designation of new FRAs](#) to protect nursery grounds for the most overexploited species like European hake and mullets in areas not covered by GFCM MAPs;
- adopt a [reporting mechanism for national EFH measures in GFCM](#), to contribute to the regional EFH network (revising GFCM/41/2017/6 on submission of data on fishing activity);
- when implementing Resolution GFCM/43/2019/6 on VME protection, [consider their functional role as EFH](#) and their contribution to the EFH network.

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