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Consideration of cultural values shapes ecosystem-based management in the Mediterranean

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Editor's note: In this article, the term "value" is generally used to indicate the importance and/or usefulness of something and is not referring to a strictly monetary value. Cultural ecosystem services or "cultural services" provide a typology for cultural values that the ocean holds for stakeholders.

The cultural importance of the Mediterranean Sea to the European, North African, and Middle Eastern nations that border it is legion. Over millennia its marine resources fed countless societies – Babylon, Phoenicia, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and many others on to the present day. Its harbors sheltered seafarers, while its connections to the Black Sea and Atlantic (and in the modern era, to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal) provided passageways for maritime transport around the world. Some historians claim that the governance of sea use by the ancients laid the groundwork for the city states that flourished in Europe during the Renaissance, which in turn gave rise to the growth and influence of European civilization. Its ecosystems served as natural laboratories for a long, continuous history of scientific study. The sheer beauty of its landscapes and seascapes have inspired art and bolstered spirituality.

This link between the natural world of the Mediterranean Sea and the cultural world on its shores is not one-sided – the sea offers a bounty of cultural services, and in return, human cultures have protected the sea. Perhaps more than any other place on earth, the Mediterranean's cultural values have influenced how humanity has managed uses of its waters and coasts.

“Stewardship without tenure” in the Mediterranean

Philip Steinberg recognizes this uniqueness in his book *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. He writes that while Mediterranean societies viewed the sea as a non-possible space, they held it in such high regard that they pushed for state power to steward its bounty. This stewardship without tenure is distinctive – and perhaps the only form of marine governance possible in a place so packed with diverse cultures that were, more often than not, warring neighbors.

This is not to say that other seafaring or coastal societies did not or do not value their ocean spaces. But the Mediterranean was so central to the many societies flanking it over the centuries that a way to protect it without laying claim to territory needed to evolve.

This historical social construct may explain how the Mediterranean came to be the only ocean body without Exclusive Economic Zones. Until the extensions of influence that have occurred in the last decade, such as the establishment of 200 nautical mile conservation zones, the sea had a large central core of high seas just beyond the 12 nautical mile territorial limit of coastal countries. And this is perhaps the main reason why the Pelagos Sanctuary for the Protection of Mediterranean Marine Mammals (established in 1999) was able to become the first marine protected area (MPA) covering areas beyond national jurisdiction, and why the three neighboring countries that established it were able to work so well together. While there are other MPAs that span national borders (see Peter Mackleworth's new book on transboundary protected areas), the Pelagos Sanctuary is a pioneering example of cooperation across borders and out into the high seas.

And marine mammals have benefitted from the historical affinity for the sea's cultural values in other ways beyond the establishment of the large Pelagos Sanctuary. The widely-held reverence of marine mammals in the Mediterranean, and the recognition that conserving them required sharing information and practicing cooperative management led to the establishment of ACCOBAMS (the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area, signed in 1996 and entered into force in 2001). This agreement binds 23 countries of the Mediterranean and Black Seas region to work together to conserve marine mammals, and is innovative in that it includes non-riparian countries whose maritime activities are likely to jeopardize cetacean conservation. Since cetaceans are not harvested anywhere in the region, their value is largely intrinsic – yet marine mammals hold such strong cultural values that they drove the establishment of an international agreement, even among countries which are not technically 'Mediterranean'.

Cultural values still paramount in the Mediterranean

But that was then – what now? The cultural values of the Mediterranean still influence attitudes, governance, and policy. The examples are too numerous to catalog – but I'll mention a few.

Following the Ramsar Convention decision in 2002 to take cultural values into account when managing wetlands, the 22 member states of the Barcelona Convention (Mediterranean Regional Seas Convention) made a concerted effort to account for and protect coastal cultural values. The Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative was launched to “understand, document and strengthen the links between inhabitants and visitors in the Mediterranean wetland sites and to show that the inclusion of cultural aspects in wetland management can increase the social pressure for the conservation of these sites and enhance the interest of visitors on Mediterranean wetlands.”

Recognizing the importance of cultural ecosystem services, Blue Plan (the regional coordinating unit of the Barcelona Convention) was instructed by the Convention's 22 member states to undertake an assessment of ecosystem services, including cultural services. This study has set the stage for more detailed assessments at sub-regional scales and is used to inform member countries' ecosystem approach to management. Determining what cultural services exist is the first step toward being able to triangulate on what matters to users and society as a whole. Knowing this, especially in a place as culturally rich as the Mediterranean, may be the most important element in crafting management approaches that safeguard the sea and the people who rely and value it.

At a different scale, Miramare – a small MPA in the northern corner of the Italian Adriatic – is widely considered one of the Mediterranean's best marine management success stories. Miramare is small (120 hectares), but highly significant, as it was the first MPA designated by Italy (1973) and is widely regarded as a model for marine management.

I mention this because the key to Miramare's success is not its protection of critical habitat or species, nor its value in enhancing fisheries production or supporting revenue-generating tourism. It is celebrated because Miramare plays an important role in reminding people of their connection to the sea and in educating residents and visitors about the natural and cultural values of the Mediterranean. Student groups from all over the region come to learn about its coastal habitat, the interplay between land and sea, and the ways that the sea has sustained generations of Mediterranean peoples.

There are reasons to be pessimistic about what is happening in the Mediterranean – fisheries are severely depleted, invasives are pouring in through the Suez Canal, pollution is lessening but is still an issue, and the capacity to control impacts is highly variable – but I'm buoyed by this region's focus on cultural services. The tradition of the Mare Nostrum ("our sea") lives on, and compels peoples who might be tempted to turn inwards to lay claim to territory and erect fences to instead turn outwards and embrace a common marine territory. What could be more cause for optimism than witnessing that societies are capable of maintaining and enhancing a common agenda – one that withstood the ravages of time?

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