

Environmental policies focus on protecting habitats valuable for their biodiversity, as well as producing energy in cleaner ways. The establishment of Marine Protected Area (MPA) networks and installing Offshore Wind Farms (OWF) are important ways to achieve these goals. The protection and management of marine biodiversity has focused on placing MPAs in areas important for biodiversity. This has proved successful within the MPAs, but had little impact beyond their boundaries. In the highly populated Mediterranean and the Black Seas, bordered by many range states, the declaration of extensive MPAs is unlikely at present, so limiting the bearing of protection. The establishment of MPAs networks can cope with this obstacle but, to be effective, such networks must be based on solid scientific knowledge and properly managed (not merely “paper parks”). OWF, meanwhile, must be placed where the winds are suitable for producing power, but they should not have any significant impact on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning, or on human activities. The project has two main themes:

1 – To identify prospective networks of existing or potential MPAs in the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, shifting from a local perspective (centred on single MPAs) to the regional level (network of MPAs) and finally the basin scale (network of networks). The identification of the physical and biological connections among MPAs will elucidate the patterns and processes of biodiversity distribution. Measures to improve protection schemes will be suggested based on maintaining effective exchanges (biological and hydrological) between protected areas. The national coastal focus of existing MPAs will be widened to both off shore and deep sea habitats, incorporating them into the networks through examination of current legislation, to find legal solutions to set up transboundary MPAs.

2 – To explore where OWF might be established, producing an enriched wind atlas both for the Mediterranean and the Black Seas. OWF locations will avoid too sensitive habitats but the possibility for them to act as stepping-stones through MPAs, without interfering much with human activities, will be evaluated. Socioeconomic studies employing ecosystem services valuation methods to develop sustainable approaches for both MPA and OWF development will also be carried out, to complement the ecological and technological parts of the project, so as to provide guidelines to design, manage and monitor networks of MPAs and OWF.

Two pilot projects (one in the Mediterranean Sea and one in the Black Sea) will test in the field the assumptions of theoretical approaches, based on previous knowledge, to find emerging properties in what we already know, in the light of the needs of the project. The project covers many countries and involves researchers across a vast array of subjects, in order to achieve a much-needed holistic approach to environmental protection. It will help to integrate the Mediterranean and Black seas scientific communities through intense collective activities, combined with strong communications with stakeholders and the public at large. Consequently, the project will create a permanent network of excellent researchers (with cross fertilization and further capacity building) that will also work together also in the future, making their expertise available to their countries and to the European Union.