

Position Paper 18th COP meeting to the Barcelona Convention

An opportunity for Mediterranean deep-sea corals and Dark Habitats

The current biennium may be a crucial turning point for the Mediterranean marine environment. For the first time, the Contracting Parties (CPs) to the Barcelona Convention have the opportunity to take decisive steps to move towards the effective protection of deep-sea habitats and species.

Until recently, knowledge about deep environments has remained out of reach, and consequently protection measures are sparse and still far from sufficient. However, recent scientific publications and findings have provided the evidence needed to demonstrate the high ecological value and importance of deep-sea habitats. Indeed, the deep-sea is characterised by a unique and rich biodiversity, which can be essential for the sustainability of many marine resources.

According to the last assessment of the Mediterranean Marine Protected Areas Network (2012):

- only 1.08% of the sea surface is under some legal protection (excluding the Pelagos Sanctuary), and;
- most of the existing protection still remains near the coast.

Based on these outcomes, the representativity of habitats and species should be improved, at least to encompass open and deep-sea areas.

In addition to their lack of protection, it is worth highlighting that deep-sea habitats are extremely fragile and vulnerable. Due to the cumulative impacts triggered by human activities (e.g., pollution, overfishing, climate change, etc.) they are facing increasing threats.

Despite the significant role of dark habitats and particularly of deep-sea corals for ecosystem functioning, the current Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity (SPA/BD) Protocol still lacks the adequate measures to assure their protection and conservation.

Since the entry into force of the SPA/BD Protocol, several amendments to the Annexes have been adopted. However, to date, only three shallow coral species and no deep-sea corals have been listed as endangered or threatened. In addition, the Dark Habitats Action Plan is an innovative tool that will provide guidance to implement key actions in order to reach the Good Ecological Status as required by the Ecosystem Approach process.

Two important Decisions concerning the deep-sea environment have been proposed for adoption at this 18th COP meeting. Endorsing these decisions would not only allow for the Convention to follow the Rio+20 recommendations, but also to be in line with commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, particularly Aichi Target 11.

For all of the reasons above, Oceana encourages CPs to endorse the following Draft Decisions:

- Action Plans under the SPA/BD Protocol, including Dark Habitats, Monk Seal, Marine Turtles, Birds, and Cartilaginous Fishes (***Draft Decision IG.21/4***).

- Amendments of Annexes II and III to the SPA/BD Protocol (***Draft Decision IG.21/6***).

Lastly, the rules, procedures and mechanisms related to the Compliance Committee have been also reviewed during the present period, and a number of specific areas of concern have been identified. The Compliance Committee plays an essential role in ensuring the implementation of the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols. Oceana therefore recommends the adoption of the ***Draft Decision on the Compliance Committee (IG.21/1)***, in order to improve the effectiveness of compliance processes within the Convention.

Oceana strongly encourages CPs to adopt the proposed decisions related to the SPA/BD Protocol, in order to:

- **Grant the necessary protection to deep-sea coral species due, to their threatened status and their importance for ecosystem functioning**
- **Comply with the Rio+20 Ocean Declaration mandates to advance marine biodiversity knowledge and protection.**
- **Properly develop a coherent and representative network of MPAs that would protect at least 10% of the Mediterranean Sea by 2020, in line with Aichi target 11.**
- **Strengthen the ongoing EBSA process in the Mediterranean region.**
- **Contribute to achieving the Targets to reach the Good Ecological Status according to the Ecosystem Approach process.**