

## KEY LONG-TERM MEASURES FOR THE RECOVERY OF EUROPEAN EEL IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

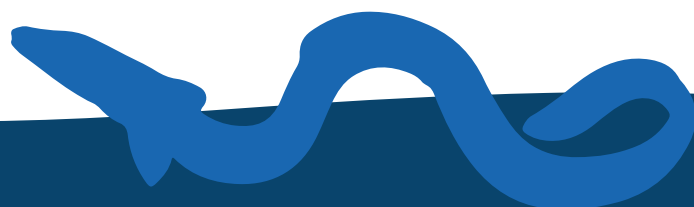
Since 2018, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) has been at the forefront of European eel management, with measures including a  $\geq 30\%$  reduction in fishing mortality, a total ban on recreational eel fisheries and a six-month fishing closure to protect eel migration in all waters. However, these measures are still far from aligned with the scientific advice and are unlikely to secure eel recovery.

The long-term management measures that the GFCM is set to adopt in 2024 will be the main opportunity to rectify this situation in the foreseeable future. These measures need to be ambitious enough to significantly boost eel recovery in the Mediterranean region, and set the direction for the rest of the EU and beyond.

The current scientific advice (ICES, 2023) on fishing opportunities and conservation is zero catch for all life stages in all habitats, including catches for restocking and aquaculture. The latest catches reported to the GFCM was 491 tonnes in 2021. Considering that European eel remains in a critical state and that the GFCM objectives for eel management include to “guarantee a low risk of stock collapse while maintaining sustainable and relatively stable fisheries”, stronger measures must be adopted.

Thus, based on the advice from the GFCM Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), as well as the conclusions of the GFCM research programme on European eel in the Mediterranean Sea, the long-term management measures should include the following clear provisions:

- ▶ Restore and maintain key eel habitats in the Mediterranean, such as coastal lagoons, including efforts to improve water quality, to maximize health and reproductive capacity of eels by 2029.
- ▶ Establish a network of spatial measures, including FRAs, to protect both eels and key eel habitats by 2029.
- ▶ Implement a full ban on glass eel fishing to protect recruitment (SAC, 2022; GFCM eel research programme, 2022). Exceptions could be made for translocation of glass eels within the same water body (ICES advice, 2023), if carefully monitored.



- ▶ Maintain the six-month eel fishing closures in all waters to protect eel migration, in particular the spawning migration of silver eels on their way to the Sargasso Sea, and ensure that implementation of the closures is aligned with the migration periods.
- ▶ Retain the full ban on all recreational fishing for European eel.
- ▶ Improve traceability of landings, together with a more effective control system, to reduce IUU fishing.
- ▶ Gradually shift to fishery independent monitoring for all eel life stages.
- ▶ Make improvements in CPC<sup>1</sup> data collection, reporting and implementation of measures, including a process for data quality control.
- ▶ Establish a public GFCM database, including information on the national implementation of eel measures, which would increase transparency and public confidence in the management measures.
- ▶ Carry out an interim review after 3 years to assess the effectiveness of the long-term measures.

The GFCM research programme on European eel in the Mediterranean Sea has assessed alternative management scenarios against the GFCM temporary management measures, and a full fishery closure was found to be the most effective way to increase silver eel escapement (Table 109, GFCM Studies & Reviews 103, 2023), which would also be the most effective way to boost recruitment.

**Seeing as European eel is listed by the IUCN as Critically Endangered and the population currently shows no signs of improving, emergency measures should be considered if there is no measurable recovery in the next three years, including a full moratorium of eel fishing for all life stages until a clear improvement, bringing the population above biological limit reference points, has been confirmed.**

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<sup>1</sup> In the GFCM, CPCs stands for Contracting Parties, and Co-operative non-Contracting Parties.