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State and pressures of the marine and coastal Mediterranean environment

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European Environment Agency

NOTE

A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (http://europa.eu.int).

Cataloguing data can be found at the end of this publication.

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Foreword

When tackling the pressing issue of sustainable development in the Mediterranean Region - among which the challenging issues of rapid urbanisation rates; increasing tourism and coastal zone development and degradation; water scarcity; and trade – the need to establish a knowledge base and help come to grips with the problems is widely recognised, as is the current lack of timely and targeted information for action. To fulfil this need means also to contribute substantially to improving access to environmental data and information at the regional and national levels, both for governmental bodies and other institutions, as well as for the general public throughout the Mediterranean region.

Significant progress in building monitoring capacities (e.g. MEDPOL / MAP, environment / development observatories) and in framing, shaping and collecting data for commonly identified indicators (cf. the recent activities of the Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development) has been made. This is remarkable, but is it enough? We do not believe so. Is the best available information put to work for the right challenges, i.e. more stringent environmental political commitments and targets to improve in general environmental quality and the rational use of significant natural assets of the Mediterranean and, finally, to progress towards sustainable development? We must, indeed, consider the unique opportunity that a new generation of shared information could represent for an effective support to the national and regional decision-making processes and for stimulating the expected public participation.

What does this mean? For instance, the costs of environmental actions are often emphasised, but there are clearly also cost-effective opportunities for countries to develop eco-efficient economies, eg. increasing the share of renewable energies is realistic for many Mediterranean communities. Another example is given by the externalities of the tourism industry which, in many areas, offset the incomes and benefits it provides. If the right choices are to be made then new kinds of partnerships between all stakeholders are necessary as well as a new type of information that is relevant to the choices of development paths available.

This said, it is fair to state that expectations in the development of harmonised environmental data in the Mediterranean region through a joint information provision exercise have been often raised. To fulfil this objective the various actors ask the European Environment Agency (EEA) to contribute directly by bridging the European partners with the other Mediterranean actors. We have therefore initiated a partnership between EEA and UNEP / MAP. One of EEA's tasks, through the work of the Topic Centre on Marine and Coastal Environment, is to establish an Inter-Regional Forum to facilitate the exchange and integration of existing data and information among regional and international conventions and organisations active in marine and coastal environmental monitoring. Major regional and international organisations / conventions such as MAP, OSPAR, HELCOM have joined the Forum. From the first discussions between EEA and UNEP / MAP Secretariat, the need for an updated report on the state and trends for the Mediterranean Sea was emphasised.

The result of the cooperation on compiling and publishing such a report is presented here. It gives the best available information on the marine environment in the Mediterranean Sea and its coastal zone. It documents and describes the various interactions between human activities and the environment. It confirms and updates the major problems of the coastal zones. One of the major objectives of the report also includes the identification of possible gaps in current knowledge, especially in the field of marine environmental monitoring, following two decades of coordinated activities in the region under MEDPOL and complementary programmes. The final aim of the report is to identify objectives and recommend actions to improve the information, which can be achieved by encouraging better use of the scientific capacity in the region in order to focus more accurately on the existing problems and to propose suitable priorities and action.

It is worth stressing that the EEA and UNEP / MAP see this report both as a contribution to and a milestone towards an overall assessment

of the environmental situation of the whole Mediterranean basin. It is necessary, however, to go beyond, in support of the activities and political agenda dealing with environment / development issues. A status report on the current situation and prospects of the whole basin, including state of action, would address the specific needs of the European Union, UNEP, countries and international financial organisations to have an objective basis for decision-making. We should not wait too long before deciding about the making of this assessment report. In fact, such a report, which we might call 'The Mediterranean Basin. Situation and Prospects for the Next 20 Years' should be available for the Rio+10 Conference in 2002 in order to mark the place and ambitions of the Mediterranean within the world community.

In the meantime, we must dare to convey some strong messages, as demonstrated by the present report. Allow us to give you our perception of the issues:

- The Mediterranean sea and region is traditionally very rich in environmental data and specific, targeted information and scientific knowledge but extremely poor in consistent and integrated assessments. This difficulty to produce regular integrated assessments, linked to the political agenda, is a major handicap that has to be overcome;

- The Mediterranean is a fantastic asset: it is a strong and healthy sea that we submit, in spite of the reduction of some pollution, to excessive pressures; hot-spots identified by MAP are still numerous. Notwithstanding this, its natural conditions remain unique: its biodiversity, oligothrophic conditions,

  km of the 47 000 total km of Mediterranean coast, behind which the Mediterranean identity and its resources are gradually disappearing .

- We also discharge too much untreated waste water and toxic substances; and biodiversity is threatened by bringing invading fauna and flora species and scraping the sea beds.

The Mediterranean basin will only be what we make of the coasts. In line with the recommendations of the Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable development, the time has come to implement common policies for action aimed to improve the current situation and stop the degradation observed in this report. Otherwise, there is little hope of honouring our responsibility to take care of what is still a treasure; the Mediterranean Sea.

EEA and MAP will continue to develop their cooperation to provide more in-depth assessments; these should form the basis for the global action to reverse the present trends. It is not too late: it is a matter of understanding our collective interest as well as the rights of future generations.

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