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Dispatches from the Field: 21 October 2015. Corsica, in ‘the sea at the center of the Earth’

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We're in wild and rugged Corsica, smack dab in the middle of the Pelagos Marine Sanctuary, in what the ancients called 'the sea at the center of the Earth' – the Mediterranean. The sea is roiling, not only from being whipped by the wind, but also from the abundant life below the surface. For all those who think of the Mediterranean as overdeveloped, stripped of resources over the millennia, it might come as a surprise that there are still productive, wild places, harboring marine biodiversity of global significance. Similarly it might surprise people to learn that in this region known for conflict and conquest, for prizing old world tradition over innovation, some of the most exciting and progressive cooperative marine management in the world is unfolding.

Readers may be familiar with the Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals, the world's first marine protected area with a high seas component, decreed jointly by France, Italy, and Monaco in 2002. This large reserve was created in recognition of the surprisingly high abundance of marine mammals in this part of the Mediterranean, a fact noted by Monaco's Prince Rainier as he gazed from his palace balcony at waters churning with life. It was he who spearheaded the Pelagos designation. And in the intervening years, many more marine conservation champions have taken up the baton to study and safeguard the fin, sperm, and beaked whales; dolphins; and other species that congregate to feed in the food-rich frontal-driven upwelling systems.

There is a problem with Pelagos, however. The boundaries that once captured this marine mammal diversity hotspot no longer encompass all of the most critical habitats. Fin whales in particular are spending much of their time outside the reserve, in dynamic frontal systems and critical feeding areas only newly identified. Thus the Pelagos Sanctuary no longer serves some of the very organisms it was established to protect.

Remarkable promise for cooperation

This is where it gets complicated, and also where there is tremendous promise for seeing remarkably innovative marine conservation – for the Mediterranean is a region extraordinarily sophisticated, and extraordinarily cooperative in its approach to science and management. Scientists from all corners who work on Mediterranean ecology, oceanography, geology, and social sciences come together periodically under the umbrella of CIEM (the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea). Similarly on the management front, MedPAN (Network of Marine Protected Area Managers in the Mediterranean) brings MPA managers from across the region together to exchange ideas, participate in trainings, and promote capacity building. And the Mediterranean Action Plan, a UNEP Regional Seas Convention Secretariat, unites all 21 riparian countries and the EU for joint priority-setting, mapping, management, and monitoring towards common ecological objectives, in true EBM fashion.

Within the boundaries of Pelagos, whales are protected by cutting edge technology REal time Plotting of CETaceans – REPCET) that delivers real time information about their whereabouts to captains of the many high speed ferries and cargo ships that travel through the sanctuary. All well and good, but what about those whales that feed outside the boundaries of the much-respected Pelagos Sanctuary?

Fortunately, whale researchers from Italy, France, Spain, UK, and the US (and likely other places as well) have pooled their knowledge about the ecology of marine mammals in the Mediterranean and come to consensus on the factors that seem to drive the movements of many of the target species. For instance, Arianna Azzellino, working with marine mammalogists from Tethys Research Institute in Milan, has developed a model that uses oceanographic information to predict where these animals will spend their time feeding. Planners can use this information to identify priority conservation areas that are dynamic and move with the whales, creating protection beyond Pelagos. As these areas are identified, an expanded REPCET system could not only to verify model predictions, but also alert ships passing through these dynamic areas that whales are present in droves.

I have the great good fortune to be working with numerous Mediterranean conservationists to explore how these cutting edge scientific findings and tools can best be harnessed. Adaptive management of the region's marine mammals, flagship and umbrella species that they are, will have great chances for success only because of the commitment Mediterranean countries, scientists, and maritime users have for the same goal – keeping Mediterranean waters roiling with life.

[Editor's note: See the textbox "'The First High-Seas MPA' - The Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals" in the September 2003 issue of MPA News for an explanation of why the Pelagos sanctuary can be considered a high seas MPA.]

Other coverage of the Pelagos Sanctuary

- "MPAs in the Mediterranean, and lessons from the Pelagos Sanctuary" by Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara of the Tethys Research Institute: <http://depts.washington.edu/mpanews/MPA121.pdf>
- "Pushing forward the Pelagos Sanctuary and the conservation of marine mammals in the Mediterranean Sea" by Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara of the Tethys Research Institute: <https://www.openchannels.org/blog/disciara/pushing-forward-pelagos-sanctuary-and-conservation-marine-mammals-mediterranean-sea>

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