MARBENA

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Summary of discussions

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[*]Introduction to Topic 2.1: Endangered biodiversity and management of marine protected areas, wetlands, lagoons, estuaries and seagrass meadows

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To have a knowledge of the most remarkable components of marine biodiversity, in its broadest sense, supposes there to be a thorough knowledge, acquired earlier, of the totality of the biodiversity elements without statute at neither national nor at regional (Mediterranean) level. In the southern and eastern part of the Mediterranean this is not always the case. Very often fragmented, disparate and delocalised data, both in time and in space, render the elaborate management plans "hypothetic". This fragmentation makes it difficult to standardise criteria for the classification of national or regional sites of interest. The essence of these criteria is in fact based on the density or the size of the remarkable or endangered species population, data that most often are incomplete if not entirely unavailable. Under these conditions it is rather difficult to devise management plans for potential areas of protection and to develop efficient practical instruments for the protection of one or another remarkable population.

For these reasons, it has always been recommended to conform to strict criteria of the presence of remarkable species when establishing a reserve, at least in the case of Algeria. In a second phase, we suggest to push the knowledge on species having a statute in order to dispose of elements that can help establish the most useful management plan.

Another gap is undoubtedly participation in the dynamics of the process of the assimilation of a reserve. Too often, people considered as "key-persons" in the system are not consulted until the end of the process, which makes their participation rather incidental because, in most of the cases, these people don't feel at all or any longer included in the dynamics started by the authorities.

In addition, the interests for economical development must be considered when generating the most appropriate mechanisms for the protection of endangered species and landscapes of major interest. The search for balance between the protection of the most symbolic species and the most rational exploitation of the species and the resources of commercial interest should be the guide while establishing the management plans for areas to be protected. That's why, on a national scale, protected areas should not be considered as isolated and autonomous entities, but more as elements or systems being part of one huge functional system where the fixed objectives for either area are complementary and are part of a global and even cross-border vision, as this is the case for a semi-closed sea like the Mediterranean.

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The Convention relative to biological diversity recognizes the urgency in implementing concrete and efficient actions for marine biodiversity protection. The actions undertaken, on a Mediterranean scale, such as the programmes on integrated management for coastal zones (GIZC and GIZL) as well as the performance objectives on protected marine and coastal areas fit in this process. At the moment, the most adapted framework to this strategy is the strategic action plan for the conservation of biological diversity in the Mediterranean region. However, the process of assimilation as a reserve needs to be accelerated taking into account that in most of the Mediterranean countries the time between the declaration of intent and the actual protection measures can be that long that valuable ecosystems have time to degrade even up to the point of irreversibility.

A modern approach to coastal marine environment protection and biodiversity requests more than just species conservation, it would need an action more related to man or, in some countries where environmental aggressive practises (e.g. fishing using dynamite,…) stay anchored, even a change of mentality. The increasingly threatened living marine resources reveal the extent of the challenges which arise to us.

As the limits of the national strategies implemented in a partitioned way seem to be reached, on a regional and world level there seems to be a serious will to establish a consensus on an integrated and global development which traces contours of a strategy on a broader geographical scale, but takes into account the characteristics of the various areas and regions.

Several Mediterranean countries are well advanced in the generation of national strategies for marine and coastal biodiversity preservation. These strategies are globally based on knowledge, awareness, and the role of participants. This last point highlights the shared responsibility in the implementation of one conservation strategy for natural elements. This responsibility needs a hierarchy from the bottom to the top of the political decision-making process at a national level, which will subsequently be put forward to the international community. This process should be the driving power behind any strategy.

Here we must say that where the number of the Marine Protected Areas of the Mediterranean is in continuous growth, this development has mainly started in the 80’s or 90’s in the western basin and has also included, in the last years, the countries of the oriental sector. Syria, with its 183 km of coast, has recently recognized the importance of the Marine Protected Areas and has begun to select some coastal areas to be protected. in the northern sector. The Syrian government took vast steps to generate these MPAs, but sometimes irresponsible works (e.g. marine transportation disasters) may cause the failure of any plan or strategy and the loss of all official and public efforts. Can we avoid these problems? Or at least, how would we deal with them?

At last, the time has probably come to review, in the light of the data gathered during the last decade, the list of endangered species as well as those whose exploitation is regulated in the Mediterranean, this also being one of the stakes for a better management of protected zones.