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Mediterranean Conservationists and Fishermen Work Together to Protect Deep Seas

The Mediterranean is the first regional sea to adopt measures to refrain from deep water fishing

Malaga, 2 March 2005 (IUCN- the World Conservation Union) – The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) - the main inter-governmental decision-making body on fishery management in the Mediterranean – last week decided to refrain from expanding deep water fishing operations beyond the limit of 1000 metres based on scientific considerations. This important measure was based on a comprehensive study on the status of deep sea fishing in the Mediterranean developed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and WWF. The measure has also been debated in a wide-reaching consultation process with relevant regional specialists, including the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Sea (CIESM), through several workshops held over the last 18 months.

“This is an important measure, the first of its kind in the world. It is a significant step towards a more sustainable fishery in the Mediterranean. Both communities, conservationists and the fishery industry, will benefit from this measure”, said François Simard, IUCN Global Marine Coordinator.

Submarine canyons, cold seeps, brine pools, cold water corals and seamounts are the hidden secrets of Mediterranean deep seas. Deep water ecosystems are highly vulnerable to commercial exploitation due to the low turnover rates of the species adapted to these environments and the lack of adaptation of deep ecosystems to cope with strong external perturbations.

Excluding bottom trawling, the most extended deep water fishing technique, the 1000m limit will protect juvenile shrimps, and therefore shrimp fisheries, as deep waters are one of their vital nursery areas.

“GFCM’s decision to exclude trawling beyond 1000 metres has moved the Mediterranean considerably towards sustainable fisheries. It also makes the region a leader in fisheries management”, said Sergi Tudela, head of the WWF delegation at the GFCM session.

Another measure suggested by IUCN and WWF, in their conservation proposal related to the GFCM’s decision, is a site-based approach that aims to create a network of Marine Protected Areas encompassing unique habitats as deep water ecosystems.

Sea water below 1000 metres depth is a poorly known ecosystem. This general approach of preventing an extension of fishing practices as a precautionary measure is therefore in line with Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recommendations.

The decision was adopted at the 29th session of the GFCM held in Rome from 21-25 February 2005. Unless objections from member countries arise, it will come into force in 4 months time.

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