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PROGRESS REPORT OF THE PROJECT “UNDERSTANDING MEDITERRANEAN MULTI-TAXA BYCATCH OF VULNERABLE SPECIES AND TESTING MITIGATION – A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH”

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1. Project background and objectives

The joint project, “Understanding Mediterranean multi-taxa bycatch of vulnerable species and testing mitigation: a collaborative approach” (the Medbycatch project) is a partnership between the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area (ACCOBAMS), the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Specially Protected Areas Regional Activity Centre (SPA/RAC) of the United Nations Environment Programme/Mediterranean Action Plan (UN Environment/MAP), the International Union for Conservation of Nature – Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN-Med), BirdLife International (BLI) and the Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles (MEDASSET).

Funded by the MAVA Foundation over a three-year period (2017–2020) and building on complementarities of the partners’ respective mandates with a view to promote synergies and join resources and expertise, the project aims to address the gaps in knowledge regarding the bycatch of vulnerable species during fishing operations in the Mediterranean, support the potential testing of mitigation measures and eventually provide elements for the formulation of national/regional strategies to reduce incidental catches and support the sustainability of fisheries. Project implementation involves field observation programmes (on-board, at landing site and through self-sampling) across different fishing gears (i.e. bottom trawls, gillnets and demersal longlines), together with training, awareness raising, and identification and testing of mitigation techniques.

Although it is being implemented in three Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey), it also develops tools and builds knowledge applicable to the entire Mediterranean and Black Sea area.

In this context, a harmonized data collection on incidental catches of vulnerable species –elasmobranchs, sea turtles, marine mammals, seabirds and macrobenthic invertebrates – is in line with a standard regional multi-taxa data collection methodology, allowing for replication across different areas, eventually leading to appropriate solutions for the whole region. The main project outputs include:

- a regional review on available information on incidental catches of vulnerable species in the Mediterranean;
- standardized regional protocols for multi-taxa data collection, inclusive of methodological annexes for observations on-board and landing sites, as well as self-sampling and questionnaires;
- training and capacity-building activities, including formation of national teams of on-board observers and of fishers on self-sampling methodologies;
- data analysis on the impacts of fleet segments on the incidental catch of vulnerable species, and the spatial and temporal distribution of incidental catches for the selected fleet segments;
- identification of the typology and a quantitative assessment of current fishing practices pertaining to these fisheries that lead to incidental catch (e.g. fishing area, seasonality, carrying capacity of the vessels, market);
- awareness initiatives on the impact of the incidental catch of vulnerable species;
- testing of mitigation measures, including implementation and monitoring of possible methods and tools in identified fisheries and countries.

2. Project organization and coordination

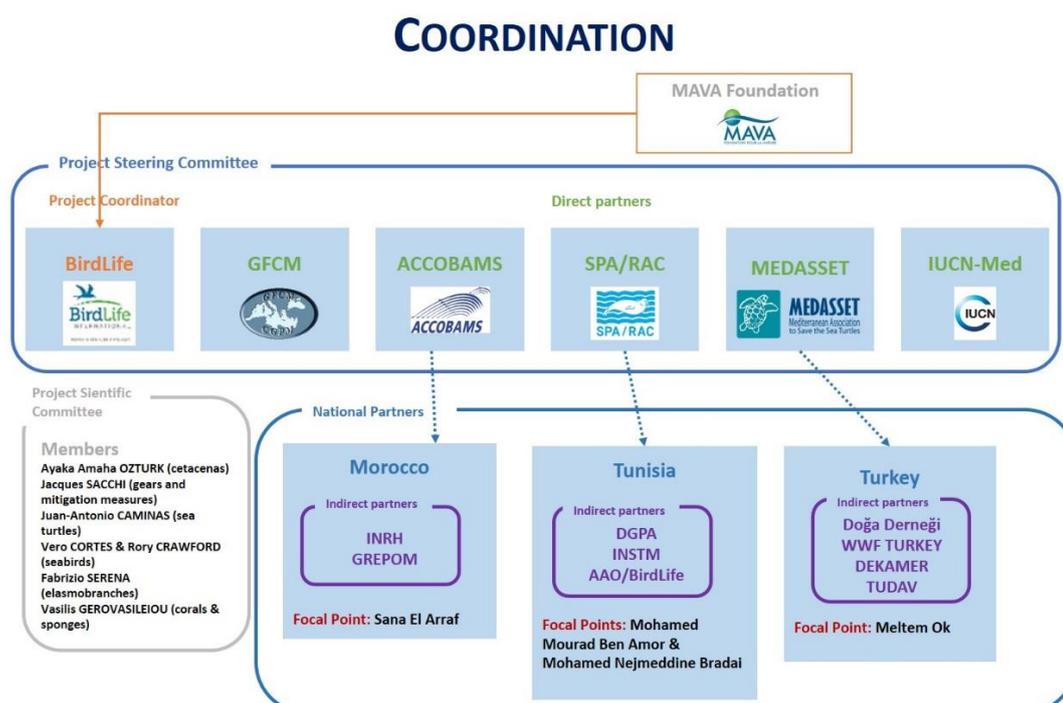
A Project Steering Committee oversees a proper and effectively coordinated project implementation, and a Project Scientific Committee provides technical feedback, advice and coherence. The latter is composed of project partners, national focal points, as well as one international expert per taxa (cetaceans, macrobenthic invertebrates, elasmobranchs, seabirds, sea turtles) and one international expert on fisheries aspects (fishing gears, in particular). For cetaceans, the Project Scientific Committee Member is the Task Manager on Interactions with Fisheries of the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee (Ms Ayaka AMAHA OZTURK during the triennium 2017-2019).

In the three countries, a Project Focal Point was officially appointed through GFCM to ensure the proper coordination of the activities at the national level. ACCOBAMS, SPA/RAC and MEDASSET provide also support to the coordination between the different national partners, respectively in Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey, and between the national and regional partners.

The national partners involved in the project are:

- In Morocco:
 - o National Institute for Fisheries Research (INRH)
 - o Groupe de Recherche pour la Protection des Oiseaux au Maroc (GREPOM)
- In Tunisia:
 - o Direction Générale de la Pêche et de l'Aquaculture (DGPA)
 - o National Institute of Marine Sciences and Technologies (INSTM)
 - o Association « Les Amis des Oiseaux » (AAO/BirdLife Tunisie)
- In Turkey:
 - o Doğa Derneği
 - o WWF Turkey
 - o DEKAMER
 - o TUDAV

The project coordination is synthetized in the organogram below.



In order to facilitate the coordination and start of the activities, inception workshops were organized during the first semester 2018 in the three countries, supported by many coordination meetings, to present the project activities to the main national stakeholders (national and local competent authorities, fishers' representatives, national fisheries research institutes and NGOs involved in the project).

Close links are maintained with the national partners and the project Focal Points, and meetings of the project Steering Committee are regularly organized to monitor the implementation of the project activities, identify solutions when problems occur and ensure that similar progress is made in the three countries.

3. Overview of the main achievements

The main actions implemented since the beginning of the project are synthesized hereinafter. They are organized according to the two strategic components of the project:

- ❖ Assessing incidental catches of vulnerable species in selected fisheries
- ❖ Raising awareness on the incidental catches of vulnerable species and supporting policy advocacy

The third strategic component of the project related to the identification and testing of mitigation techniques will be developed in 2020, after a one-year period of implementation of the monitoring programmes to allow a proper assessment of the incidental catch issues.

3.1. Assessing incidental catches of vulnerable species in selected fisheries

a. Regional review on incidental catches of vulnerable species in the Mediterranean and Black Sea

In order to establish a reference baseline of the available knowledge on interactions between fishing activities and vulnerable species in the Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries, a bibliographic review was developed including different chapters for each concerned taxa. The final report is under final editing stages and it will be published on the project partners' websites as soon as it is available.

Regarding cetaceans, the main conclusions of the review point out that, *in the past, most of the cetacean catches derived from large mesh size driftnets; once they have been banned, the cetacean mortality in fishing gears dropped. Currently the large mesh size driftnets are officially banned from all the countries of the GFCM area, but there are still some anecdotal information and some evidences (cetacean strandings with typical signs of entanglement in large driftnets, images and videos on social networks, news from online newspaper) that this activity is still illegally practiced in some areas. Major sources of recent information on cetacean bycatch were found in the Black Sea, where incidental catch of the three endemic cetacean species still occurs in the turbot and spiny dogfish bottom net fishery.*

The review also emphasizes that in the last ten years, the number of publications and records concerning surveys or studies about cetacean bycatch in fishing gears has drastically reduced and that one of the main problems to assess cetacean incidental catches is that the methods used by researchers in different countries are not standardized. It is then extremely difficult to compare the results obtained.

b. Development of a standardised methodology for multi-taxa data collection

The "[Monitoring incidental catch of vulnerable species in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea – methodology for data collection](#)" aims to support regional monitoring programmes and provide a framework for the development and

implementation of an efficient, standardized data collection and monitoring system for all vulnerable species encountered in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, namely elasmobranchs, marine mammals, seabirds, sea turtles and macrobenthic invertebrates. This methodology includes on-board observations, questionnaires at landing sites and self-sampling activities. It ensures minimum common standards for the collection of data on these species and allows for replicability and comparisons among fisheries across the region, thus offering a harmonized basis of knowledge, information and evidence for decision-making.

This protocol and related methodology was developed consistently with existing instruments and regulations in place at GFCM level (i.e. the Data Collection Reference Framework and existing binding recommendations) as well as other relevant instruments (e.g. the EU Data Collection Framework).

c. Training of on-board observers

In each of the three countries, the national partners identified the observers to be part of the monitoring programmes, taking into consideration their experience as regards fisheries monitoring programmes and their knowledge of vulnerable marine species.

5-days trainings were organized for the observers in the three countries during the second semester 2018 with the support of international and national experts. The sessions covered the following topics:

- Presentation and use of the data collection methodology
- Vulnerable species affected by incidental catches (species identification, information to be collected in case of incidental catch and guidelines on how to handle and release bycaught individuals)
- Characterization of the fishing gears/operations and their interactions with vulnerable species
- Building relationship with fishers and security on-board fishing vessels.

Practical sessions on board of fishing vessels were organized in the three countries so that the observers could practice data collection in real conditions.

d. Development of Identification Guide and Identification Sheets

Identification of vulnerable marine species is sometimes difficult, in particular when it has to be done during fishing operations before fishers discard the non-commercial catches.

In order to support the work of the observers and to complement the data collection methodology, an [Identification Guide of vulnerable species incidentally caught in Mediterranean fisheries](#) was developed to provide observers on board fishing vessels and fishers with identification assistance and general information about vulnerable species potentially caught as bycatch. Each species description contains photographs, illustrations and narrative descriptions to highlight important anatomical structures and features of a particular species.

For each species, there is a description of the main characteristics that can be used to identify the species (or for the case of sponges and corals, the morphological groups), together with its common name in several languages (English, Spanish, French and Arabic). Information is also provided if the species is protected under Appendix I (Endangered migratory species) and/or Appendix II (Migratory species conserved through Agreements) of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS); Appendix I (Species threatened with extinction) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area (ACCOBAMS); or under Annex II (List of Endangered or Threatened Species) or III (List of Species Whose Exploitation is Regulated) of the SPA/

BD Protocol (Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean) of the Barcelona Convention. Additionally, it is provided if the species is included at any GFCM (General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean) recommendations on fisheries management measures for conservation of the species in the GFCM area as well as the management recommendations and resolutions adopted by ICCAT (Inter-national Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) on bycatch in tuna and tuna-like fisheries. Finally is given the conservation status following IUCN conservation categories in 2019.

Based on this guide, simplified ID sheets are also being developed to provide observers and fishers with a practical tool that could be used in the field, at ports and landing sites for example.

e. Implementation of the monitoring programmes

In the three countries, the monitoring programme has started in March/April 2019. It relies on on-board observations and port questionnaires. Self-reporting methodology will be tested in the next months, once the most collaborative and interested fishers are identified.

Several meetings have been organized with professionals before the start of the monitoring program and during its implementation to facilitate the collaboration with fishers.

The monitoring programmes and the monitoring efforts carried out so far can be summarized as follows:

❖ In Morocco:

- 4 ports are surveyed (across GSA 3)
- 15 observers
- Fishing fleets: trawlers, longliners and purse seiners

By mid-September, the completed number of on-board observations and port questionnaires is:

Fleet	On-board observation	Questionnaires
Trawlers	192	433
Longliners	114	303
Seiners	125	308
Total	431	1044

❖ In Tunisia:

- 24 ports are surveyed (across GSA 12, 13 and 14)
- 14 observers
- Fishing fleets: trawlers and polyvalents (longliners and static nets)

By mid-September 2019, the completed number of on-board observations and port questionnaires is:

Fleet	On-board observation	Questionnaires
Trawlers	31	159
Polyvalents	82	503
Total	113	662

❖ In Turkey:

- 19 ports are surveyed (across GSA 22 and 24)

- 13 observers
- Fishing fleets: trawlers and polyvalents (longliners and static nets)

By September 2019, the completed number of on-board observations and port questionnaires is:

Fleet	On-board observation	Questionnaires
Trawlers	23	
Polyvalents	4	866
Total	27	866

The data collected will be gathered in a regional database managed by GFCM for the project. After one-year of implementation of the monitoring programmes, data will be analysed at the national level and, as much as possible, at the regional level to compare the results among the different countries. Data analysis will be performed with the support and guidance of the experts of the project Scientific Committee.

3.2. Raising awareness on the incidental catches of vulnerable species and supporting policy advocacy

This project component includes activities related to the communication on the project itself and activities aimed at facilitating, through awareness raising of decision makers, future changes in the fisheries management policies, based on reliable assessments and viable technical solutions to mitigate incidental catches.

a. Communicating on the project and creating awareness on bycatch issues across the Mediterranean

A logo, that is declined in a different version for each country, was created to define a brand identity to the project. Printed material (leaflets, roll-ups) was created to present the project and information on the project is disseminated on the occasion of regional meetings/conferences/fora. Communication material (such as T-shirts, windbreakers and hats) was also produced for stakeholders (eg. fishers collaborating with observers).

Testimonies of observers and fishers who participate in the monitoring programmes are collected to showcase the project and to highlight the challenges to be addressed.

Video and infographics showcasing and presenting the project and the incidental catch issues were also produced.

News on the project activities are regularly shared through the project partners' social media, using a common hashtag to identify the project. Press releases and web stories are produced on the occasion of national events.

b. Raising awareness of decision makers on the incidental catches of vulnerable species

Several awareness raising activities are implemented in the three countries, for example:

- National photo exhibitions are (or will be) organized to highlight the incidental catch issue
- Factsheets are developed for each country with information on the legal and technical contexts related to fisheries management, bycatch data collection and conservation of vulnerable species.
- Dedicated meetings/conferences/roundtables are being organized at the national level involving the competent authorities to raise awareness among decision makers on the incidental catches issue.

Activities aimed at engaging with the EU to promote the project and specific deliverables such as the protocol and the GFCM database (e.g. developing a brief on the Protocol) are also carried out.

c. Disseminating good practices

The FAO-ACCOBAMS Good practices guides for handling marine species caught incidentally in Mediterranean fisheries were translated into Arabic and Turkish.