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50 years of the Mediterranean Action Plan: Honoring achievements, driving change

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A key institution for protecting the region's marine and coastal environment, the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, and the post-Rio Barcelona Convention, whose 24th Conference of the Parties (COP) is taking place this week in Cairo, marks its 30th anniversary. This milestone is both a moment for celebration and an opportunity for reflection, inviting the Mediterranean community to draw lessons from the past and renew commitment to strengthening regional cooperation in the face of mounting challenges.

This blog post is based on a report commissioned by UNEP to IDDRI and the Varda Group on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Mediterranean Action Plan.¹ This report will be presented at the 24th Conference of the Parties of the Barcelona Convention on Thursday, 4 December.

To our colleague and friend [Rémi Parmentier](#).

As one of the flagship initiatives of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under its Regional Seas Programme, the MAP has undergone significant evolution over the past five decades, with a steadily expanding legal

framework and institutional architecture. The 1976 Barcelona Convention, amended in 1995 to align with the principles adopted at the Rio Conference, is now completed by seven legally binding protocols, making its legal framework one of the most comprehensive among regional seas. Its institutional structure is also unique, comprising e.g. a Compliance Committee, which few other global or regional legal instruments currently possess; a Commission on Sustainable Development with a hybrid membership combining the Barcelona Convention's Parties and representatives of civil society organizations; and seven Regional Activity Centres (RACs) which, when fully operational, contribute to the dynamism of regional cooperation by supporting States in the implementation of their obligations. Thanks to this robust structure, and despite a complex and often volatile geopolitical context, the 22 Contracting Parties² have succeeded in maintaining a resilient and adaptive framework for cooperative action.

Environmental Progress

From an environmental standpoint, the past decades have seen substantial progress, driven in part by the spirit of cooperation that the MAP has consistently fostered and sustained. The regional system has been a driving force behind the designation of marine protected areas, the development of common rules for coastal zone management, the protection of iconic ecosystems such as Posidonia seagrass meadows, the enhancement of pollution-monitoring systems, the reduction of land-based pollutants, including through the growing number of waste water treatment plants, and improved regional and national preparedness for marine pollution incidents.

However, as underscored by the [Blue Plan](#), the transformations expected in the Mediterranean by 2050 will unfold in a region already under severe environmental pressure. Accelerating climate change, increasing permanent and seasonal population pressures, growing concentration of human activities along the coastline, and intensifying demands on natural resources pose significant threats to the sustainability of the region. Therefore, beyond commemorating the MAP anniversary, this moment calls for anticipation and strengthened action.

Filling the implementation gaps

The first challenge to overcome is undoubtedly to step up efforts to implement the existing instruments. Since the late 1990s, environmental cooperation has entered a new era. Until then, both globally and regionally, the primary challenge was to fill legal gaps by adopting new instruments. Today, the focus has shifted from filling legal gaps to implementing the existing instruments, a task that is undoubtedly [much more challenging](#). In the Mediterranean, as in many regions, the implementation of regional agreements is far from systematic and comprehensive. Many reasons, often cumulative, can explain this situation, including the lack of political will, political instability in some States, financial shortfalls, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Much progress is therefore to be made to strengthen regional implementation efforts.

Developing cooperation in emerging issues

In addition to implementing existing tools, it is crucial for the MAP to also enhance regional cooperation on emerging and increasingly urgent issues. This unquestionably requires strengthening actions related to climate change adaptation. This is especially pertinent given that the Mediterranean Sea is a [hot spot for climate change](#), warming 20% faster than the global average. Coastal and maritime tourism is another area that could be further explored by the MAP and its Contracting Parties. [As the world's leading tourist destination](#), the Mediterranean attracts 30% of global tourism and generates over US\$420 billion annually. Yet tourism also fuels [coastal overdevelopment](#), environmental degradation, and social pressures, including overcrowding and precarious employment. To prevent fragmented or counterproductive approaches, the future of Mediterranean tourism must be addressed [at the scale of](#)

[the entire basin](#), not through a mere patchwork of national policies.

For these and potentially other issues, new forms of cooperation will likely be required. For various reasons, countries appear reluctant to develop new protocols. Regardless, progress must continue through alternative approaches, including potentially involving sub-national authorities more extensively. These authorities are uniquely positioned at the heart of adaptation and tourism challenges and can serve as key drivers in implementing sustainable strategies and measures. National level involvement alone is no longer sufficient. This should be seen as an opportunity to expand the MAP's engagement with local authorities, leveraging their proximity to the issues to foster more effective and lasting solutions.

Implementing global commitments

Regional ocean governance should also serve as a lever for implementing commitments made at the global level. In this regard, at least three key instruments should be given particular attention by regional seas in general and the MAP in particular.

First, [the Global Framework for Biodiversity/Kunming-Montreal Agreement](#), adopted in 2023 by the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which serves as the international roadmap to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Several targets of this agreement fall within the MAP's mandate, particularly the flagship target on implementing the 30x30 objective. Therefore, actions must continue to support Mediterranean States in the implementation of these biodiversity goals.

Adopted in 2023, the international agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (the "[High Seas Treaty](#)") is another significant international instrument that aims to conserve and sustainably manage the previously neglected half of our planet. High seas pockets remain in the Mediterranean, and the MAP should therefore act on at least two fronts, the first being to support their Contracting Parties in their ratification process. The MAP should also anticipate the challenges related to the agreement's implementation in the Mediterranean, particularly with regard to area-based management tools and marine protected areas.

Finally, negotiations for a global treaty on plastics must also be closely monitored. Every day, approximately [730 tons of plastic are dumped into the Mediterranean Sea](#). Measures to combat this pollution have already been taken, including through the 2013 Regional Plan on Marine Litter and the 2022-2027 Medium-Term Strategy. If the global treaty is finally adopted, the MAP could continue these efforts by supporting countries in its implementation, tailored to the specificities of the region.

Since its creation, the Mediterranean cooperation framework has endured through the years, proving particularly resilient in the face of crises, wars, revolutions, regime changes, and social unrest, while achieving undeniable progress in the protection of coastal and marine environments. Many challenges, however, remain to ensure effective protection of Mediterranean ecosystems, strengthen the resilience of coastal habitats, and guarantee equitable and coordinated management of shared resources. Yet, at a time when the global geopolitical context is increasingly uncertain and multilateral dynamics are evolving, Mediterranean history shows that a regional approach to marine protection is a powerful lever for collective progress. It is now up to the Mediterranean States to heed this lesson and strengthen their political leadership and financial commitment to reinforce the efforts already underway.

IDDRI Report on “The Mediterranean Action Plan at 50: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Directions” UNEP/MAP

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Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Slovenia, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Turkey, and the European Union.

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- OCEAN

NÉGOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES OCÉAN

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

PLASTIQUE

HIGH SEAS

TOURISME DURABLE