

VME protection: What is needed?

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VME protection: A legal obligation for GFCM

The protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) has been a legal obligation for RFMOs since 2008, with specific requirements laid out under United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions [59/25](#), [61/105](#) and [64/72](#). However, GFCM lags far behind other RFMOs in fulfilling these obligations. GFCM measures to protect VMEs are limited to three fisheries restricted areas (FRAs) and a prohibition on trawling below 1000 m. Most VMEs in the Mediterranean are therefore entirely unprotected.

Under the UNGA requirements, RFMOs and States should, among other actions:

- Take immediate action to protect VMEs, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold water corals, from destructive fishing practices.
- Identify VMEs and determine whether bottom fishing activities would cause significant adverse impacts to them, by improving scientific research and data collection and sharing.
- Assess, on the basis of the best available scientific information, whether individual bottom fishing activities would have significant adverse impacts on VMEs, and if so, manage these activities to prevent such impacts, or not authorise them to proceed.
- Close areas where VMEs are known to occur or are likely to occur to bottom fishing and ensure that bottom fishing does not proceed unless conservation and management measures have been established to prevent significant adverse impacts on VMEs.
- Require vessels flying their flag to cease bottom fishing activities in areas where VMEs are encountered during fishing operations, and to report encounters so that appropriate measures can be adopted.
- Implement the 2009 FAO *International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas*.

VMEs are classified based on their:

- *Uniqueness or rarity*
- *Functional significance*
- *Fragility*
- *Life history characteristics*
- *Structural complexity*

Examples of VMEs include:

- *Cold water corals*
- *Deep-sea sponge aggregations*
- *Seep and vent communities*

Examples of features where VMEs may occur include:

- *Submerged edges and slopes*
- *Seamounts*
- *Canyons and trenches*
- *Hydrothermal vents and cold seeps*

The way forwards

Safeguarding VMEs is an important pending task for GFCM, in order to fulfil its legal obligations, and to protect highly productive deep-sea areas, as well as the fish stocks and other species that depend upon them.

Developing appropriate management and conservation measures must be based on the best available science. Therefore, as a first step in the process to develop these measures, GFCM should establish a Working Group of scientific experts that will focus on VME issues.

The responsibilities of the VME Working Group should include:

- Outlining steps to be taken to progress in the **implementation** of UNGA Resolutions for VME protection, including an assessment of relevant measures developed within other RFMOs;
- Defining a comprehensive **list of VME indicator species and habitats*** for the region, based on the best available information and scientific advice;
- **Identifying areas where VMEs occur** or are likely to occur, and propose means by which data collection on VMEs can be strengthened;
- Advising on a precautionary, scientifically-based **VME encounter protocol** (including a move-on rule).

Oceana strongly urges GFCM Members to begin the process of developing measures to protect VMEs



Cold water coral reef in the Alboran Sea © OCEANA

* Please refer to Oceana's document "**Developing a list of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems.**"

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