



Fostering Ecosystem-Based Maritime Spatial Planning in the Western Mediterranean Sea

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Research context

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) is the main governance process that ideally balances economic, ecological and socio-cultural goals through the regulation of human uses at sea. With the global and regional conservation and green energy targets ahead, there is an urgent need to better align MSP and strategic conservation planning, hence the operationalisation of an ecosystem approach to MSP. The EU-funded project MarinePlan supports the implementation of ecosystem-based MSP through the development of a Decision Support System (DSS). To inform the DSS, research has been conducted on the effectiveness of current governance regimes across eight European study sites, including the Western Mediterranean Sea (WMS) study site. The study site encompasses European nations – France, Italy and Spain – as well as north African countries – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Through an institutional and policy

audit, supported by interviews and a survey with key marine actors, detailed information has been developed on the barriers and enablers of adaptive marine governance in each region.

Governance targets and objectives

MSP remains a tool used at a national perspective without fully recognising the WMS as shared ecosystem. Planning in isolation increases the risk of creating mismatches or unintentional conflicts. Hence the importance of fostering cooperation across borders and enhancing alignment between national plans. Facilitating genuine integration between WMS nations is essential for more coherent management of shared spaces and resources. This research has identified several governance challenges that are obstructing MSP related progress. These challenges, as well as proposed solutions, are listed on the following page.

Barriers to achieving targets and recommendations



Barrier #1 – Disconnect between MSP and Marine Protected Area (MPA) designation at the national level

Recommendation – MSP and MPA roadmaps should be created to guide alignment between the processes. This should reinforce MSP and MPA implementation at the national level, ensuring robust governance, scientific knowledge and stakeholder engagement. Additionally, a common data collection framework should be established at a regional scale, promoting standardised methodologies for MSP and MPA designation.



Barrier #2 – Limited cooperation across borders in identifying priorities and setting specific objectives for the Western Mediterranean Sea

Recommendation – Establish a structured transboundary MSP cooperation strategy supported by key regional institutions (e.g., WestMED Initiative or UNEP-MAP Working Group on MSP) and all basin countries in the context of the already existing blue economy initiatives. This framework could facilitate workspaces for MSP in the region, develop useful planning tools, and advocate for increased and targeted budget allocations.



Barrier #3 – Stakeholder involvement in MSP is uneven across the Western Mediterranean region, with some sectors disengaged with the process

Recommendation – Improve stakeholder trust through early, inclusive and transparent engagement. Formalised steering committees that include sectoral representatives should be created, with facilitators assigned to work with less experienced stakeholders. Each committee should link to cross-border dialogue.



Barrier #4 – Stakeholder fatigue caused by the expected role and contribution of some stakeholders exceeding the capacity of their available resources

Recommendation – Reinforce government and stakeholder collaboration to enhance efficiency and maximise policy impact. Fostering strategic stakeholder coalitions could lead to shared responsibilities and resources. Thus, lowering fatigue. This should build on regional structures, such as the PAP/RAC regional activity centre.



Barrier #5 – Limited political capacity or commitment to develop adaptive marine governance

Recommendation – Mobilise public support and align political incentives with sustainable marine policies. This can be achieved by identifying political figures who can act as champions for the marine environment. Leaders should develop new cross-border engagement networks, as well as adaptation roadmaps that can help to align national policies with transboundary initiatives, such as the GFCM. Political leaders should also identify specific strategic objectives for region that could drive transboundary MSP and MPA processes.

More information

To read more on MarinePlan's recommendations for the WMS, click on the below links to an ArcGIS StoryMap, Deliverable reports, and a publication presenting an EB-MSP assessment tool:

[ArcGIS StoryMap](#)

'Fostering ecosystem-based MSP in the WMS'



[Deliverable 4.1](#)

'Report on existing policies and institutions'



[Deliverable 4.2](#)

'Report on adaptive capacity of governance'



[EB-MSP Assessment Tool](#)

'Assessment tool to address implementation challenges of EBM principles in MSP processes'



References

ArcGIS StoryMap – <https://arcg.is/HXjSK>

Deliverable 4.1 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10829632

Deliverable 4.2 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13862281

EB-MSP Assessment Tool – doi.org/10.1038/s43247-024-01975-7

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