Essential Fish Habitats Protection

Rebuilding EU fish stocks by 2020 under the Common Fisheries Policy

JUNE 2017

What is an Essential Fish Habitat?

An Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) is a habitat identified as crucial to the ecological and biological requirements for the critical life cycle of exploited fish species, and which may require special protection to improve stock status and long-term sustainability[1]. In particular, EFH refers to the waters and substrate necessary for fish to spawn, breed or feed[2].

Examples of EFH include[3]:

- **Spawning grounds:** areas with a high concentration of mature females.
- **Nursery grounds:** areas where the highest concentrations of juvenile fish are found.
- **Migration corridors:** pathways, used by highly mobile species throughout their lifecycle, (such as from the spawning ground to the nursery ground).
- **Feeding grounds/ Foraging grounds:** areas, where increased feeding activity takes place.

Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management

The Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) is a management strategy that explicitly recognizes the complexity of ecosystems and the interconnections among its component parts. It usually refers to bycatch mitigation, multi-species management, protection of vulnerable ecosystems, and integrated approach[4]. In the context of the overall goal to end overfishing and reduce bycatch significantly, conserving and enhancing EFHs form the foundations for an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

Several fisheries policies and legislations worldwide have already included the protection of EFHs, for example, the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995), the US Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (1996), and the Malta MedFish4Ever Declaration (2017). Also, the European Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)[5] establishes the ecosystem approach as one of its policy pillars (Art. 2.3), and in particular, when adopting regional multi-annual plans specific alternative conservation measures, based on the ecosystem approach, shall be included for some of the stocks it covers (CFP Art. 9).

Article 8 of the CFP binds EU Member States, and the European Commission, to establish Fish Stock Recovery Areas.

It requires the creation of a coherent network of protected areas which are essential to fish life cycle, due to their biological sensitivity, including areas where there is clear evidence of spawning grounds and heavy concentrations of fish below the minimum conservation reference size.

Oceanic puffers (*Lagocephalus lagocephalus lagocephalus*) aggregate to reproduce.
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CFP provisions on Fish Stock Recovery Areas

In the context of the ecosystem approach to fisheries management, Article 8 of the CFP recognises the importance of Fish Stock Recovery Areas (FSRAs) and that its effective protection can contribute to the objective of rebuilding and exploiting fish stocks sustainably by 2020, at the very latest.

Article 8.2 requires EU Member States to identify suitable areas essential to the fish life cycle based on their biological sensitivity and to request the European Commission to propose the protection of such areas from adverse fishing impacts. Finally, paragraph 3 of Article 8 points to the responsibility of the European Commission to integrate provisions to protect EFHs in multi-annual plans for fisheries.

EFH protection so far

The EU is still far from implementing an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. FSRAs have unjustifiably received little political attention, and very little progress has happened so far, despite considerable scientific work conducted and funding invested for their identification for many years.

The protection of EFH through the establishment of FSRA, as a conservation measure in line with the objectives of Multi-Annual Plans (MAPs) described in Article 10 of the CFP, has not been included either in the recently adopted multi-annual management plan for the Baltic[6] nor in the current multi-annual management plan proposal for the North Sea[7].

Why protect EFH under MAPs?

- **To support the ecosystem approach to fisheries management (EAFM):** the goal of EAFM is to sustain structures and functions of ecosystems as well as fishing yield. In this context, the protection of EFHs will safeguard critical habitats as well as critical life stages of harvested species, which in turn contributes to the conservation and health of fish stocks.
- **To facilitate the implementation of the landing obligation:** in some EU fisheries, the selectivity of the fishing gears has proved insufficient to reduce unwanted catches and to eliminate discards. Avoiding fish activities in places where young fish aggregate, would contribute to reduce unwanted catches of fish below minimum conservation reference sizes.
- **To support the MSY objective by optimising fishing opportunities:** by conserving the proportion of fish stocks that is responsible for the future state of the stock will rapidly rebuild biomass without limiting fishing opportunities further for overfished stocks, and could even allow for greater fishing opportunities.

Since 2007, the EU funded at least €19 M in marine research projects, directly or indirectly linked to Essential Fish Habitats[8]

Surmullets (*Mullus surmuletus*) feeding on small invertebrates that live on seagrass (*Cymodocea nodosa*)
© OCEANA/ Rafael Fernández Esteban

EFH protection in the Strait of Sicily

In the Strait of Sicily, demersal stocks of deep-water rose shrimp and hake are heavily overexploited, with fishing mortality of up to five times sustainable levels. Moreover, up to 50% of the hake caught in this area is undersized, which undermines the productivity of this stock.

In 2016, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) adopted **a multi-annual management plan for demersal stocks** of hake and deep-water rose shrimp in the Strait of Sicily with the aim to rebuild these stock. The plan included the **closure of three nursery areas to bottom-fishing** in the Northern part of the Strait of Sicily.

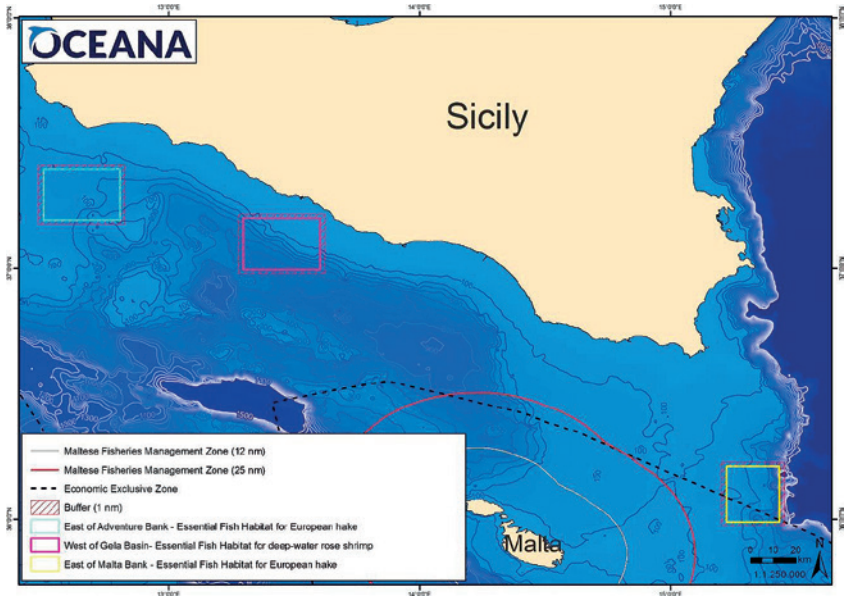
This decision follows technical proposals by Oceana, based on at- sea surveys in the area, and is a key step towards rebuilding the stock of hake – the most overfished species in the Mediterranean – and preserving the home to over 60% of the deep-sea rose shrimps caught in this sea.

Protecting **Essential Fish Habitats** in this context is expected to:

- Reduce and gradually eliminate catches of juvenile fish, mainly of hake;
- Reduce fishing mortality and move towards the recovery of the stocks to sustainable levels.

European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*). Mediterranean Sea © OCEANA

Strait of Sicily Fisheries Restricted Areas



Up to 50% of hake caught in the Strait of Sicily is undersized (STECF 2013)

Recommendations

Oceana calls on the European Parliament and EU Member States, as co-legislators, as well as the European Commission, to implement an ecosystem approach to fisheries management by swiftly establishing Fish Stock Recovery Areas under multi-annual management plans, in order to meet their obligation to recover and exploit fish stocks in a sustainable, long-term way under the CFP by 2020.

For this, the following measures are necessary:

- Include in the **North Sea multi-annual plan** a provision that, at the latest by 2020, Member States shall designate spawning grounds and areas where there is clear evidence of heavy concentrations of fish below minimum conservation reference sizes, in line with the objectives set out in Art. 10 of the CFP Basic Regulation;
- Guarantee the protection of EFH as a **prerequisite to all upcoming EU multi-annual plans**. In particular, in the Western **Mediterranean multi-annual plan**, where the protection of EFHs, mainly nursery grounds, could contribute effectively to the recovery of severely overfished demersal stocks, being the commercial fisheries in this region oriented toward smaller sizes, as commercial fisheries in this region tend to prioritise smaller fish;
- Propose, by means of a European Commission delegated act, the establishment of Fish Stock Recovery Areas in current multi-annual management plans where such provisions to protect EFHs are absent (e.g. Baltic MAP);
- Establish FSRAs as an effective tool to reduce unwanted catches of fish below the minimum conservation reference size and thus **facilitate the implementation of the landing obligation**.

Implement a consistent **network of EFHs in EU waters and in particular,** in the **Mediterranean Sea** by 2018 as set out in the Malta MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration.

Oceana urges Fish Stock Recovery Areas to be integrated as a prerequisite into all EU multi-annual fisheries plans.

School of damselfishes (*Chromis chromis*)
© OCEANA/ Juan Cuetos

References

1 STECF (2006). Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries opinion on 'sensitive and essential fish habitats in the Mediterranean Sea'. Commission staff working paper, Rome, 48 pp.

2 Rosenberg et al. 2000. Ecosystem Approaches to Fishery Management through Essential Fish Habitat Bulletin of Marine Science, 66(3): 535-542, 2000

3 Adapted from M. Bergmann, H. Hinz, R.E. Blyth, M.J. Kaiser, S.I. Rogers, M. Armstrong, 2004. Using knowledge from fishers and fisheries scientists to identify possible groundfish 'Essential Fish Habitats', Fisheries Research, Volume 66, Issues 2-3, 373-379,

4 Morishita J. 2008. What is the ecosystem approach for fisheries management? Marine Policy, 32: 19-26.

5 Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC.

6 Regulation (EU) 2016/1139 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 establishing a multiannual plan for the stocks of cod, herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks, amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2187/2005 and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1098/2007.

7 (COM/2016/0493 final - 2016/0238 (COD).

8 Projects include Interreg, FP7 or other, such as Marea; MediSeH; Mantis; Balance; Living North Sea; EFH-GIS; MaPACo, Coconet.

Cover: © OCEANA/ Carlos Minguell

Oceana acknowledges the generous support of EU LIFE Programme

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