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Agenda Item 7: Status of implementation of the Ecosystem Approach (EcAp) Roadmap

Status of implementation of the Ecosystem Approach (EcAp) Roadmap

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I. Introduction

1. At their 19th Ordinary Meeting (COP 19, Athens, Greece, 9-12 February 2016), the Contracting Parties to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention) and its Protocols adopted the Integrated Monitoring and Assessment Programme and related Assessment Criteria (IMAP).
2. At their 20th Ordinary Meeting (COP 20, Tirana, Albania, 17-20 December 2017), the Contracting Parties endorsed, in Decision IG.23/6, the key findings of the 2017 Mediterranean Quality Status Report (the MED QSR Decision), that recommend a list of directions towards the 2023 MED QSR including:
 - harmonize and standardize monitoring and assessment methods;
 - improve availability and ensure long time series of quality assured data to monitor the trends in the status of the marine environment;
 - definition of the reference state of habitats and species, threshold values and assessment criteria;
 - further develop Ecological Objectives, which are currently not part of IMAP, namely Ecological Objective 4 “Food webs” and Ecological objective 6 “Sea-floor integrity”, etc.
3. To that effect, in line with the Programme of Work 2022-2023, SPA/RAC has assisted the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention in implementing their national monitoring programmes in line with requirements of the IMAP and has undertaken actions to deliver the above-outlined outputs highlighted in the MED QSR Decision related to biodiversity (EO1) and non-indigenous species (EO2).
4. The present report describes the activities implemented during this biennium with the support of SPA/RAC regarding the IMAP process.

II. Overview of the national activities on IMAP implementation related to biodiversity and non-indigenous species

5. Progress is being made by the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention on national implementation of IMAP, with the support of SPA/RAC. Several activities are developed within the SPA/RAC Programme of Work (2022-2023).
6. Within the framework of the EU-funded projects IMAP-MPA and EcAp-Med III, UNEP/MAP and SPA/RAC are supporting Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to elaborate an integrated monitoring plan for biodiversity and pollution implemented in pilot sites (MPAs and in high pressure areas). Memoranda of agreements (MoAs) were signed with the national institutions designated by the Contracting Parties for IMAP implementation. Field work and data collection was finalized in Israel and Morocco and is ongoing in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia. Data submission of new and historical data into the IMAP info system is ongoing. These activities will be finalized by all the beneficiary countries by the end of June 2023 for the IMAP-MPA project and by the end of November 2023 for the EcAp-MED III.
7. Specific and on-job trainings on monitoring common indicators related to biodiversity (Habitats characterization, mapping of marine habitats, bird and cetacean estimation, NIS identification) and pollution clusters (sampling and processing of water for pollution evaluation) are being organized at national level in the framework of the signed MoAs.

8. All the national experts involved in the implementation of IMAP in Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia participated in the sub-regional workshops for pollution, marine litter, biodiversity and hydrography monitoring and GES assessment organized by the UNEP/MAP Coordinating Unit and with the support of the SPA/RAC (Athens, 7-8 March 2023 and 20-21 March 2023) and facilitated by the regional experts on biodiversity, pollution and hydrography.

9. Specific training sessions on data reporting have been organized in cooperation with the INFO/RAC aiming at strengthening national capacities to report monitoring data into the IMAP Info System.

10. Within the framework of MTF and the MASE funds, SPA/RAC is supporting Montenegro to implement their national IMAP for biodiversity and NIS. MoA was signed with the Institute of marine biology in Montenegro. A complete monitoring plan for the field surveys of the selected CI in the selected monitoring sites in line with the national monitoring programme was prepared and agreed with the Institute. The upload of data collected in the framework of previous projects and initiatives into the IMAP Info System is ongoing. The fieldwork has already started. This activity will be finalized by December 2023.

11. SPA/RAC is assisting Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey to implement their national IMAP for biodiversity. Official contacts have been made to identify the national institutional partners for the implementation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the monitoring of sea birds will be implemented, while in Foça SEPA in Turkey, the monitoring of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows will be conducted. These activities will be finalized by December 2023.

III. Overview of the regional activities on IMAP implementation related to biodiversity and non-indigenous species

12. Decision IG.23/6 on key findings of the 2017 Mediterranean Quality Status Report (the MED QSR Decision) recommends a list of directions towards the 2023 MED QSR including the definition of the reference state of habitats and species, threshold values and assessment criteria. To that effect, in line with the Programmes of Work 2020-2021 and 2022-2023, SPA/RAC has undertaken actions aimed at developing and standardizing the monitoring and assessment methods related to IMAP Biodiversity Cluster, including the development of monitoring and assessment scales, assessment criteria, thresholds and baseline values for the IMAP common indicators related to biodiversity (EO1) and NIS (EO2).

13. Decision IG.24/4 on the 2023 MED QSR Roadmap and Needs Assessment defines the vision for the successful delivery of the 2023 MED QSR, and outlines key IMAP-related processes, milestones and outputs to be undertaken, with their timelines. In the biennium 2020/2021, the UNEP/MAP Secretariat developed an Operational Plan with concrete activities per each Milestone/Output of the Roadmap, supported by the UNEP/MAP Programmes of Work 2020-2021 and 2022-2023, and externally funded Projects (namely, the EU-funded EcAp MED III, IMAP MPA, Marine Litter Med II Projects and the GEF-funded MedProgramme).

14. For biodiversity cluster, monitoring and assessment scales, assessment criteria, thresholds and baseline values for the IMAP common indicators 3, 4 and 5 related to marine mammals, marine turtles and seabirds were reviewed by the biodiversity Online Working Groups (OWG), discussed by the CORMON meetings on biodiversity and fisheries (videoconference, 10-11 June 2021 and 28-29 March 2022, respectively) and were endorsed by the EcAp Coordination Group meetings (videoconference, 9 September 2021 and 5 July 2022 respectively) for its use for the purpose of the 2023 MED QSR.

15. An analysis of the implementation status of IMAP common indicators (CI1 and CI2) related to benthic habitats was elaborated to evaluate the possibility to propose monitoring and assessment scales, assessment criteria, thresholds and baseline values. This document was prepared with the support of the Biodiversity Online Working Group (OWG) on benthic habitats and was submitted to the CORMON meeting on biodiversity and fisheries (Athens, Greece, 9-10 March 2023) for review and consideration for the way forward in the new IMAP cycle to enhance the implementation of the monitoring and assessment of the benthic habitats towards achieving the Good Environmental Status (GES) in the Mediterranean Sea and coasts.

16. The process of the elaboration of a Mediterranean NIS baseline aimed to collect the available material on the presence of marine NIS in the Mediterranean countries in the form of existing national inventories combined with new and up-to-date information on new species records, the taxonomy and biogeography of the registered species and agreed methodological standards, to arrive at refined NIS baselines at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. This work was developed in synergy with the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), where a common template was agreed to be used in close collaboration with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission to avoid duplication of work. The outcome is the result of a collaborative process between national and regional experts, involving detailed exchange of information and the building of consensus on the final lists.

17. The national, sub-regional and regional NIS baselines were discussed with the experts of the OWG on NIS and reviewed by the CORMON meeting on biodiversity and fisheries (videoconference, 28-29 March 2022). Several comments were provided by the Contracting Parties and were included in the final version of the document that was endorsed by the 9th EcAp Coordination Group meeting (videoconference, 5 July 2022) for its use for the purpose of the 2023 MED QSR.

18. As a contribution to the 2023 MED QSR biodiversity (EO1) and non-indigenous species (EO2) chapters, six thematic assessment reports for benthic habitats, cetaceans, Mediterranean monk seal, seabirds, marine turtles and non-indigenous species were developed and discussed by the CORMON meeting on biodiversity and fisheries (Athens, Greece, 9-10 March 2023). These chapters are being updated following the comments received from the Contracting Parties. The updated versions will be submitted to the forthcoming integrated CORMON meeting to be organized in Athens, Greece on 27 and 28 June 2023.

19. The assessment chapter for EO3 on fisheries is being developed by GFCM Secretariat. If available in time, the draft chapter will be circulated by email to the CORMON representatives, for review before its submission to the integrated CORMON meeting in June 2023.

20. The current IMAP covers the ecological objectives related to biodiversity (EO1), non-indigenous species (EO2), eutrophication (EO5), hydrography (EO7), coast (EO8), contaminants (EO9), and marine litter (EO10). Ecological objectives for marine food webs (EO4) and sea-floor integrity (EO6) are not yet included in the IMAP. They were discussed in the early stages of the EcAp implementation process, with initial proposals made in 2013 for a description of GES, associated indicators and related targets (UNEP/MAP, 2013). However, it was agreed at that time that EO4 and EO6 needed further development, considering the lack of data and the knowledge gaps on these two topics in the Mediterranean Sea region.

21. Within SPA/RAC Programme of work (2022-2023) and with the support of the ABIOMMED EU-

funded project and the MASE funds, the first draft of the EO6 proposal was delivered in September 2022 and was reviewed by the experts of the biodiversity OWG on benthic habitats and discussed during an online meeting (9 December 2022). The updated version was submitted to the CORMON meeting on biodiversity and fisheries (Athens, Greece, 9-10 March 2023) for their review. The updated document is presented under (information document WG.548/Inf. 12).

22.Regarding the Ecological Objective 4 on marine food webs, Terms of References on the development of a desk review of available data sources, best practices and methodologies in the Mediterranean for the monitoring and assessment of marine food webs in view of the development of the EO4 were published in February 2023. However, the call for consultancy was unsuccessful. SPA/RAC has reached out to the SPA/BD focal points and requested a list of national experts with the necessary qualifications and expertise to complete the work required. This approach may help identify a wider pool of potential candidates for the consultancy.