

For decades, Adriatic Sea has been synonymous with big business. Overfishing, bottom trawling, pollution, and climate change are seriously threatening the biodiversity of the Adriatic. Which, together with the neighbouring Ionian Sea, is home to almost half of the marine species of the entire Mediterranean.

European hake, which the Adriatic Recovery Project indicates as the most economically relevant species for bottom trawling, is being fished 5.5 times above sustainable limits; stocks do not have time to regenerate. Unsurprisingly, catches dropped by as much as 45 percent between 2006 and 2014. For almost three years, experts and NGOs have been calling for the establishment of a Fisheries Restricted Area (FRA) in the Strait of Otranto, between the Italian region of Puglia and Albania. FRAs are geographically-defined areas in which some specific fishing activities are temporarily or permanently banned or restricted. As Carlo Cerrano, professor of zoology at the Marche Polytechnic University, explains, the Strait of Otranto is a fundamental gateway for the currents flowing in the Adriatic Sea, and a large number of organisms find a favourable environment there.

“Preserving such an important area means ensuring a certain balance for the entire basin,” he notes. “If we compromise it, we also compromise the ‘biodiversity bank’ of the entire Adriatic”.

The excellent results of the FRA in the Jabuka/Pomo Pit established in 2017 between Italy and Croatia prove that saving the Adriatic is possible.

“A year and a half after the institution of that FRA, the biomass of hake and prawns had more than doubled,” explains Domitilla Senni, spokesperson for MedReAct, an NGO that works for the recovery of Mediterranean marine ecosystems.

“Italian and Croatian fishermen active around that area have noticed a remarkable increase in the resources, to the point that while before they were skeptical or even opposed to the establishment of these areas, they have become their champions”.

In 2018, MedReAct, among the promoters of the FRA in the Jabuka/Pomo Pit, submitted a request for the establishment of a similar fisheries restricted area in the Strait of Otranto to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM). Italian stakeholders also support the request.

“Initially we were against it, they wanted to restrict a lot of sea,” says a fisherman from Puglia who agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity.

“Then we found a common ground. But I understand there’s a need for some pressure from the media”.

Indeed, after almost three years, no decision has been made. And as one delves into the intricacies of the institutional processes involved, it seems clear that it may still take a long

time. A 2019 GFCM recommendation states “FRAs shall be established for the conservation and management of stocks in the Adriatic Sea”. The roadmap for doing so includes several steps, including a workshop with GFCM members, scientists and stakeholders.

“The workshop is expected to be held tentatively before the next meeting of the GFCM subregional committee for the Adriatic Sea, which has been postponed to the first semester of 2021 due to the prevalence of the Covid-19 pandemics,” says Miguel Bernal, GFCM senior fishery officer.

“As an additional note, the GFCM has agreed that further FRAs need to be established in the Adriatic Sea, but that does not necessarily imply that a FRA will be established in the Strait of Otranto” he adds.

“A FRA in the southern Adriatic Sea could help recover the demersal stocks while also protecting essential fish habitats and vulnerable marine ecosystems” observes Vivian Loonela, the coordinating spokesperson for the Green Deal and for fisheries at the European Commission.

However, while the EU Commission leads the EU delegation to the GFCM, “when it comes to the establishment of FRAs, then this is largely a member state competence”, she notes. In the case of the FRA in the Strait of Otranto, Albania – an extra EU country – and Italy must reach an agreement first. In the view of Arian Palluqi, head of the Albanian delegation at the GFCM, the process is , and it just requires time to be completed. “The proposal is now following the steps foreseen by the GFCM.

“At the national level, we have created consultation tables to discuss the matter with the stakeholders, so to reach a commonly agreed decision. Moreover, as this FRA involves two countries, bilateral meetings have been initiated with our counterpart in Italy”.

According to Riccardo Rigillo, who heads the directorate general for fisheries and aquaculture of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policies, further studies are needed.

“In addition to the effects on the stocks that reproduce in that area, we also need to understand where the fleet that currently operates there would start fishing. Closing one area could cause greater damage elsewhere,” he points out.

“Furthermore, closing an area to fishing has immediate economic effects, and we need to carefully assess those too”.

But professor Cerrano argues that “the Otranto area is now a unique area in terms of seabed biodiversity, and it must absolutely be preserved”.

The only way to avoid a catastrophic scenario in the Adriatic is to create long term-protected areas, so that the system can function again, at least there, he adds.

“The first to benefit from this would be the fishermen themselves. Otherwise, the resources will disappear for everyone”.

According to Senni, the process for the FRA in the Strait of Otranto is being much slower than usual.

“The FRA in the Jabuka/Pomo Pit is the demonstration that when there is the political will, things can be done. The more so because the Jabuka/Pomo Pit was much more important for fishing than the Strait of Otranto, where very few fishing boats can operate since waters are very deep” she says.

“The recovery potential is great. But we must let the sea rest”.

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