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SMALL-SCALE FISHERS' FORUM

Selective fishing gear: from impacts to alternatives

9–10 April 2025
Split, Croatia

Report

Executive summary

This SSF Forum workshop¹ was held in Split, Croatia, on 9–10 April 2025, in collaboration with WWF. The meeting was attended by 41 participants from 8 Mediterranean countries, with women making up the majority of participants for the first time. The objective of this workshop was to bring together fishers from across the region to explore the impacts of fishing gear and share local success stories and practical examples. In particular, participants discussed the challenges and opportunities related to the adoption of selective fishing gear in small-scale fisheries and examined the effects of fishing gear on juveniles and vulnerable species, while also exploring selectivity measures and gear modifications that could offer sustainable alternatives. Participants also discussed the challenges, strategies and incentives that could encourage the adoption of more selective practices at the local level. In line with a participatory management approach for the development of scientific advice, the meeting report will be shared with relevant GFCM expert groups and stakeholders.

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Background and objectives of the meeting

1. This SSF Forum workshop was held in Split, Croatia, on 9–10 April 2025, in collaboration with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The meeting was attended by 41 participants from 8 Mediterranean countries. The meeting agenda is provided in Appendix 1 and the list of participants is provided in Appendix 2.
2. The SSF Forum is an initiative deriving from the recommendations of the Regional Plan of Action for Small-scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea (RPOA-SSF) to offer capacity-building opportunities and provide a space for exchanges for small-scale fishers and fish workers from across the region.
3. This workshop emerged from a participatory process during the SSF Forum consultation (March 2023, Rome) and responds to a need from small-scale fishers to address the topic of selective fishing gear, to better understand the impacts of gear and possible alternatives and discuss incentives to put into practice.
4. This marked the last session of a series of four workshops held within the framework of the SSF Forum programme for 2023–2025. The workshop was the opportunity for fishers and stakeholders to get involved, share experiences and reflect on practical, replicable ways of working with selective fishing gear in their communities.

Conclusions

Drivers and constraints to implementation of selective fishing gear

5. Utilizing selective fishing gear, such as pots and traps or nets with appropriate mesh sizes, is widely recognized as a more sustainable approach to fishing. Ensuring that gear is more selective, targeting specific species and reducing bycatch, is a crucial tool for supporting healthier marine ecosystems and more responsible resource use. Fishers and stakeholders are generally in favor of improving selectivity, when simple changes such as enlarging the mesh are shown to generate positive results; however, this must be balanced with the socioeconomic impacts of selectivity modifications.
6. Ideally, and considering certain gear types, the use of larger mesh sizes facilitates catching larger, higher-value fish, which can improve economic returns while protecting juveniles and conserving fish stocks, provided that such modifications do not increase risks to the broader ecosystem. However, practical challenges persist. Across the region, fishers face common obstacles in adopting more selective gear, including high costs and limited access to new technologies, as well as regulatory and political barriers. In some cases, existing licensing frameworks make it difficult for fishers to modify or upgrade their gear.
7. There are significant differences in fishing regulations between countries of the region, particularly regarding gear types and usage, fishing methods and licensing. These create substantial challenges for the enforcement of regulations and sustainability efforts. Fishers experience confusion, which can undermine collective efforts. A more harmonized framework encouraging selective gear standards, tailored to species specificities and fishing areas, would enhance regional fisheries management and promote compliance.
8. While sustainability is a priority, it must be balanced with the economic realities of fishers. Profitability, reduced time at sea, and improved quality of life are key motivators for adopting sustainable practices. Fishers report that using more selective gear, such as larger mesh sizes, often results in higher-value catches: “one big fish is worth five small ones.” To make these transitions viable, regulatory flexibility and support are essential, including facilitating gear trials and easing licence modifications.
9. Fishers emphasize the need for innovation in fishing gear to improve efficiency, profitability and sustainability, including the impacts of fishing gear on the marine environment. For example, trials with biodegradable fish aggregating devices (FADs) are currently underway and showing promising results. However, concerns remain regarding the availability and durability of sustainable material alternatives, particularly for ropes and other gear components.

10. Participants emphasized the importance of training, early education and youth engagement to encourage the long-term adoption of sustainable practices. Some countries are investing in training programs for active fishers and courses in fishing schools to build awareness of selective gear and sustainable methods. Providing young fishers with hands-on experience at sea and early exposure to conservation was widely supported.

Broader perspectives on selective gear for building resilience in small-scale fisheries

11. Fishers highlight the need to preserve fish stocks for future generations, recognizing that the long-term viability of their livelihoods depends on the health and resilience of marine ecosystems. This includes adapting to emerging challenges, such as the spread of non-indigenous species and broader environmental changes. By integrating specialized gear into their practices, fishers can contribute to more sustainable fisheries management while minimizing the impact on marine ecosystems.

12. The safe handling and release of endangered species, such as sharks and rays, are central to reducing mortality rates and to improving bycatch management strategies, highlighting the vital role fishers play in marine conservation. Through responsible practices at sea, fishers are recognized as guardians of marine biodiversity, contributing to scientific data collection and innovation, and serving as essential partners in the development of selective fishing gear. For example, ongoing efforts regarding shark populations in the Adriatic, using a new collaborative tShark platform, are being enhanced in partnership with fishers, strengthening evidence-based management and ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries management.

13. Fishing tourism provides fishers with a valuable way to diversify their income, enabling them to reduce their fishing effort – which can sometimes result from adopting more selective gear – while still maintaining or even increasing earnings. However, the development of the fishing tourism sector is often constrained by complex licensing procedures, inconsistent regulations and safety concerns. Requirements vary widely between countries, from crew-to-tourist ratios to safety equipment standards such as safety rails, lifejackets and buoyancy aids. Establishing consistent, safety-focused standards that also enhance accessibility would not only promote sustainable coastal tourism, but also support the uptake of selective fishing practices and help ease pressure on fish stocks.

14. Addressing regulatory imbalances between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors is another challenge. In a number of countries, small-scale fishers may be subject to stricter regulations (licensing restrictions and gear selectivity measures) while the recreational sector, despite also contributing to fishing effort, remains largely unregulated. Strengthening licensing systems and improving data collection are key steps to ensuring fair and effective selective fishing management measures.

15. Cultural perceptions and trust issues remain barriers to strengthened regional collaboration for the development of selectivity measures, particularly with regards to the sharing of data and fishing techniques. Strengthening trust among fishers is essential to support knowledge sharing and overcome skepticism, and, in this context, storytelling, shared data and inclusive dialogue can be valuable tools. Emphasizing the identity of fishers as stewards of the sea, rather than mere resource users, is a key step toward driving collective action and the broader adoption of selective fishing practices.

16. Greater inclusion of women, who are often underrepresented in fisheries governance and innovation spaces, is also essential. Women contribute significantly across the value chain, including in the design, construction, testing and adoption of selective fishing gear. Recognizing and supporting their roles will strengthen collective action and accelerate a transition to more selective fishing practices.

Recommendations

- Promote the adoption of more selective fishing gear by providing guidance on gear modifications, such as mesh size adjustments in line with scientific advice and fostering collaboration between researchers

and fishers across the region to address selectivity challenges and develop innovative solutions to enhance sustainability and reduce bycatch.

- Provide scientific advice to support selective fishing measures, such as minimum conservation reference sizes and corresponding mesh sizes, and encourage alignment at the regional level, where appropriate, while considering species and area-specific needs, to support effective, tailored management and conservation efforts.
- Support fishers' transitions to selective fishing gear and sustainable practices by encouraging the development of financial incentives and regulatory flexibility, such as facilitating the process for gear trials and licence modifications, to make selective gear more accessible and economically viable.
- Promote gender equity by supporting the participation of women in the development, testing and governance of selective fishing gear and sustainable practices, recognizing their roles all along the fisheries value chain.
- Strengthen research and innovation in sustainable fishing gear by promoting collaboration among countries, research institutions and fishers to develop and test sustainable alternatives to existing fishing materials.
- Enhance training and education programmes for fishers, particularly for younger generations, on the benefits of sustainable fishing practices and the adoption of selective gear, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Support the role of fishers in marine conservation by promoting their involvement in data collection, bycatch management and the safe handling and release of endangered species, reinforcing their role as potential guardians of the sea and active contributors to scientific efforts.
- Encourage the development of fishing tourism as a tool for livelihood diversification, enabling fishers to reduce fishing effort, by exploring opportunities for harmonizing licensing and regulatory frameworks, with a focus on safety and accessibility, and promoting sustainable coastal tourism.
- Address the impact of recreational fishing, by promoting the development of improved licensing and data collection systems, towards ensuring fair and effective management measures, minimizing the pressure on fish stocks and supporting the efforts of small-scale fishers using selective fishing gear.
- Foster regional cooperation among countries in the region to align fisheries management measures relating to selective fishing gear and associated topics, promoting joint efforts to improve the resilience of small-scale fisheries.

Agenda

1. Welcome and introduction to the SSF Forum
2. The key role of selectivity in reducing the impacts of fishing gear and GFCM work to address the challenge
3. Local example: the Croatian landscape and success stories
4. Croatia mandates return of egg-bearing Norwegian lobsters to the sea
5. Experiences from Croatian fishers
6. Safe handling and release of vulnerable species: fishers for fishers
7. Exploring alternatives: regional examples of fishers using selective fishing gear and successes and challenges
8. Open discussion on improving small-scale gear selectivity: experiences, potential opportunities and limitations?
9. Field visit to the Institute of Oceanography and Fisheries (IOR)
10. Elasmobranch bycatch mitigation for SSF in Croatia
11. Introducing tShark: A new platform for mapping shark & ray tagging
12. Group work: building on challenges towards mainstreaming the use of selective fishing gear in small-scale fisheries communities
13. Group presentations
14. Final thoughts and conclusions

List of participants

Chorouk Alaya	Aristotelis Kolios
Fisher	Fisher
Tunisia	Greece
Sandra Amezaga Menéndez	Odysseus Liakoutsis
Fisher	Fisher
Spain	Greece
Anna Bozzano	Franka Makovac
Fisher	Fisher
Spain	Croatia
Giuseppe Cambria	Diego Makovac
Fisher	Fisher
Italy	Croatia
Inmaculada Carrasco Rosado	Marina Masanović
Fisher	Fisheries biologist
Spain	Croatia
Mohamed Dahech	Jadranka Miškić
Fisher	Fisher
Tunisia	Croatia
Ines Dominguez	Magda Moudioti
Fisher	Fisher
Spain	Greece
Fotis Gaitanos	Anita Mrvica
Fisher	Fisher
Cyprus	Croatia
Stavros Giagias	Nino Mrvica
Fisher	Fisher
Greece	Croatia
Despoina Gkavougiorgou	Stavros Nanidis
Fisher	Fisher
Greece	Greece
Mehmet Can Görgün	Roxani Naasan Aga-Spyrulopoulou
Fisher	iSea
Türkiye	Beatriz Nieto Novoa
	Fisher
	Spain

Mladen Pandur
Fisher
Croatia

Nicoleta Popeanca
Fisher
Italy

Maria Sidiropoulou
Fisher
Greece

Marilou Suc
Network of Women in Aquaculture (NOWA)
France

Iris Triola Cors
Fisher
Spain

Antonia Vasileiou
Fisher
Greece

Latifa Yahya
Fisher
Tunisia

Christina Zantioti
Network of Women in Aquaculture (NOWA)
Greece

WWF

Alessia Bacchi
WWF Italy

Hrvoje Čeprnja
WWF Adria

Kora Dvorski
WWF Adria

Luca Eufemia
WWF Mediterranean Marine Initiative

Mariam Feki
WWF North Africa

Michalis Margaritis
WWF Greece

Simone Niedermueller
WWF Mediterranean Marine Initiative

Fabijan Peronja
WWF Adria

Panagiota Stappa
WWF Greece

GFCM Secretariat

Clémentine Laurent
Small-scale fisheries communications specialist
GFCM Secretariat

Constance Verlhac
Small-scale fisheries specialist
GFCM Secretariat