

Data collection is key to save Mediterranean fish stocks

A recent analysis shows that 93 per cent of the assessed Mediterranean fish stocks are overexploited, and a number of them are on the verge of depletion.

The study, conducted by the Commission's Scientific Technical Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) and the Joint Research Centre (JRC), also reveals that the Mediterranean Sea has lost 41 per cent of its marine mammals and 34 per cent of the total fish population over the past 50 years.

The analysis looks at the historical changes in the Mediterranean Sea food web driven by environmental drivers and fishing efforts and describes the largest reductions were found in the Western Mediterranean Sea and the Adriatic Sea (- 50 per cent), while the reduction was much less in the Ionian Sea (- 8 per cent).

In addition, the study concludes that the main driving force behind these changes has been the variation in the primary production within the Mediterranean Basin. Primary production refers to the photosynthetic activity of plants, whereby plants use sunlight to synthesise nutrients from carbon dioxide and water to create phytoplankton biomass, which forms the basis of the food web and fish reproduction. As the primary productivity of the Mediterranean Sea is naturally low, the entire Mediterranean Sea is characterised as a low-productivity ecosystem.

"These characteristics render the Mediterranean Sea highly vulnerable to impacts such as climate change, marine litter and invading alien species, and it is very easy to overfish the existing stocks. When fish stocks are fished intensively, they not have the time to reproduce to keep up the population levels", pointed out Jann Martinsohn, leader of the fisheries research group at the JRC.

Better data collection is one of the key preconditions to save these fish stocks, as acknowledged by the Medfish4Ever political declaration, signed by Mediterranean basin Ministers by the end of March.

To support work towards this objective, the JRC has developed a public database which is now online to help monitor the status of fish stocks in the Mediterranean and Black Sea. The data is made available through an interactive online dashboard that allows stakeholders to compare and contrast several stock assessment variables such as fishing mortality, the weight of all individuals in a fish stock capable of reproducing, and trends in the dynamics of natural populations. The system also enables its users to filter the results by area, species and status.

"The collection of fisheries data is indispensable for the long-term sustainability of the sector. The online database developed by the Joint Research Centre is a step in the right direction," pointed out Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, responsible for the JRC.

The Commissioner explained that it contains almost 10 years' worth of fish stock assessments in the Mediterranean Sea, which will enable a more accurate analysis of existing fish stocks and thus contribute to the overall fisheries management in the Mediterranean for the benefit of the environment and citizens.

For his part, Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Karmenu Vella stressed the JRC database is yet more evidence of the need for urgent action, stating that their joined up approach matches scientific evidence with political will.

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