



BirdLife Malta's comments on the Public Consultation Document  
Conservation Objectives & Measures For Malta's Marine Natura 2000 sites  
03 September 2021

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BirdLife Malta would like to submit our comments with regard to the Public Consultation Document "*Conservation Objectives & Measures For Malta's Marine Natura 2000 sites*".

### General recommendations

Firstly, we would like to emphasize the need to align all the measures and targets in the document with the SMART methodology which will contribute to the feasibility and effective monitoring of the document's implementation.

For each MPA we recommend developing a scientific research programme to close existing data gaps on the marine environment (e.g. bycatch) and to keep track of any changes in the protected habitats and species populations, and amending the management plans accordingly, as well as updating and enhancing the Standard Data Forms. There is a need to regularly evaluate and revise (at least once in 5 years) the management plans for each Natura 2000 site to maintain a favourable conservation status (FCS) of the protected areas, relying on up-to-date data. Apart from that, we would like to emphasize the importance of establishing an effective national spatial plan which is designed in the context of specific ecosystems.

There is a crucial need to put strong regulations addressing the **bycatch** issue. The issue of incidental catch and entanglement of birds in fishing gears remains one of the most urgent and yet unaddressed, however it is covered by the EU legislation. In line with the CFP, the Action Plan for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears (2012) provides the member states with an explicit management framework to minimise seabird bycatch to the lowest levels practically possible. Among the proposed mitigation measures are:

- avoidance of fishing in areas and/or at times when seabird interactions are most likely and intense;
- limiting bird access to baited hooks;
- deterring birds from taking baited hooks;
- reducing the attractiveness or visibility of the baited hooks.

Taking into consideration that there is a paucity of data relating to the issue of bycatch, we stress on the drastic need to conduct studies and close the information gaps. Data gaps and uncertainty around bycatch estimates limit our ability to understand population level effects from bycatch and impede the implementation of measures to address the problem. The issue of lack of data must be tackled by developing statistically robust and standardised monitoring



programmes for seabirds to collect population and distribution data for seabird species occurring over the Maltese marine territory, and coordinate these programmes at the sea basin level to understand regional trends, taking into account cumulative threats to species from multiple fisheries, or in combination with other pressures. We have noticed that the consultation document doesn't cover the problem of bycatch fully. Namely, the issue and the mitigation measures should be comprehensively evaluated under the sections:

- 3.4 - Pressures and threats (PT);
- 3.5 - Improved data collection (IDC).

We also recommend including the **aquaculture** activity into the list of anthropogenic pressures and threats, since there are fish farms operating within the marine Natura 2000 sites, such as the fish farm located offshore of St. Paul's Islands/Sikka l-Bajda, approximately 6 km from the coast. Maltese aquaculture zones happen to lie within the areas which are protected to safeguard Annex I (Birds' Directive) seabird species - Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Puffinus yelkouan*), Mediterranean Storm-petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus melitensis*), and Scopoli's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*) - that are regularly present in the areas and use the sites as their foraging areas and as rafting areas where they congregate in the evening in front of the colonies during specific times throughout the year. The potential impacts on seabirds are largely undocumented but may include the following:

- Increased abundance or supplementary food availability for predatory seabirds such as the Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*). Increased gull populations may impact other nesting seabirds due to predation and competition, including Shearwaters and Storm-petrels;
- Collisions with fish farm structures, including sea cages or vessels moored at night. The presence of a semi-permanently moored vessels could potentially impact individuals of these seabird species through collisions, attraction to light and disorientation due to inappropriate lighting on service vessels;
- Risk of oiling when seabirds rest or raft in the waters around the fish farms where oil slicks are present. Fish oil affects the waterproofing of seabird feathers putting in risk their lives – every summer BirdLife Malta is collecting an increasing number of seabirds with feather permeability issues as a result;
- Entanglement in cage mesh, predator nets or protective bird netting due to diving activities of the seabirds.

Therefore, along with including the aquaculture into the list of pressures & threats, it is also important to offer feasible mitigation measures to avoid adverse environmental impact. The establishment of aquaculture zones should also be taken into consideration given their unclear future after proposals to allocate this for the north of Malta.

## Technical remarks

- As stipulated in the consultation document, management plans are to be designed for each MPA with the aim to achieve Favourable Conservation Status of marine habitats and species. It should be added that regular revision of such plans is important to keep them up-to-date.

### *Section 3 - General objectives and measures*

- Conservation Measures table in section **3.1 - Education and awareness (EA)** suggests assessing the increase of public awareness on the relevant issues through online surveys which are not the most representative means of data collection. Given the size of Malta, we recommend having field surveys to reach out to stakeholders who are not necessarily online or have the means to engage online.
- Conservation Measures table in section **3.4 - Pressures and threats (PT)** offers to “develop, inform and publicise a set of Code of Conducts/Guidelines for touristic and recreational activities, including diving, boat tours, and boat parties, addressing physical disturbance or other forms of disturbance on the marine environment and associated species”, could be useful adding light and noise pollution specifically.
- Conservation Measures table in section **3.6 - Management (M)** suggests establishing of an impartial Scientific Advisory body to evaluate marine data and monitoring approaches. In this context, worth providing details, e.g. who will such an impartial advisory body consist of?

### *Section 4 - Specific objectives and measures*

- The specific objective **SSO7: Incidental by-catch of marine turtles within MPAs is at levels that are not harmful to the turtle populations** is phrased vaguely and needs to be more detailed, it also should state clearly that no activities should jeopardize favourable conservation status of the species.
- The specific objective **SSO25: Reduce the level of pressure caused by fishing activity and associated lost/discarded fishing gear on coastal reefs** is relevant to Sections 4.3 - Seabirds (Sb), 4.2 - Marine turtles (Tu) and 4.1 - Cetaceans (Ce) and should be added accordingly.