

WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Overfishing crisis: act now, or lose it forever

SEPTEMBER 2018

Mediterranean Sea at Risk

The Mediterranean Sea is one of the world's most important seas. However, it is currently the world's most overfished sea, with more than 90% of stocks fished above what is considered sustainable (i.e. above Maximum Sustainable Yield, or MSY).

In the Western Mediterranean alone, overfishing affects 80% of demersal fish stocks, which live and feed at, or near, the bottom of the sea. Severe overexploitation rates pose high biological risks of stock collapse, which directly affect fishermen, businesses and the livelihoods of coastal communities that depend on the natural yet limited marine resources there.

Today, the most commercially-important species in the Mediterranean, including European hake, red mullet, or anglerfish, are exploited 10 times more than what science recommends.

Overfishing, together with the extensive use of bottom trawling fishing, known as the main threat to the ecosystems and artisanal fisheries in the Mediterranean, are the main culprits behind the critical state of *Mare Nostrum*.

In addition to it, politicians have repeatedly ignored scientific advice, failed to implement existing measures, and failed to set adequate control measures for those that were implemented. **The EU takes a great responsibility for the current dire situation of the Mediterranean Sea** as the key fishing player in terms of volume of catches, the size and the capacity of its fishing fleet.



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80%

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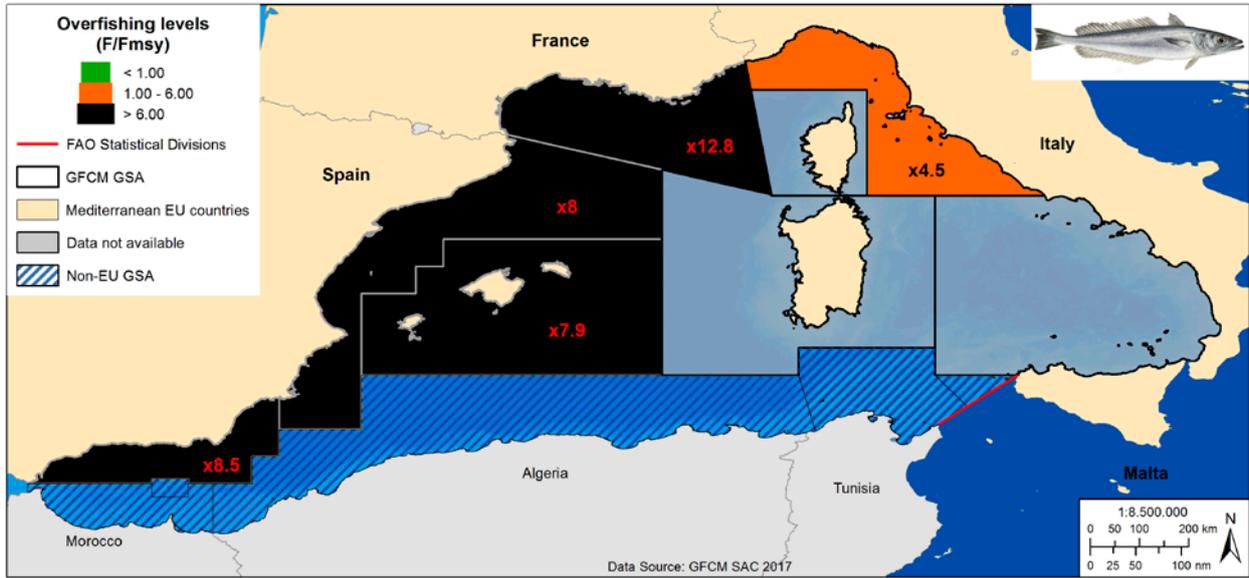
While bottom trawling is known as the main threat to the ecosystems and local artisanal fisheries.



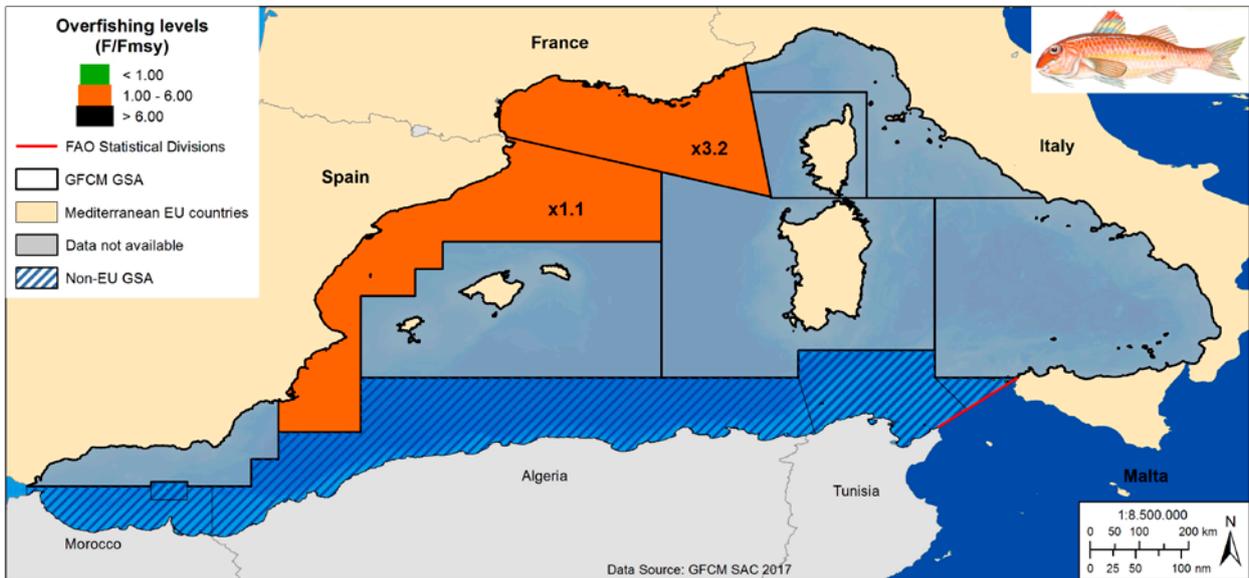
Trawling marks in the Malta Bank
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LEVELS OF OVERFISHING

HOW MANY TIMES FISHING MORTALITY OF HAKE IS ABOVE SUSTAINABLE LEVELS



HOW MANY TIMES FISHING MORTALITY OF RED MULLET IS ABOVE SUSTAINABLE LEVELS



Lack of effective regulatory framework is another key motif behind dwindling fish populations in the region. In practice it means that:

- **MSY is far from being achieved:** due to continued over-fishing and ignoring scientific recommendations, the EU is still lagging behind in achieving sustainable fisheries by 2020.
- **Fishing control effort is not effective:** Member States are not able to tackle the problem of excessive fishing mortality in the Mediterranean Sea, which under EU competence is on average three times higher than sustainable levels.
- **Catches of juvenile fish are too high:** poor selectivity of catches is caused by bottom trawlers
- **Protection of nurseries and spawning areas is poor:** insufficient protection of Essential Fish Habitats (EFHs), which contribute to the recovery of overfished stocks.
- **Enforcement and control measures are limited:** lack of inspections and/or sanctions; non-compliant gears; boat power, minimum size. Some trawlers even target juvenile fish aggregations.

Bottom trawling ban

Earlier this year, the European Commission published its new [proposal](#) for the first multi-annual management plan (MAP) for demersal fish stocks in the Western Mediterranean Sea.

Given an alarming situation of its dwindling fisheries and inability of the Mediterranean governments to tackle overfishing, banning the most destructive trawling gears is **inevitable**.

The Commission proposes to restrict trawlers from operating up to 100 m deep, from 1 May to 31 July each year. Oceana does not consider this measure sufficient enough to protect the most vulnerable part of the EU waters (the coastal zone) and to meet the objectives outlined in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

EU WESTERN MED. TRAWLING FLEET¹

- **High catches of demersal fish account for 81-97% of the total volume of landings in Italy, Spain and France.**
- **Discarded fish account for more than 40% of the total catch on average with that figure rising to 60% in shallow waters**

ESTIMATED DISCARD RATES FROM TRAWL FISHERIES IN THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN²:

Spain: 20-40%

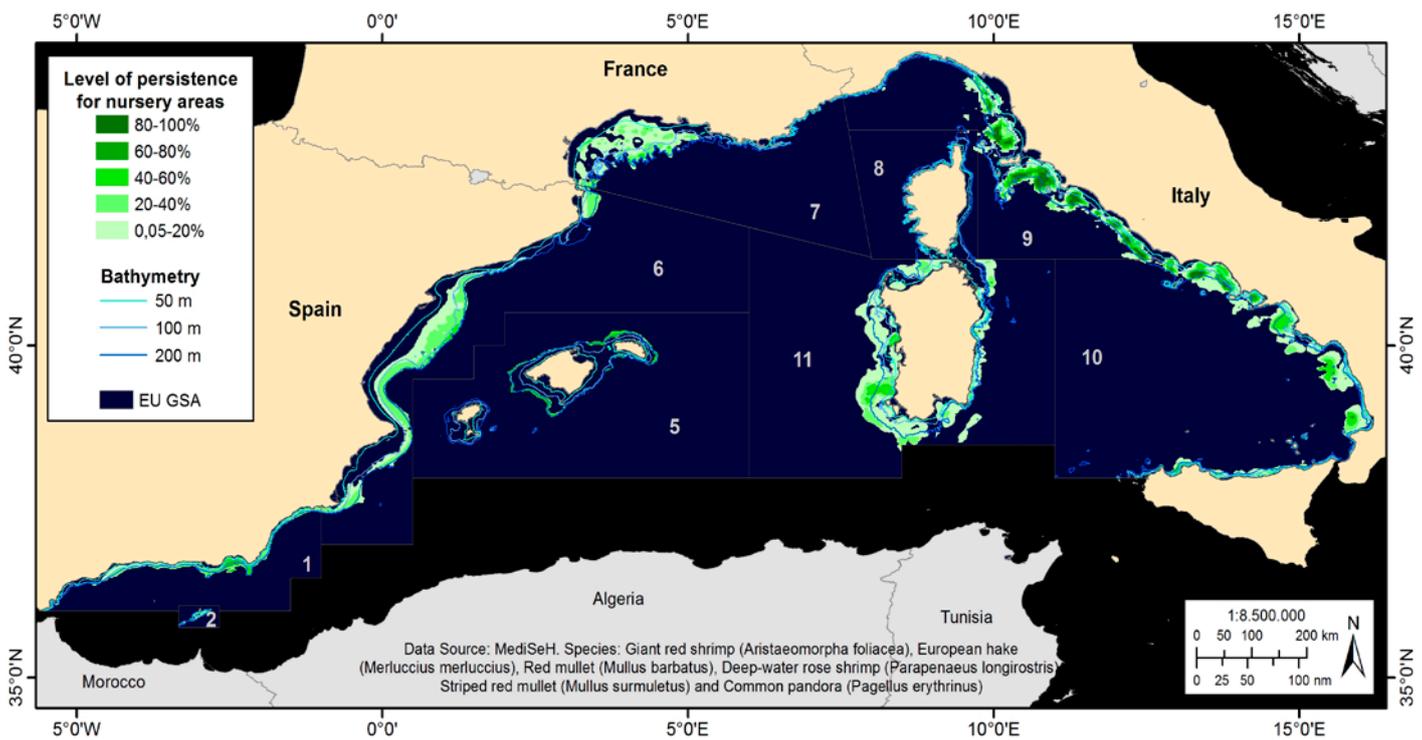
France: 27-40%

Italy: 20-35%

Oceana proposes to extend the trawl-free zone to at least 100 m deep all year round, rather than granting temporary bans since this would not preserve sensitive habitats.

This would contribute to:

- Rebuilding fish stocks and reducing fishing mortality
- Improving selectivity and reducing by-catch of juvenile fish
- Protecting Essential Fish Habitats (EFHs); in particular, safeguarding nursery areas of key demersal stocks (i.e. mullet, seabream and part of hake nurseries)
- Strengthening the protection of sensitive habitats (e.g. maërl and coralligenous beds) and giving preferential access to low-impact small scale fisheries - the most important fleet in the region



Urgent need for a catch limit system

Mediterranean fisheries are managed differently from the rest of the fisheries in the EU, on the basis of the effort control (i.e. ‘days at sea’) and technical measures. Scientists confirm that the so-called “Mediterranean fisheries paradigm” is ineffective in reducing the levels of fishing mortality and resulting in the situation in which “limiting the time allowed to fish at sea leads to an investment in equipment to catch more fish in the same amount of time.”⁴

Despite the fact that STEFC (an EU advisory body) provides scientific advice every year on EU Mediterranean fisheries, the actual number of catches has usually been much larger than what science recommends as a limit.

The effort control is insufficient to reduce fishing mortality. More drastic measures are needed to rebuild dwindling fish stocks.⁵

EXCESSIVE FISHING CAPACITY IN ITALY, SPAIN AND FRANCE³

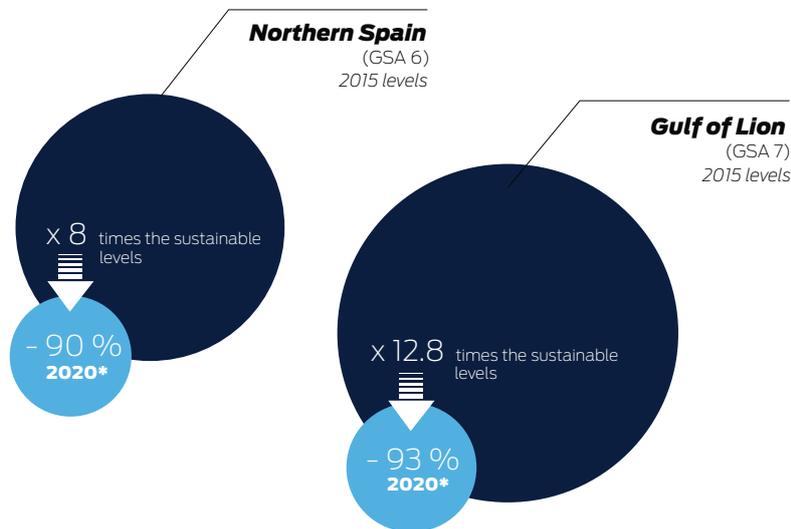
80% of the fleet for which an assessment was possible relies on overfished stocks

56% of the fleet is economically unsustainable in the short-term

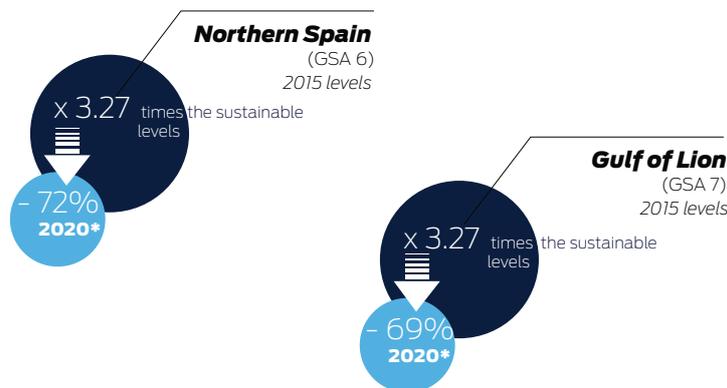
47% of the fleet is economically unsustainable in the long-term

Effort reduction required to reach MSY by 2020

HAKE



RED MULLET



* CFP legal obligation

Ineffectiveness of the current effort system, the continuous ignorance of the scientific advice and inadequacies of existing national management plans are major reasons behind the alarming situation of the Mediterranean Sea stocks' collapse.

Hence, setting catch limits proves to be a more effective way in meeting the objectives of the CFP. Considering the composition of catches in mixed Mediterranean, it will also ensure that all species are exploited within safe limits.

In the North-East Atlantic for example, the implementation of catch limits in line with scientific advice has gradually contributed to reduced levels of overfishing, bringing at the same time the benefits to the fishing sector, the region's economy and to the environment.

Policy recommendations

The first multi-annual management plan for demersal fish stocks in the western Mediterranean Sea is of utmost importance to bring more stability, transparency and sustainability to the region.

The Commission's proposal is a direct follow-up to the MedFish4Ever Declaration from 2017 and a timid step in the right direction on the path to recovery of exploited marine species. As it stands now, the proposal is insufficient to address the overfishing crisis in the Mediterranean by 2020, as laid out in the CFP.

Therefore, Oceana recommends taking urgent and bold actions aimed at:

- Creating a trawl-free zone of at least 100 m deep
- Establishing fisheries closures in deep-sea areas where juveniles and sensitive habitats occur
- Implementing catch limits based on scientific advice, necessary to reach the objectives of the CFP and to restore the abundance of the Mediterranean Sea in the short-term

New, science-based fisheries governance together with effective management measures are key elements to guarantee long-term sustainability of the Mediterranean fisheries.

It is a legal duty of our politicians to replenish all EU fish stocks to sustainable levels by 2020. The Mediterranean Sea is not different in this regard, and therefore the decision-makers should no longer postpone the actions, nor look for further excuses to save *Mare Nostrum*. Through the ministerial MedFish4Ever declaration, the coastal countries of the Mediterranean Sea committed to following scientific advice, to ensuring the sustainability of resources and the recovery of heavily overfished stocks.

There is no better momentum to adopt an ambitious multi-annual plan that would mark a milestone in recovery of the stocks and the rich ecosystems of the Mediterranean Sea.

References

- 1 STECF-16-21; STECF 16-11; STECF 17-18; GFCM The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries 2016
- 2 The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries 2016 (SoMFI 2016): <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5496e.pdf>
- 3 STECF 16-18
- 4 STECF - 55th Plenary Meeting Report (PLEN-17-02); Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg; EUR 28359 EN; doi:10.2760/53335
- 5 Spedicato, M. T. (2016). Study on the Evaluation of Specific Management Scenarios for the Preparation of Multiannual Management Plans in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. CALL MARE/2014/27, CONTRACT NUMBER-EASME/EMFF/2014/1.3. 2.7/SI2. 703 193. Final Report.

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