

## The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean

# Multifaceted approach to improve stock management

Fish stocks do not respect national boundaries and often occur as straddling or shared stocks between exclusive economic zones, or between these zones and the high seas, or exclusively in the high seas. Conserving and managing these stocks require international cooperation which is often in the form of a regional fishery body. These bodies provide the forum by which parties to an international agreement can work together to manage fish stocks. The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) is one such body responsible for stocks in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Today it is led by Abdellah Srour who discusses here some of the challenges facing stock management in these water bodies.

**The GFCM was established in 1949 under the auspices of the FAO to promote the development, conservation, rational management and utilisation of living marine resources in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and connecting waters, among other objectives. Has the situation in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea with regard to these priorities improved or deteriorated since then?**

There is a general feeling of satisfaction regarding the evolution of the GFCM, from the very first day of its establishment until now. With about 50 binding decisions adopted, the Commission has shown its ability to meet its overarching objective of protecting and managing different living resources in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Over the years, activities have been increasing at a regular pace, ranging from the first fisheries restricted area (FRA) approved in 2005 (Rec. GFCM/29/2005/1) to prohibit bottom-trawling activities in waters deeper than 1000 m and protect deep-sea benthic environment to several management measures for red coral and turbot fisheries. Then, in 2013, for the first time in the Mediterranean and Black

Sea, the Commission approved a multiannual subregional management plan for a shared fishery. These concrete recommendations have been complemented by a series of guidelines for the implementation of management plans, the reduction of fishing capacity and precautionary measures to ensure the sustainability of fisheries in the whole area. We clearly need some time to fully assess the impact of some of these measures and ensure their effective implementation. However, we are starting to witness some sustainable exploitation in recent stock assessments and we have good reasons to believe that we are achieving our goals more and more efficiently. We strongly hope that current and future measures will keep fostering interest towards more efficient scientific work and advice with respect to our main priorities.

**Overfishing is a significant problem in the Mediterranean. Out of 85 stocks of small pelagic and demersal species almost 90% are overfished according to a May 2013 communication from the European Commission to the European Council. In the Black Sea turbot, spiny dogfish, sprat, whiting, and anchovy are**



**Abdellah Srour, Executive Secretary, General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).**

**in different states of overfishing according to the Black Sea Commission. What measures are being implemented by the GFCM to combat this overexploitation?**

It is indeed an important issue that the GFCM and its members have placed at the centre of their ongoing efforts towards more sustainable fisheries. Some of the recent decisions are directly focused on stocks affected by overfishing. In particular, a management plan for small pelagic species in the Adriatic Sea has been adopted in 2013 and a set

of harmonised management measures has been launched to reduce the mortality of turbot and minimise the undesirable effects of this fishery on other species such as cetaceans or sea birds. At the same time, the GFCM has been working in close collaboration with its members and with the FAO to further develop management tools directed at other fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea and to improve fleet selectivity.

**Knowledge about the status of fish stocks is dependent on**

**regular scientific assessments. However the data on a number of stocks in the waters under the GFCM area of competence is deficient. What can the GFCM do to encourage more consistent and coherent data collection?**

There is still a lot of work to be done in order to improve the collection of reliable data regarding Mediterranean and Black Sea stocks, but it is important to stress that the number of stocks assessed by the GFCM has been constantly increasing and regional databases containing scientific data are becoming more and more important. On the one hand, a growing number of stocks are subject to assessment and, on the other hand, many activities have been carried out together with the FAO and its regional projects to enhance data collection and assess the stocks exploited by southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. The GFCM has been deploying considerable efforts to improve the collection of basic data, and one of its main achievements is the first comprehensive GFCM Data Collection Reference Framework (GFCM DCRF), currently under discussion. In the long run, this tool will be instrumental in achieving the collection of more consistent and reliable data. It should help GFCM members to collect the minimum set of information required to assess the status of their main fisheries and to allow the GFCM to take action at a subregional and regional scale. The recent session of the Scientific Advisory Committee offered an opportunity to discuss it in greater detail in order to present a final document to the next annual session of the Commission (May 2014) so that we can swiftly achieve a timely, reliable and consistent data collection system.



**Aquaculture plays an important role in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region since it contributes to its economic development and represents not only an important food resource but also a source of employment for coastal communities.**

**Pollution from land, threats to marine and coastal habitats, pollution from oil, invasive species, and climate change are some of the issues that are negatively impacting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. What role does the GFCM play in resolving these challenges?**

It is widely recognised that these threats are jeopardising the quality of Mediterranean and Black Sea environment and resources and it is our common interest to preserve it as much as possible in order to be able to keep relying on sustainably exploited fishing resources. The GFCM has indeed an important role to play and can contribute to minimise impacts that are linked to fisheries activities and biodiversity. The adoption of binding decisions, ranging from the improvement of gear selectivity to spatial restrictions, has enabled GFCM members to fish in a more responsible way, taking into account conservation

priorities and thus helping limit and prevent the overexploitation of fish stocks. Over the last years, we have started as well to pay more attention to those alien species that are affecting fishing activities in several ways. An ad hoc study on their status in the Mediterranean and Black Sea is currently in press and we are promoting stock assessments for alien fish species that have become frequent in the region (such as puffer fish in the eastern Mediterranean). Pollution is also a great concern and we are developing platform to stimulate cooperation mechanisms in order to combat the sources of pollution.

**The introduction of multi-annual plans for different stocks, protection of sensitive habitats, and reduction of by-catch and other conservation measures are all steps intended to increase the sustainability of fishing in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Is the GFCM**

**also looking at independent certification of fisheries in the region?**

There are in fact several ways to ensure the sustainability of resources and the GFCM is promoting a series of important tools that should help improve the current situation. For some specific fisheries, the certification of fisheries products has been proposed as a possible instrument to improve the sustainability and profitability of fisheries. Initiatives that could potentially improve the situation of stocks and fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea are always strongly encouraged. At the moment, the certification of fisheries in the region is a process that mainly originates from stakeholders and we are aware of several initiatives launched in the area. Now, the most important priority for us is to work together with all interested actors and stakeholders in order to promote the local

consumption of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries products and to make sure that these products are sustainable, profitable for local communities and feature the best possible quality to compete with products from the rest of the world.

**Pelagic resources from the Black Sea are used for the production of fishmeal and fishoil. At the same time calls to use this type of fish for human consumption are increasing. Is the GFCM encouraging the use of this fish for human rather than industrial purposes?**

As an FAO body, our main concern is the sustainable production of safe and nutritious food for humans. The development of fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea should take place bearing in mind this fundamental principle. For us, it is important to ensure that local communities have access to fish products and that these fish products are used efficiently in the food chains, for the benefit of local populations. In the Black Sea, the fluctuation of small pelagic stocks, market control on catches and final uses of fish products have been identified as sources of instability for an adequate management of these resources. Ongoing attempts to improve the management of fisheries in the region should therefore take these issues in consideration.

**The creation of Fishing Restricted Areas (FRA) and Marine Protected Areas (MPA) in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea should contribute to the sustainability of fisheries if they are respected. However, as long as IUU fishing in these waters is not controlled, the creation of FRA's and MPA's will not have**

**the desired effect. What tools does the GFCM have at its disposal to press for closer monitoring of fisheries?**

As a regional fisheries management organization, the GFCM has competence to set binding recommendations to ensure the sustainable management of fisheries and the conservation of resources and habitats. We are in a position to provide an institutional framework to integrate fisheries and conservation governance, especially in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The GFCM is progressively developing fisheries management plans based on an ecosystem approach and taking into account interactions among ecological and socio-economic services provided by marine ecosystems. Some measures are area-based and aimed at protecting sensitive zones and a particular attention is devoted to the small-scale fisheries sector which develops its activity within coastal zones. Not to mention the momentous efforts we have deployed to fight illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, as witness the two recent roadmaps adopted for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. As it happens in other seas and oceans all over the world, IUU fishing is a major scourge for the sustainability of fish stocks and beyond. Several aspects relating to IUU fishing are in fact to be dealt with swiftly if we want to get the better hand. It is a great challenge and we are aware of that.

**Small scale fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea provide thousands with a livelihood. How can the GFCM ensure that these fisheries are sustainable and can co-exist with other types of commercial fishing?**

Small-scale fisheries have been the focus of several actions

within the GFCM recently. We are supporting the work of FAO towards the implementation in Mediterranean and Black Sea countries of the *Voluntary Guidelines for securing sustainable fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication*. Within this framework, the First Regional Symposium on Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea (Malta, 27-30 November 2013) organised by the GFCM and other partners (CIHEAM Bari, the FAO Fisheries Department and FAO regional projects, MedPAN, WWF Mediterranean Programme) is already a success story. Over 170 participants from all fisheries actors of the Mediterranean and Black Sea have had the opportunity to share experiences and make steps towards a sustainable future for small-scale fisheries in the region. Discussions have laid the groundwork for a regional project where all the components linked to small-scale fisheries should be addressed with interested stakeholders. The objective is to foster a better knowledge of the sector, to facilitate its integration in marine protected areas, to support co-management and participation processes and promote a strategy to valorise small-scale fisheries opportunities and products. The Symposium has also been marked by the signature of a collaboration agreement signed between fishers from the Northern and Southern Mediterranean shores. It is the first time ever that such a platform is created to enable cooperation between fishers from both sides of the Mediterranean. Active dialogue has been established and all the actors are confident that this is the way forward to enable a smooth coexistence of all sectors linked to fisheries.

**The mandate of the GFCM includes promoting the sustainable development of aquaculture in the region. While fish farming in the Mediterranean has expanded many fold over the last decades the industry in different countries is now competing for market share. How can the GFCM contribute to expanding the market for farmed fish?**

Aquaculture plays an important role in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region since it contributes to its economic development and represents not only an important food resource but also a source of employment for coastal communities. As a matter of fact, marine and brackish water aquaculture has been growing steadily over the last decades and has substantially helped meet the rising demand for fishery products. Within the MedAquaMarket project, many marketing aspects connected to aquaculture products have been analysed and key challenges and priorities have been identified. In today's world, trade competition for aquaculture products requires shifting from a production-oriented approach to a market-oriented production strategy and addressing critical concepts such as product quality and safety, economic efficiency and market promotion. However, the aquaculture sector is quite heterogeneous in the different countries and subregions of the GFCM area: it consists of various production segments showing different levels of maturity and it therefore requires tailored approaches. Within the newly established GFCM Aquaculture Multi-Stakeholders Platform (AMShP), it has been foreseen to give a special focus to market-related challenges and a strategic area has been dedicated to quality and safety of products,

markets and consumers. In this way, we will strive to improve the understanding of regional seafood markets dynamics and to promote strategies aiming increasing competitiveness and fostering a level playing field for an equal access to markets.

**The GFCM has issued guidelines for Allocated Zones for Aquaculture in the GFCM member countries. How do these zones work together with EU initiatives such as the one on integrated coastal zone management?**

Spatial planning issues linked to aquaculture are sparking considerable discussions worldwide. Through its Resolution GFCM/36/2012/1, the GFCM has adopted guidelines on allocated zones for aquaculture (AZA) as a potential management tool to prevent conflicts with other uses of coastal zones while enabling aquaculture planning. This is perceived as an effective approach to sound coastal zone management. In this context, there is an ongoing collaboration between the GFCM and the FP7 EU-funded PEGASO project, which aims in particular at creating an integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) governance platform to support the development of integrated policies for the coastal, marine and maritime realms of the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins. In this respect, enhanced synergies among other regional projects and working groups within the GFCM Committee on Aquaculture (CAQ) would be beneficial for the sustainable development of aquaculture and its integration within an ICZM approach.

**The recently launched GFCM Aquaculture Multi-Stakeholder Platform is intended to provide a forum for the sharing of**

**experiences between the different stakeholders, producers, authorities, research organisations, NGO's, etc. What are your hopes for this platform and what are the issues it should focus on in the first instance?**

We hope that this platform will position itself as a regional aquaculture hub and help enhance dialogue and consultation among aquaculture actors so that common solutions for sustainable aquaculture strategies can be proposed and implemented in the whole region. The aim is to foster a better governance of the sector, better compliance to regulations, strengthened capacity in research and development, as well as minimised space competition in coastal zones. Several issues will be tackled in parallel and work will be articulated around four forums dealing with regulatory frameworks, environment and disease management, quality and market of aquaculture products, technology and feed production.

**The GFCM has initiated agreements to strengthen institutional cooperation with several other inter-governmental organisations, for example, the Black Sea Commission, Eurofish, ACCOBAMS, and UNEP/MAP. How do these links facilitate the work of the GFCM and help it to achieve its objectives?**

It is very important to build synergies with other partner organisations operating in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea in order to harmonise our work and achieve more efficiently our common aims. Our collaborations focuses for instance on harmonising criteria for the establishment of marine protected areas (MPAs, SPAMIs) and fisheries restricted

areas (FRA), developing capacity-building initiatives and jointly promoting measures to ensure the conservation of resources and vulnerable species. Carrying out joint research is also very important to raise awareness on the importance of fisheries and aquaculture in the region and on the means to ensure their sustainable development, to exploit interactions in data collection activities and to ensure their proper dissemination in the whole region. The number of cooperation agreements signed with other partners and the successful results achieved show that we are working in the right direction.

**Both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are bordered by widely disparate countries in terms of their economics, politics, and stage of development of their fisheries and aquaculture sectors. How can these differences be reconciled so that the GFCM can achieve its objectives? As Executive Secretary of the GFCM, what are your personal priorities for what the organization achieves while you are leading it?**

First of all, let me illustrate one of our most important endeavours over the last years. Recently, the GFCM has made substantial steps forward to support its reform process, launched in 2009 with the aim of modernising its institutional framework and ensuring a more efficient functioning. Thanks to the work carried out by an ad hoc task force, and capitalising on the efforts deployed by all GFCM members, this process should lay the foundations for strengthened compliance to GFCM decisions, enhanced sub-regional cooperation and more efficient decision-making mechanisms for a better management of fisheries and aquaculture in the

region. To support this process, a dedicated financial mechanism should be set up thus contributing to strengthen the capacities of GFCM members from the social, economic and management point of views.

Within this framework, each of the different bordering countries of the Mediterranean and Black Sea will have a role to play and more opportunities to address particular needs. Thanks to the subregional approach that is being developed, disparities between the different subregions should be reduced and our goal is to create a level playing field. A special focus will be placed on Black Sea riparian countries with a view to strengthening ongoing dialogue and promoting institutional cooperation in this region. Our objective is to achieve a more effective and efficient management of fisheries and aquaculture and to make sure that the necessary conditions exist so that all Black Sea riparian countries become members of the GFCM.

As the Executive Secretary, I will do my best to make sure that all these needs are properly addressed and that regional and national policies can duly factor in fisheries and aquaculture to guarantee their long-term sustainability of fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Finally, I take this opportunity to underline the extremely fruitful cooperation launched between the GFCM and Eurofish and to express my satisfaction regarding the results obtained. It is my hope and my wish that we can maintain this momentum and keep working together to find more and more synergies and achieve our common goals.