

Cooperative audit: Are adequate mechanisms in place for the designation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within the Mediterranean Sea?

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The Auditor General, Charles Deguara, presented to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Hon. Anglu Farrugia, the cooperative audit Report: Are adequate mechanisms in place for the designation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within the Mediterranean Sea? This cooperative audit, coordinated by the Supreme Audit Institutions of Malta and Cyprus, was undertaken under the auspices of the European Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (EUROSAI) Working Group on Environmental Auditing. The Report based its findings and conclusions on seven individual national audit reports, which were presented to the respective Parliaments by the Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) of Albania, Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia during 2018 and 2019.

The cooperative audit concluded that the legal framework regulating MPAs is sufficiently robust and mandates national authorities to ascertain the sustainability of the marine environment. However, it does not provide a common definition of what constitutes a MPA. In addition, overlapping and, in some instances, conflicting provisions were identified within the national regulatory frameworks.

National strategic frameworks, generally, reflected the political will and aimed to outline the relevant outputs as well as outcomes through the designation of MPAs. However, in some of the participating countries, no comprehensive sector specific strategies are in place. Moreover, all SAIs identified the potential for strengthening national strategic frameworks, so as to optimise their impact.

Participating SAIs noted that national authorities have carried out the relevant site assessments to designate MPAs. Nonetheless, the scope of these assessments was not always appropriately comprehensive, either due to resource and technical expertise limitations, or due to diplomatic issues when the site assessments pertained to joint jurisdictions or the high-seas.

Most participating SAIs reported that site-specific management plans are not yet in place. Moreover, other technical and logistical limitations, such as coordination issues and the non-deployment of resources, influenced the degree to which participating countries could implement specific measures to ascertain the conservation of protected species within MPAs.

SAIs reported that weaknesses related to site-specific management plans, administrative capacity and coordination limitations between stakeholders are the key elements that hindered adequate monitoring and enforcement of measures in MPAs. Monitoring and enforcement shortcomings do not guarantee that MPAs, and therefore the biodiversity they aim to protect, are being managed and utilised in a sustainable manner.

This cooperative audit confirmed the participating countries' understanding and commitment for the protection of the Mediterranean marine environment, as attested by the increasing number of MPAs. On the other hand, in some cases, the lack of site-specific management plans and regulation, as well as the designation of MPAs within the high-seas, remain common issues of concern.