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**Performance Audit: Prolonging the adoption of site-specific management plans hinders conservation and enforcement initiatives in Marine Protected Areas**

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In the Report, "The designation and effective management of protected areas within Maltese waters" the Auditor General, Mr. Charles Deguara, acknowledged recent efforts by National Authorities to designate Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to protect habitats and seabirds in accordance with the Natura 2000 framework. Nonetheless, the risks exist that such initiatives would be ends in themselves unless supported by site-specific management plans and the appropriate level of resources to ensure their timely implementation, monitoring and enforcement.

The 14 designated MPAs constitute around 30 per cent of the Maltese Fisheries Management Zone (FMZ). These initiatives were based on the findings and conclusions of six major assessments commissioned by or through the Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change, costing around €4.6 million. As the scope of these studies extended to the 25 nautical mile zone constituting the FMZ, together with the prevailing political climate within a number of Mediterranean countries, Malta remains restricted from declaring MPAs within the high seas.

Frequently, various sources, including Non Governmental Organisations, highlight the impact of economic activities on MPAs. Examples in this regard relate to anchoring at is-Sikka l-Bajda and excessive diving at Mgarr ix-Xini. The former leads to potential risks of degradation of posedonia oceanica while the latter threatens the biodiversity of this site. This illustrates the critical need for the more expedient adoption and implementation of the national strategic framework, including site-specific management plans. The Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) contends that these plans will be adopted by 2020, which, with the exception of one plan, remain within the EU permissible deadline.

In the interim, ERA together with other national authorities, including Transport Malta, Ministry for Tourism and Department for Fisheries is implementing various other initiatives which contribute to safeguarding biodiversity within these sites, namely those related to the Programme of Measures within the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Nonetheless, until such time that these site-specific plans are in place, it will prove problematic for National Competent Authorities to secure the required level of resources and to adopt a common management criteria to facilitate planning and implementation. This audit concluded that unless National Authorities strengthen their position to enable them to adopt, implement, monitor and enforce site-specific management plans, the risk exists that it will be difficult to establish the required equilibrium between conservation and blue growth.

The Report proposes a number of recommendations aimed at strategic, administrative capacity and operational levels.

To view report (.PDF) please follow [link](#).

