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**“Making coastal wetlands governance a good deal:
voluntary-based commitment-to-act agreements for pursuing multiple benefits”**

Webinar Summary

The WETNET project (2016-2019), co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg Med Programme, has aimed at ensuring higher coordination between different levels of spatial planning and stakeholders engaged into wetland management processes, whilst limiting conflicts between conservation issues and economic activities. Furthermore the project has aimed at defining common priorities for Mediterranean wetlands and freshwater ecosystems conservation. In particular it has focused on building a common territorial strategy for the integrated wetlands' management and ensuring higher coordination between different levels of spatial planning and stakeholders engaged into wetland management processes, whilst limiting conflicts between conservation issues and economic activities. In order to achieve these goals, WETNET has tested in nine EU-Mediterranean wetlands (one in Portugal, three in Spain, one in France, two in Italy, one in Slovenia, one in Malta) a voluntary-based multi-stakeholder agreement (“Wetland Contract”) as governance tools for the sustainable management of protected wetlands. WETNET has been built on previous EU experiences mainly based on “River Contracts” (born in France in the early 80' and developed in Belgium and Italy later on) to face the challenge of improving wetlands governance and ecosystems conservation. The River Contract is an agreement that allows to adopt a set of regulations in which criteria of public utility, economic return, social value and environmental sustainability equally take part in the search for effective solutions for the river basin's re-covery (World Water Forum - L'Aja, 2000).

Wetlands only occupy 9% of the land globally, but they provide proportionally significantly more ecosystem services, which are also of high importance (e.g. water provision, regulation of hazards). Especially in regions such as the Mediterranean Basin where wetland extent is decreasing while the human population is increasing, the importance of wetlands for ecosystem services and biodiversity is increasingly disproportionate.

Wetlands are naturally complex ecosystems that cannot be managed with sectorial approaches and policies. In such a context, single-objective measures normally generate externalities that could affect other sectors than the ones addressed by the measure itself. Thus it is to be acknowledged the importance of adopting integrative and inclusive decision making processes, able to take into account different ecosystems features and place-based stakes. From the governance point of view, such a voluntary based negotiated agreement as the Wetland Contract tested in the WetNet project can represent a way for identifying common and shared responsibilities amongst relevant stakeholders for the sustainable management of Med wetlands.

WETNET has tackled the issue of implementing a multilevel governance for MED wetlands in order to achieve overall and network effects on wetlands' ecosystems. Wetland Contracts can be defined as voluntary-based commitments undertaken by various public and private entities for the sustainable management of wetland systems. Through the Wetland Contract a local community can identify responsibilities and implementation strategies for the governance and management of their own wetlands. Even before sharing decisions, this governance tool aims at sharing the way of taking decisions.

The Wetland Contract is based on a process of mutual listening amongst public and private stakeholders, aimed at (1) integrating expertise and perceptions, (2) sharing wishes and complaints and (3) agreeing proposals and commitments.

The path toward the contractual agreement is inclusive and transparent, in order to facilitate the legitimacy and practicability of the final decisions.

Two key issues of the participatory process are the stakeholder analysis and the consequent stakeholder engagement strategy. Under the umbrella of the European regulatory framework both public information and consultation should be anyway guaranteed (according to the recommendations of the Water Framework Directive). Beside of this the design of active participatory and/or negotiation processes should match the expectations of the target groups as well as the specific features of the decision making problems. In any case the engagement process could be considered a pedagogical path in which each player may get to higher levels of knowledge and awareness, thus shaping the inclusiveness and empowerment degree of the Contract itself.

The outcoming action plan includes responsibilities for each activity to be implemented, specifying implementation deadlines, financial resources (already available or to be retrieved) and implementing rules.

Key data

- www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/conservation-status-of-species-and#tab-dashboard-01
- www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/conservation-status-of-species-and#tab-dashboard-01

Bibliography

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- Palazzo A. L., Muccitelli S., D'Ascanio R., Pozzi C., and Magaudda S. (eds), (2021) Environmental Contracts in Marine Protected Areas: methodology and pilot cases from TUNE UP, leNote di U3, n. 3, ISSN 1973-9702.