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Agenda Item 3: Steps undertaken towards the implementation of the Post-2020 Strategic Action Programme for the Conservation of Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources in the Mediterranean Region (Post-2020 SAPBIO) at regional and national levels

Guidance for identifying and reporting Mediterranean marine and coastal Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs)

SPA/RAC
Tunis, 2026

Note by the Secretariat

1. The SPA/RAC has prepared the Draft guidance document on Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECM) : identification and Criteria application in the Mediterranean, in accordance with the Barcelona Convention Post-2020 Regional Strategy on Marine and Coastal Protected Areas and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures in the Mediterranean, Action A.3.1.6 Develop sectoral and other guidance, such as tools and templates, for applying OECM criteria and establishing processes for identifying OECMs.

2. The first draft was shared with the AGEM members for comments and feedback, then a specific AGEM meeting was organised to discuss the draft guidance on 15 April 2025. The reviewed draft was after that shared with the SPA/BD Focal Points for comments. The Guidance was thus reviewed following the received feedback from the SPA/BD Focal Points and AGEM members, integrating additional inputs received from experts and organisations working on OECMs.

3. In this context, SPA/RAC supported three volunteer countries in conducting the first national pilot exercises to understand and report OECMs using the OECM Guidance. This version incorporates the outcomes of these three pilot experiences.

Acronyms

ABMT	Area-based management tool
ABNJ	Area beyond national jurisdiction
ABTA	Area To Be Avoided
AGEM	*Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean
BACI	Before-After Control-Impact
CAFF	Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CDDA	Common Database on Designated Areas
COBSEA	Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia
COP	Conference of Parties
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources (Philippines)
DG ENV	Directorate-General for Environment
EBSA	Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Area
EEA	European Environment Agency
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
FRA	Fisheries Restricted Area
FPIC	Free, prior and informed consent
GBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
GD-PAME	Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness
GFCM	General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean
HELCOM	Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (the Helsinki Commission)
ICES	International Council for the Exploration of the Sea
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IUCN Med	IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation
IUCN-WCPA	IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas
KBA	Key Biodiversity Area
LBS	Land-based source
mOECM	Marine Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measure
MoEFCC	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (India)
OECM	Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure
MAPAMED	Database on Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean
MCPA	Marine and Coastal Protected Area
MedPAN	Network of Marine Protected Areas Managers in the Mediterranean
MPA	Marine Protected Area
NBA	National Biodiversity Authority (India)
NEAFC	North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIPAS	National Integrated Protected Areas System (Philippines)
NNORC	National NIPAS and OECM Review Committee (Philippines)
OECM	Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measure
OSPAR	Agreement for protecting the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic, also known as the Oslo and Paris Convention
OSU	Oregon State University
PAME	Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment
PSSA	Particularly Sensitive Sea Area
RFMO	Regional Fisheries Management Organisation
SPA/BD	Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity
SPAMI	Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance
SPA/RAC	Specially Protected Area Regional Activity Centre (of UNEP/MAP)

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP/MAP	United Nations Environment Programme / Mediterranean Action Plan
UNEP/WCMC	United Nations Environment Programme / World Conservation Monitoring Centre
VME	Vulnerable Marine Ecosystem
WDPCA	World Database on Protected and Conserved Areas
WD-OECM	World Database on Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures

Acknowledgements

This document has been developed under the guidance of the *Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM) of the Specially Protected Areas Regional Activity Centre (SPA/RAC), in consultation with the Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity (SPA/BD) Focal Points, as well as relevant experts and institutions dealing with Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs).

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) are one of five strategic pillars of the Barcelona Convention's Post-2020 Regional Strategy for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and OECMs in the Mediterranean[1]. The *Ad hoc* Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM) of the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (SPA/RAC) recommended that Mediterranean countries start working to identify area-based management measures that could be recognised as OECMs, with the Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity (SPA/BD) Focal Points facilitating and coordinating activities at the national level. The AGEM also called for the development of guidance to support this process.

2. In fulfilment of this recommendation, this document explains the processes recommended for identifying and reporting OECMs in the marine and coastal environment, and how these might best be used in the context of the Mediterranean. It describes existing global and regional guidance, emphasising that countries should use the now well-established processes to ensure a harmonised approach. It also highlights that these processes are new and often challenging, in particular the requirement that there must be evidence that an OECM is already achieving, or will achieve the long-term in situ conservation of biodiversity.

3. The guidance covers a variety of types of potential marine and coastal OECMs, including those managed under fisheries measures (for which the FAO and General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) have produced handbooks), and those that might be managed through measures used by other sectors.

4. The guidance recommends that Mediterranean countries use IUCN-WCPA's site assessment tool2 as the basic approach for identifying OECMs, in order to:

   a. ensure a harmonised approach to the wide range of area-based management initiatives that might be potential OECMs, and
   b. take advantage of the tool's set of forms that were developed to ensure that the screening process is comparable across all countries and regions.

5. When identifying OECMs, the recommendations in the more specialised sets of guidance should be used whenever appropriate. For example, in the case of wetland areas, the Ramsar site guidance could be used, whereas for marine fisheries OECMs, the FAO guidance should be used, in conjunction with the IUCN-WCPA site assessment tool. The mOECM Guide, under development by Oregon State University, will provide important additional evidence for guiding OECM identification in the marine environment.

[1] https://www.spa-rac.org/en/publication/download/1632/post-2020-regional-strategy-for-mcpas-and-other-effective-area-based-conservation-measures-in-the-mediterranean

[2] https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/PATRS-006-En.pdf

INTRODUCTION

Why is guidance to OECMs needed?

1. Recognising the requirements of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Target 3 "Conserve 30% of Land, Waters and Seas", Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) are one of five strategic pillars of the Barcelona Convention's Post-2020 Regional Strategy for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and OECMs in the Mediterranean (UNEP/MAP - SPA/RAC, 2021). This was adopted at the COP22 of the Barcelona Convention in December 2021, and the Contracting Parties were asked to take effective measures to implement it.

2. To support this, under Output 3.1 of the Strategy (Awareness in Contracting Parties and stakeholders on OECMs enhanced and guidance for the application of OECM criteria provided), it was proposed that a user-friendly interactive tool should be developed to help the competent authorities apply the criteria. The Specially Protected Areas Regional Activity Centre (SPA/RAC) of the United Nations Environment Programme / Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP) was requested, in coordination with other regional and international organizations, to provide the technical assistance needed for this process and to help clarify the process for OECM identification in the Mediterranean.

What were the steps leading to the compilation of this guidance?

3. The Report of the Ad hoc Group of Experts for Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (AGEM)'s work during the biennial period 2022-2023 (UNEP/MAP-SPA/RAC, 2023) recommended that Mediterranean countries start working on existing measures that could be identified as OECMs with the Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity (SPA/BD) Focal Points facilitating and coordinating activities at the national level. It also stressed the need for a workshop to reflect on what should constitute a biodiversity outcome for an OECM, one of the key challenges in identifying OECMs.

4. In December 2023, as part of the implementation of the 2022-2023 SPA/RAC Programme of Work, with the AGEM, SPA/RAC organised a workshop on Mediterranean marine OECMs to better clarify the concept of an OECM and to come up with a harmonised and coherent way to consider marine OECMs in the Mediterranean context. The report issued following this workshop (Agardy, 2023) recommended that guidelines on the identification of OECMs in the Mediterranean marine and coastal environment should be prepared. At the same time, many Mediterranean countries had started to identify OECMs, primarily terrestrial but including areas on the coast, and to develop national frameworks and guidance.

5. The initial concept for this guidance, to address issues specific to marine and coastal OECMs, was discussed during the 5th meeting of the AGEM, in April 2025. By this stage, IUCN had produced its site-assessment tool and there was widespread recognition that new tools were probably not needed, but that there was a need for region-specific guidance on use of the tool and associated materials.

6. The first draft of the guidance for the Mediterranean was produced by a qualified expert, and submitted to the SPA/BD Focal Points 17th meeting (Istanbul, Türkiye, 20-22 May 2025) for discussion and review. Amendments were made following the feedback from this meeting.

7. In October and November, the guidance was tested through three online webinar sessions: Lebanon, Libya and Morocco had volunteered to pilot-test the guidance for locations which they chose and for which there was some evidence that they might be suitable candidate OECMs. The discussions during these

webinars led to recommendations for a number of changes. These were discussed during an online meeting of the AGEM on 27th November. Following a period of further review by the AGEM, a final draft of the guidance has been prepared by the consultant incorporating all suggested changes and comments.

Who is the guidance designed for?

8. The guidance is designed to assist the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention and their partners in identifying and reporting OECMs. More generally, it is made available to all those responsible for, and involved in, identifying and reporting on OECMs in the Mediterranean coastal and marine areas. This must be seen as a multi-stakeholder process, involving regional bodies such as the UNEP/MAP SPA/RAC, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-GFCM), the International Union for Conservation of Nature Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN Med) and others, government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities, scientists and other experts.

What is the scope of the guidance?

9. The guidance covers the identification of OECMs in the marine and coastal environment, as defined under the Barcelona Convention's Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean (UNEP/MAP - SPA/RAC, 1995). The Protocol covers the waters, the seabed and its subsoil on the landward side of the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured and extending, in the case of watercourses, up to the freshwater limit. It also covers the terrestrial coastal areas designated by each of the Parties, including wetlands.

10. The guidance is designed for identifying all types of potential marine and coastal OECMs, including those managed under fisheries measures (for which the FAO and GFCM have produced handbooks) and those that might be managed through other measures, including those introduced by commercial sectors such as shipping and other marine activities (for which Oregon State University is producing a guide), those designed for archaeological and heritage sites, and those relating to Ramsar sites which are managed for wetlands conservation and sustainable use.

11. It is important to note that for the northern Mediterranean countries, guidance is being produced through the European Union and other wider European initiatives (see Section 2.3).

SECTION 1. BACKGROUND TO OECMS

1. What is an OECM?

12. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD 2018a) defines an OECM as:

"*a geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the* in-situ *conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values*".

13. As stated in the CBD's Scientific and Technical Advice on OECMs (CBD, 2018), the concept of an OECM was introduced to recognise that there are other ways in which in situ conservation of biodiversity may occur over the long-term in marine, terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, but while allowing for sustainable human activities in a particular area. By recognizing such an area, there is an incentive for sustaining existing biodiversity values and improving biodiversity conservation outcomes.

14. Four criteria for identifying OECMs, whether on land, in freshwater, or in the sea, were agreed by the CBD at COP14 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (CBD, 2018) (Table 1). In summary, an OECM must have a boundary, formal designation, and clear and legitimate governance and management that contributes to the conservation of biodiversity. In most cases, OECMs are expected to be existing management measures applied to a particular location (there must be defined boundaries), rather than the creation of new management measures for a defined space, although there may be some exceptions as will be explained. The term OECM is thus a 'label' to recognise the in-situ biodiversity conservation that the measures implemented at a site provide.

15. Biodiversity conservation may, or may not, be the main objective of the management of the site. There could also be other objectives, such as water source management, fisheries management or protection of antiquities and cultural heritage. Biodiversity conservation is not necessarily an explicit objective of the management of the site, but rather the result of the application of specific measures and the effective governance and management system in place.

16. An OECM can be governed and/or managed by a government agency, private group (e.g. a company, a university, or a non-profit organisation), by Indigenous peoples, local communities, or in a shared arrangement.

Table 1. The four CBD criteria for identifying OECMs (CBD 2018)

Criterion	Explanation
A: The site is not a protected area.	An OECM must be **fully outside any protected area currently recognized by national government or reported by any governing entity** Internationally agreed norms under the CBD, and IUCN recommendations, are that areas that meet the definition of a protected area, **and are recognised as such by the governing authority**, should be considered a protected area. In practice, many sites that meet the definition of a protected area are not recognised and reported as such for various reasons. Although OECMs should NOT be considered an alternative to or a replacement for protected areas, which are a critical part of Target 3, it is now recognised that a site where biodiversity conservation is the primary objective could be reported as an OECM, if the governing authority chooses not to label it as a protected area (See section 2.2. of Jonas et al., 2024a).
B: The site is bounded, governed, and managed	The area is a geographically defined space with clear and legitimate governance and management. The boundaries of the site must be defined, and the site must have sustained governance and management by a legitimate governing authority. The type of governance and management is not a factor in identifying an OECM – what is important is the effectiveness of governance and management in achieving conservation (see Criterion C).
C. The site is confirmed to contribute to sustained *in situ* biodiversity conservation.	The area must be achieving positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the *in situ* conservation of biodiversity, or be reasonably expected to achieve positive and sustained outcomes in the future. In order to carry out this function, and to be able to know that the area is having the intended impact, information and monitoring are required. The biodiversity features (also referred to as 'biodiversity attributes' or 'biodiversity values') should be clearly described and might be (a) rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems; (b) natural ecosystems which are under- represented in protected area networks; (c) high level of ecological integrity or intactness; (d) significant populations of range-restricted species or ecosystems; (e) important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas; or (f) areas important for ecological connectivity.
D. The site maintains associated ecosystem functions and services, as well as cultural, spiritual, socio–economic, and other locally relevant values	The area and its associated measures ultimately support the effective delivery of ecosystem services and functions, thus contributing to human well-being. Ecosystem functions and cultural, spiritual and socio-economic values exist where people use the products and services from a site. The CBD decision stipulates that where these values exist for an OECM, management should achieve both biodiversity conservation and the maintenance or enhancement of these other values.

2. Why are we interested in OECMs and what is their added value?

17. Under Target 3 of the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), countries are required to report on coverage, effective management and equitable governance of their OECMs, as well as their terrestrial and marine protected areas. Target 3 calls on Parties to effectively conserve at least 30% of terrestrial, marine and coastal areas by 2030 through both protected areas and OECMs.

18. This is one of the immediate reasons for the current interest in, and the need for, guidance on identifying and reporting OECMs. The CBD criteria above are thus essential for ensuring that identified and reported OECMs do not overlap with reported protected areas, and lead to an over-estimation of the area reported under Target 3.

19. The Barcelona Convention Post-2020 Regional Strategy on MCPAs and OECM in the Mediterranean also calls on the Contracting Parties to identify and report OECMs, in order to contribute to the achievement of the 30x30 CBD Target, using the CBD criteria.

20. However, the more fundamental purpose of OECMs is to promote much wider attention to biodiversity conservation, and to ensure that it is not limited only to protected areas, but that all managed areas contribute to this vital role.

3. What are the key differences between OECMs and protected areas?

21. Sites which meet the definition of a protected area, and are recognised as such by the governance authorities (including local communities where relevant), should be classified as such. If an area is already an existing, managed area that is recognised as a protected area (e.g. MCPA, Natura 2000 site, etc.) as per the IUCN definition (Box 1) and reported to the World Database on Protected and Conserved Areas (WDPCA)3, it should not be assessed as an OECM.

Box 1. Definition of the term 'protected area' – from Jonas *et al*. (2024a)

The CBD defines a protected area as: "A geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives".

IUCN has a more detailed definition: "A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values".

The CBD and IUCN recognise the two as being equivalent in practice as, in both cases, these areas are intended to achieve *in situ* conservation.

22. OECMs complement protected areas by encouraging conservation of biodiversity in sites which are not protected areas. OECMs and protected areas can work together as a network to achieve improved biodiversity conservation.

23. Like protected areas, OECMs are expected to be long-term conservation measures, not temporary arrangements that might expire after a certain period. Sites where measures are in force for a finite term only (even for 25 years) or with no guarantee of longevity (or proof of the likelihood of longevity) should not be assessed as OECMs. If areas subject to fisheries measures are being assessed, these measures must be long-

[3] In November 2025, the World Database on Protected Areas was combined with the World Database on OECMs and renamed the World Database on Protected and Conserved Areas.

term and whole ecosystem-based. A closure for a single species in a fisheries management area that allows industrial fishing or seabed alteration would probably not meet the criteria for as an OECM.

24. Unlike protected areas, such as national parks and reserves, that automatically qualify for reporting under Target 3, each potential OECM site has to be assessed to determine whether it meets the CBD definition and criteria for an OECM, and reflects the IUCN guidance.

25. OECMs may not be easy to identify: the process can be lengthy as the criteria are more stringent than those used for recognising protected areas. As will be seen in subsequent sections, there are additional requirements, including ensuring that there is a monitoring system to inform management on the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation, and processes in place to evaluate the effectiveness and equity of governance and management. Furthermore, once it has been agreed that an area might be suitable for assessing as an OECM, the agreement or free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of all the stakeholders and rights holders must be obtained, before moving on to a full assessment.

4. Who can identify OECMs?

26. Marine and coastal OECMs can be identified by any organisation, including government agencies, scientific and heritage bodies, fisheries management authorities and bodies, other management agencies and local communities within a country. Further details on the organisations that can. and should, be involved is given in Section 3 (Designing a national process). Once a given area satisfies all CBD criteria, its final recognition as an OECM is the prerogative and responsibility of the relevant country (or countries if the OECM straddles national borders) or regional bodies.

5. Who is responsible for reporting confirmed OECMs?

27. For recognition at the global level, OECMs should be reported to the World Database on Protected and Conserved Areas (WDPCA) which is maintained by the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC). Guidance on how to report to the WDCPA was updated in 2025 and is described in Section 7. Member states of the EU must also report their OECMS to the EIONET Central Data Repository, along with other nationally designated areas such as protected areas4.

28. Mediterranean countries should also report their confirmed OECMs to the Database on Marine Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (MAPAMED), which is managed jointly by UNEP/MAP-SPA/RAC and the Network of Marine Protected Areas Managers in the Mediterranean (MedPAN). This database is a further official source of data for the WDPCA and CBD, in relation to Target 3 and ensures alignment between regional and global reporting.

29. Globally, most countries have yet to provide data to the WDCPA. The total number of OECMs in January 20265 was 7284, most of which are terrestrial, with only 231 marine OECMs. This compares with a total of 308,064 protected areas reported to the WDPCA by most of the world's countries (UNEP-WCMC 2025); fewer than 20 countries and territories have reported OECMs. No marine OECMs have been reported in the Mediterranean although a few countries have reported coastal OECMs. A brief overview of progress in identifying OECMs in the Mediterranean is provided in Annex 1.

[4] https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/cdda/
[5] https://www.protectedplanet.net/en

6. Is specific legislation needed for OECMs?

30. An OECM does not need specific OECM legislation, legislative recognition or a specific designation. The word ‘other’ in the term 'other effective area-based conservation measures' implies that legal (or perhaps customary or locally enforced) measures, mostly likely existing, are ‘effective’. Recognition of these measures, provided biodiversity conservation is being achieved, is considered sufficient.

31. However, countries may choose to enable legislation or other mechanisms to formally recognize OECMs, or develop policies to guide the achievement of the desired outcome in a coherent and effective manner, but these are not requirements (Fitzsimons et al., 2025). For example, in response to external expectations and internal policy needs, Taiwan has chosen to incorporate marine OECMs into the country’s new Ocean Conservation Act which was passed in 2024. This legislative opportunity created a pathway for OECMs to be formally recognized under domestic law, and an assessment is now underway (Hu, Cheng-Yu et al. 2025). Many countries have used non-regulatory approaches, such as policy guidance, and have found this works well. Further guidance on legal and policy frameworks for identifying OECMs is given in WWF and CISL (2026), as described in Section 3.

SECTION 2. INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED GUIDANCE ON IDENTIFYING AND REPORTING OECMS

32. There are now several formally recognised, globally accepted and widely used sets of guidelines and handbooks for identifying and reporting OECMs, that are endorsed by the CBD, IUCN and other international bodies. It is therefore strongly recommended that these are used as fundamental tools by Mediterranean countries, to ensure harmonisation with other countries. Section (3) provides advice on how to use these tools for different types of OECM and this section summarises the key guidance documents available.

1. Global guidance

33. Once the definition of and criteria for OECMs were agreed by the CBD parties, IUCN was invited to provide technical and scientific guidance. This is available in the following documents:

- *Recognising and reporting other effective area-based conservation measures* (IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs, 2019). This is an overview of the CBD criteria and is summarised in Section 1 above.
- *Site-level tool for identifying other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs)* (Jonas et al. 2023). This is the site-assessment tool developed by IUCN-WCPA that is now widely used to identify OECMs. It is recommended that it is used as the primary tool in all Mediterranean countries to ensure consistency in identifying OECMs (Section 4) and reporting (Section 7).
- *Guidance on other effective area-based conservation measures* (OECMs). (Jonas et al., 2024a). This is more detailed guidance, produced by IUCN-WCPA, that provides essential guidance for a full understanding of how to use the site-assessment tool, helping to clarify many of the questions that may arise.
- *Advancing legal and policy frameworks for Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs): Global lessons for policy and practice*. (WWF and CISDL, 2026). This provides a very helpful overview of the national processes used by 16 countries to identify OECMs, and shows the variety of approaches that can be used.

34. A self-paced on-line course6 on identifying, reporting, monitoring and strengthening OECMs has been developed by IUCN and UNDP's Learning for Nature programme, and presents general principles, key criteria, and globally applicable best practices for OECM recognition across diverse governance and management types, based on IUCN guidance and with case studies

35. Since international Ramsar Sites are not formally recognised as protected areas in some countries, they may be prime candidate sites for OECM identification given that they play a key role in wetland biodiversity conservation. The Secretariat of the Wetlands Convention has therefore produced guidance on how to determining whether a Ramsar Site meets the criteria for an OECM (Convention on Wetlands, 2025) based on interpretation of CBD Decision 14/8 and the IUCN-WCPA guidelines mentioned above,

2. Marine OECM (mOECM) guidance

36. Identifying mOECMs raises particular challenges, as noted in the IUCN-WCPA Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on this topic (Woodley, 2024). Providing confidence that a marine area managed through certain measures will have a positive and sustained biodiversity outcome (i.e. CBD Criteria C) can be difficult since, for the ocean, data on important biodiversity values and their status are often lacking or incomplete. The FAQs give summary advice on this and other related issues. A further helpful document is the Birdlife International position paper on mOECMs (Birdlife International, undated).

37. There are two sets of guidance specific to mOECMs that should be used in association with the IUCN-WCPA site assessment tool when assessing marine areas: FAO guidance for fishery-based areas and

[6] https://www.learningfornature.org/en/courses/introduction-to-other-effective-area-based-conservation-measures-oecms/

more general guidance for other marine areas, as explained here. Use of these sets of guidance is covered in more detail in Section 6.

1. **Fisheries-based OECMs**, the FAO handbook (FAO, 2022) and supplementary guidance on identifying biodiversity outcomes in fishery based OECMs (Agardy et al., 2025). This is also available in the form of two e-learning courses, in English, French and Spanish:
   a. Introduction to other effective area-based conservation measures in marine fisheries – provides background information.
   b. Recognizing other effective area-based conservation measures in marine fisheries - provides guidance on identifying, evaluating and reporting OECMs in marine fisheries.
2. **mOECMs in general**: The mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review), compiled by Oregon State University (OSU) with a large number of co-authors from around the world, lays out the steps required for an analysis of threats at a marine site managed through marine sector measures of different kinds. An assessment of the potential impact of threats and how these may be reduced is essential for marine areas where the necessary ecologyical monitoring data is often lacking.

3. Regional OECM guidance

38. Several regions are developing their own guidance on identifying and reporting OECMs, that can be used in conjunction with the IUCN guidance and that help to scale-up the process and provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and experience-sharing as the OECM process moves forward.

39. For northern Mediterranean in Europe, IUCN WCPA Europe has prepared recommendations and guidance for establishing a national process and identifying OECMs (Stolpe et al., 2024). This guidance should be used, in addition to this Mediterranean guidance.

40. However, countries that are members of the EU need to adhere to the EU requirements on OECMs. Outline guidance has been produced by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV) (European Commission, 2022) which notes that "OECMs can be counted towards the 30% target only if the area is covered by a national or international legislative or administrative act or a contractual arrangement aiming to achieve long-term conservation outcomes; conservation objectives and measures are in place; and effective management and monitoring of the biodiversity in the area is in place."

41. Other UNEP Regional Seas programmes have also produced guidance, and it may be useful to look at these initiatives to learn from experiences of other marine and coastal regional groupings. Examples include:

- The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM), has produced guidance for the Baltic states based on that provided by CBD, IUCN, and the European Commission (HELCOM, 2022). A 'decision support tree' is being tested at national level, and will be revisited in 2027 and, if necessary, updated. The decision tree was designed to be used as the first step in the OECM process to identify potential OECMs but does not address the actual recognition and management of OECMs. It is very similar to the early steps in the IUCN-WCPA site assessment tool and might prove a useful process for some Mediterranean countries.

- The Agreement for protecting the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR), which covers the Northeast Atlantic countries, has committed to expanding the network of MPAs and OECMs to cover at least 30% of OSPAR's Maritime Area by 2030. It is identifying fisheries based OECMs[7] with the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), which has the role of setting out fisheries measures that will deliver conservation benefits. OSPAR complements these by providing measures under its competence in the same areas and relevant biodiversity and

[7] www.ospar.org/site/assets/files/37958/neafc-ospar-joint-oecm-narrative-final_clean.pdf

environmental data to NEAFC's scientific advisor, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES).

- Other Regional Sea areas: For the East Asian Seas, the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) has initiated a process to develop guidance (COBSEA, 2024), which will complement the broader IUCN-WCPA guidance produced for Asia as a whole (Sharma and Pasha, 2024). For the Arctic, Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) and Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) are initiating a process, starting with an overview of the range and understanding of international and national criteria used for the identification of OECMs[8]. A process has started this year in the Pacific region[9].

4. Additional potentially useful guidance and scientific advice

42. Several other initiatives, existing or underway, are likely to prove helpful in identifying OECMs, particularly when assessing Criterion C, and attempting to demonstrate whether potential sites have or might have positive biodiversity outcomes. Some examples include:

- The many tools for assessing the management effectiveness of protected areas and determining whether these are having positive biodiversity conservation outcomes, as required under Target 3 (Wells et al., 2026). These include the IUCN Green List Standard[10] and associated indicators which are designed to apply to OECMs as well as protected areas. The Interreg Euro-MED Green List for Mediterranean Marine Protected Areas project (GreenList4MMPAs)[11] is exploring how to apply the IUCN Green List Standard in the Mediterranean, and the results of this work will help to inform the process for identifying OECMs.
- An ongoing EU project, LIFE-PAME Europe[12], led by the Europarc Federation, is designed to assess management effectiveness in EU Member States will also provide helpful information. The project is analysing established assessment methodologies (including several of those covered by Wells et al., 2026), along with national approaches. With the European Environmental Agency (EEA). The project will develop a digital tool to help Member States report their management effectiveness evaluation findings.
- Many countries are now producing their own national guidance, some examples of which are provided in Annex 2.

43. A growing number of scientific papers, analyses of existing OECMs and reviews of the process in different countries provide valuable lessons learned and illustrate some of the challenges. These are worth consulting in association with the guidance mentioned below. Some key papers to consult are:

- Fitzsimons et al. (2025): the authors outline several common misconceptions about OECMs: an understanding of these is essential in order to avoid the misapplication of the OECM concept.
- Cook et al. (2025): this is an analysis of over 6000 OECMs reported to the WDPCA. The authors found that less than 5% provided any information to support their recognition as an OECM and about 2% had characteristics that conflict with the definition of an OECM.
- Claudet et al. (2022): the authors provided an analysis of mOECMs only (relatively few had been reported at that time) and identified that many did not meet the criteria and could be termed 'blue-washing'.

[8] https://www.caff.is/work/projects/other-effective-area-based-conservation-measures-oecm-in-the-arctic-marine-environment/
[9] https://www.tiakimoana.org/
[10] https://iucngreenlist.org/standard/global-standard/
[11] https://greenlist4mmpas.interreg-euro-med.eu/
[12] https://www.europarc.org/about-us/europarc-projects/life-pame-europe/

- Brodie et al. (2025): this is an analysis of OECMs in the Philippines, Colombia and South Africa which that the long-term benefits of OECMs for biodiversity are likely to be greater if a strategic planning process is used to help identify sites for assessment.

SECTION 3. DESIGNING A NATIONAL PROCESS

44. The identification, reporting, monitoring and strengthening of OECMs can take place at site level (i.e. an organisation may identify an OECM itself and report it if it meets the requirements. However, a national OECM process is recommended as this ensures that full reference is made to the legal, policy, cultural and ecological characteristics and requirements of a country. A national process can also help to ensure that

- OECMs and the OECM identification process are understood by decision-makers, rightsholders and other stakeholders;
- a full range of rightsholders, stakeholders and knowledge holders are involved in the identification process;
- there is consistency in applying the OECM identification criteria;
- OECMs are effectively integrated within national plans and programmes for biodiversity conservation; and
- a national approach to documenting and reporting OECMs is established,

45. An analysis of 16 countries that have reported OECMs to the WDCPA shows that each developed a nationally specific legal or policy pathway to identify OECMs (WWF and CIDSL, 2026). These approaches fall into distinct categories (Ministerial and departmental legal instruments; national OECM guidelines and policy frameworks; administrative procedures; and sector-based recognition under existing legal designations). This analysis demonstrates that there is no single model for identifying and reporting OECMs but a range of practical approaches that fit national legal systems, governance traditions and conservation priorities can be used.

46. The following is a list of suggestions for steps to be taken and sources of information to consider when developing a national process, based on guidance from IUCN (Jonas et al., 2024 – Annex 4) and, in the context of mOECMs, the guidance provided by FAO (Agardy, 2023) and in the forthcoming mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

1. Clarify why there is a need to identify OECMs (e.g. as an incentive for different sectors to improve management for biodiversity; to contribute to the positive effects ensured by the network of MCPAs, etc.) and thus whether some OECMs might have greater priority than others.

2. Decide whether OECMs should be recognised on a whole sector (e.g. fisheries) or site-specific basis (e.g. following a review of key marine and coastal biodiversity areas within a country).

3. Decide on the financing mechanism for the process and who will be responsible for finding funds for both the process and the subsequent monitoring and long-term oversight.

   Determine the expertise and institutions, along with rightsholders and stakeholders (including universities, other research institutes, NGOs and local communities) and individuals that will need to be involved in identifying, reporting, monitoring and strengthening OECMs, and that will provide the guarantee that the OECMs will continue to fulfil the criteria in the long-term once recognized. The governing authority is the group or groups that make decisions about the overall purpose, long-term management policies and sometimes also the day-to-day use of the site. In many managed areas, the mandates and rights of two or more groups overlap, and the governing authority consists of representatives of all these groups. At some sites, dialogue and negotiation may be required before all rightsholders share the same understanding of which groups have governance rights and responsibilities. The recognition of a site as an OECM is not expected to result in any changes to ownership, management, or use, unless perhaps new OECMs are created with a new governance and management structure, or where governance or management are strengthened to meet OECM criteria.

4. Determine a process of ensuring the development of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), which is a mandatory component of the OECM identification and reporting process. Through the CBD, Parties have agreed that the rights of local communities must be recognised and protected. Both governing authorities and local communities must agree that a site be assessed, identified and reported as an OECM, including accepting or rejecting such a proposal when made by another party. Under FPIC principles, local communities may withdraw their support for the process at any time (see Jonas et al., 2024 for further detail).
5. Bring together the identified organisations, institutions and other bodies to introduce the OECM identification process and develop an approach and time-line.

6. Establish a list of potential OECMs to be included in the consultation, consent and identification processes, with reference to existing analysis, priority setting and policy. Sources of information might include:
    - national lists of threatened species and ecosystems;
    - any National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan;
    - protected areas network planning documents;
    - a locally relevant category of governance, such as areas managed by local communities.

    Section 5 provides further information on the types of area that might be suitable for assessment. In addition, IUCN guidance on connectivity (Hilty et al., 2020), information on privately protected areas (Mitchell et al., 2018) and geo-conservation (Crofts, 2020), and proposals for transboundary conservation (Vasilijevic et al., 2015) may also be relevant.

7. Identify opportunities in national and subnational legislation and policy for the management and conservation of OECMs to be recognised and strengthened. Section 8 and 9 of Jonas et al. (2024) provides guidance on how OECMs should be monitored and managed to improve biodiversity outcomes over time.

47. In addition to stakeholder consultation and the application of FPIC, the identification and long-term management of OECMs would benefit from the promotion of participatory and co-management approaches. In particular, where areas are used or managed by small-scale fisheries or local communities, their meaningful involvement in governance and decision-making processes should be encouraged throughout all stages of identification, assessment, and monitoring. This includes not only consultation, but, where appropriate, shared or collaborative decision-making arrangements that recognise existing rights, knowledge systems, and management practices. Strengthening such approaches can enhance compliance, legitimacy, and the effectiveness of conservation outcomes over the long term and should be considered as part of the development of a national process.

48. Appendix 2 provides examples of several countries that have developed national processes for OECM, in some cases specifically for marine OECMs (e.g. Canada, Oman).

SECTION 4. GUIDANCE FOR IDENTIFYING OECMS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN MARINE AND COASTAL ENVIRONMENT - USING THE IUCN SITE IDENTIFICATION TOOL

49. This section lays out the recommended process for countries to identify OECMs. It is recommended that Mediterranean countries use IUCN's site assessment tool (Jonas et al., 2024) as the basic approach as (a) it can be used for a wide range of area-based management initiatives that might be potential OECMs, and (b) because it includes a set of forms that allow the screening process to take place immediately in a format that is comparable to other countries and regions. The tool should be complemented by the other sets of guidance described in Section 2 above, as appropriate.

1. The screening and assessment processes

50. The site assessment tool comprises three steps: an initial screening to identify a potential OECM; obtaining consent for a full assessment to identify a candidate OECM; and a full assessment of a candidate OECM to identify it as a confirmed OECM.

51. In order to make assessments, IUCN breaks down the four CBD criteria (see Table 1) into eight criteria which are used in the tool. Table 2 shows how the CBD criteria relate to each of the IUCN criteria.

Table 2. Correlation between the four CBD criteria and IUCN's eight criteria (Annex 2, Jonas et al., 2024a)

	IUCN criterion	CBD criterion	Notes
1	The site is not a protected area	A	No difference
2	There is a reasonable likelihood that the site supports important biodiversity values	C	This provides a useful early step in the identification process to ensure that CBD Criterion C will be met
3	The site is a geographically defined area	B	CBD Criterion B requires that a site has defined boundaries
4	The site is confirmed to support important biodiversity values	A C	This is the completion of Criterion 2, and helps to ensure CBD Criterion C is met
5	Institutions or mechanisms exist to govern and manage the site	B	CBD criterion B requires that a site has sustained governance and management by a legitimate governing authority
6	Governance and management of the site achieve or are expected to achieve the *in situ* conservation of important biodiversity values	C	This is the third step in the process to ensure that CBD Criterion C is being met; the IUCN criteria emphasise more clearly the requirement for effective biodiversity conservation
7	*In situ* conservation of important biodiversity values is expected to be for the long term	C D	This emphasises the need to assess whether the biodiversity conservation achieved will be long-term
8	Governance and management arrangements address equity considerations	B	IUCN Criterion 8 emphasises the principle that for biodiversity conservation to be effective, the governance and management must be equitable

STEP 1: SCREENING: identifying a POTENTIAL OECM

52. This requires recording basic information about the site, to determine whether it qualifies as a potential OECM according to two of the IUCN screening criteria i.e. that the area is not a protected area (Criterion 1) and that it protects important biodiversity (Criterion 2). The form on p.3 of the tool is used. To qualify, a site must score 'yes' for both of these criteria. Information is required on site name, location, designation. Ask the question: "Does available information suggest that at least one of the following important biodiversity values occurs at the site?"

- Rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems
- Natural ecosystems that are under-represented in protected area networks
- High level of ecological integrity or intactness
- Significant populations/extent of endemic or range-restricted species or ecosystems
- Important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas
- Importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a larger area.

53. Key Mediterranean-specific biodiversity features should also be considered, including endemic fauna and flora, and ecosystems such as Posidonia oceanica meadows and coralligenous assemblages. The Annex to the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity of the Mediterranean (SPA/BD Protocol) provides some guidance on regionally important species, and there are also more recent sources providing relevant information (e.g. Rodriguez-Rodriguez and Malak, 2022).

STEP 2. CONSENT FOR FULL ASSESSMENT: - identifying a CANDIDATE OECM

54. This step is designed to confirm that the governing authority, local communities, and (as appropriate) other rights-holders have agreed to proceed with the full assessment. It requires recording basic information on the stakeholders (representatives of the categories directly concerned by the specific OECM) and governance of the site. The documentation required includes (a) dates and description of the consultation process, (b) information provided to the parties giving consent, (c) input received from parties giving consent, (d) name and position of representatives participating, and (e) proof of consent, such as a signed letter or agreement. (Use form on p.6).

55. Steps 1 and 2 can be carried out separately or together but must be completed before step 3 is undertaken. Once both Steps 1 and 2 are completed, the site can be considered a candidate OECM.

STEP 3: THE FULL ASSESSMENT: identifying a CONFIRMED OECM.

56. The full assessment uses a further six criteria (Criteria 3-8 – see above) to confirm that the site meets the definition of an OECM. This step requires confirmation of all the important biodiversity values, as far as possible based on available information, and that the site has defined boundaries that are agreed upon by the governing authority or a local community, where relevant, as identified in step 2. This step also has questions to confirm that the effect of governance and management activities should be that pressures and threats on the site are known and that pressures on the site's important biodiversity values are controlled, so that these values are conserved in situ. It should be confirmed that there will be a reasonable likelihood that the in-situ conservation of biodiversity values will be permanent, and that the governance and management arrangements will be able to mitigate future threats, or will be able to do so with additional support that is expected to be provided.

57. There are guiding questions for each criterion:

- A site with a 'yes' response to every criterion is a confirmed OECM, subject to any stakeholder consent and approval by the governing authority.

- A site with a combination of 'yes' and 'uncertain/partial' responses, or with all 'uncertain/partial' responses, remains a candidate OECM, until further information or other changes allow it to be confirmed as an OECM.
- A site with one or more 'no' responses is not currently an OECM but might be re-assessed in the future if information suggests that the situation has changed.

58. The IUCN site assessment tool includes a table (p.17) to summarise the results of the screening and full assessment.

2. How do you determine if there will be a positive biodiversity outcome (Criterion C)?

59. There are three ways in which an OECM can result in a positive biodiversity outcome:

- ***Ancillary conservation*** – areas delivering *in situ* conservation as a by-product of management, even if biodiversity conservation is not an objective (e.g. some war grave sites or archaeological sites).
- ***Secondary conservation*** – active conservation of an area where biodiversity outcomes are only a secondary management objective (e.g. some conservation corridors and fishery management areas).
- ***Primary conservation*** – areas meeting the IUCN definition of a protected area, but where the governance authority (i.e. community, Indigenous peoples' group, religious group, private landowner or company) does not wish the area to be reported as a protected area.

60. Criterion C is a particular challenge in the OECM identification process, and some countries have reported OECMs that do not technically meet this criterion. Globally agreed metrics to assess whether management of a site is having a positive outcome have yet to be agreed, even for protected areas. CBD Decision 14/8 defined achieving biodiversity outcomes very generally as "the successful conservation of …. in situ species, habitat and ecosystems and associated ecosystem functions and services and by preventing, reducing or eliminating existing, or potential threats, and increasing resilience" and that there should either be evidence of, or a realistic expectation of, a biodiversity outcome.

61. While robust scientific data and long-term monitoring are desirable for demonstrating biodiversity outcomes, in some cases, particularly in areas governed by small-scale or community-based management systems, a proportionate and context-sensitive approach may be necessary as such data may be limited. In these situations, assessments may draw on a combination of available evidence, including proxy indicators, risk-based evaluations of pressures and threats, and well-documented local or traditional ecological knowledge, as recognised in existing guidance. This approach should not lower the standard required to meet the CBD criteria, but rather ensure that areas delivering effective and sustained biodiversity conservation outcomes are not excluded due to differences in monitoring capacity or governance context.

62. Biodiversity outcomes are generally measured in terms of increases in species and biomass (species richness), and improvements in habitat coverage and condition and ecosystem functioning (e.g food web integrity or delivery of ecosystem services). Demonstrating such outcomes requires either direct evidence from ecological monitoring, or proxy studies from similar situations, or some kind of evidence that prohibiting certain practices would have a positive impact with a high level of certainty (Stolpe et al., 2024).

63. In the absence of monitoring data and/or baseline, a risk-based approach could possibly be taken. This would require assessing current / imminent threats to biodiversity and determining whether the existing management measures in the potential OECM address these. A full understanding of the existing management of the area is therefore needed, as well as of the rates of compliance with regulations. If there are adequate regulations prohibiting the activities that have significant adverse impact, and there is clear compliance with regulations, then there can be a reasonable expectation of a positive biodiversity outcome. Proxy studies, with good before and after and control monitoring data (BACI studies) might also provide some idea of the

qualitative and quantitative biodiversity outcomes, although these require caution (Agardy 2023). For more information related to these steps in candidate mOECMs, see Agardy et al. (2025) and the forthcoming mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

64. The management measures in place will depend on the type of site being assessed. A site where management is non-extractive or low impact, such that the important biodiversity values are retained, is potentially an OECM. Sites managed for industrial exploitation of natural resources (including fishery management areas will generally not qualify as OECMs because there are likely to have been major changes in the natural ecosystem and depletion of biodiversity values (Site-level tool for identifying OECMs, Criterion 6). However, if areas are permanently set aside from harvest within an area managed for industrial exploitation, it is possible that they could qualify as OECM as long as they meet all the criteria (including that they have important biodiversity values, are of sufficient size, are governed and managed, and are long term in nature) (Jonas et al., 2024a). A site where the prevailing management approach is focused on maximum sustainable use, or causes the loss or depletion of the site's important biodiversity values, will not qualify as an OECM. In general, if the site is being harvested under sustainability standards and production is ecologically sustainable, it should be reported under GBF Target 10, although guidance for reporting against this target is currently minimal.

65. For all risks to biodiversity to be effectively managed, the many threats that a site regularly faces have to be addressed in a coherent and mutually reinforcing way. This will require assessing how well the various controls and management within a site for a wide range of activities are harmonised and effective, even when implemented by different legal and management authorities. An area where there is no multisectoral management regime in place (e.g. in the high seas where only sectoral management is currently possible) is unlikely to meet the criteria for an OECM, even if its biodiversity is intact (FAO, 2022; Stolpe et al., 2024)

66. In principle, anything that could change the answer to any of the CBD criteria should trigger a new assessment. For example, in the marine environment, a change in national competence, such as through the case of the establishment of an exclusive economic zone, would necessarily trigger a new assessment, if there is interest in ensuring maintenance of the OECM label after the site comes under a new jurisdiction (GFCM, 2024).

67. If the assessment shows that a site does not meet the criteria for an OECM, this does not necessarily mean it can never be an OECM. Sectors can work further with communities and other rights holders to improve management so that the OECM standards are met. Further information is available in Jonas et al. (2024a), the FAO guidance (FAO, 2023) and the mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

3. How do you ensure that OECMs continue to protect biodiversity in the long-term?

68. Once an OECM has been recognized, it should be managed, monitored and tracked using appropriate indicators to ensure that it is effective and having a positive outcome – a process more commonly called adaptive management. To ensure full implementation of Target 3, such processes should be being developed for all MCPAs in a country and it is recommended that the same processes are followed for OECMs. This emphasises the need for coordinated planning for management of the protected area and OECM system in any country and the identification of a strategy for strengthening OECMs. Further advice on this is provided in Section 8 of Jonas et al. (2024).

69. Meeting the requirement for long-term protection of mOECMs may be particularly challenging. For example, fisheries management measures are not always established in perpetuity and very careful assessment will be required to determine whether they meet the OECM requirement (See section 5 and 6).

SECTION 5. WHAT TYPES OF MARINE AND COASTAL AREAS MIGHT BE SUITABLE FOR OECM ASSESSMENT?

1. Areas recognised for biodiversity value

70. Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) and (in the case of mOECMs) Ecologically or Biologically Significant marine Areas (EBSAs) and Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), that are not already classified as protected areas but that are subject to an effective management measure, might be priority sites to assess. 15 EBSAs have been identified in the Mediterranean (Mackelworth et al., 2024), as well as a large number of marine and coastal KBAs. In such cases, the biodiversity value of the site may already be extensively documented, and the main focus will be on assessing threats, pressures, and management measures.

71. Areas that are undergoing restoration, re-wilding or other activities that will lead to improvement of the biodiversity, could also potentially be considered. Best practice is that restoration areas should not be recognised as OECMs until the point at which they are delivering demonstrable and significant outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity that are expected to endure for the long term; criteria for this are laid out in Box 5 of Chapter 3 of IUCN's detailed guidance (Jonas et al., 2024a). The forthcoming mOECM Guide reviews evidence for negative impacts of restoration, such as introduction of disease and physical destruction of surrounding ecosystems.

2. Areas managed for geoheritage and geodiversity

72. Important geological sites are often managed as formal protected areas, if there is important associated biodiversity. Geodiversity (the variety of rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, sediments and soils, together with the natural processes that form and alter them) and geoheritage (elements and features of geodiversity, that are considered to have significant value for intrinsic, scientific, educational, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, ecological or ecosystem reasons) may also be protected in their own right. For example, the UNESCO Global Geoparks programme13 are sites and landscapes of international geological significance that are managed for protection, education and sustainable development; there are many Geoparks in the Mediterranean region. Further guidance is available in Crofts et al. (2020).

3. Ramsar sites.

73. These sites should be considered if they are not recognised as a protected area, and specific guidance has been produced for assessing them as OECMs (Convention on Wetlands, 2025), as mentioned in Section 2. This guidance firmly recommends the use of the IUCN OECM site assessment tool and suggests the following wetland situations could have potential as OECMs:

- areas that meet the definition of a protected area but where the governing authority does not want to designate them as protected areas due to the existing socio-political situation or other circumstances;
- wetlands where the long-term *in-situ* biodiversity conservation is a secondary management objective, a by-product of management interventions not intended primarily to conserve wetlands;
- wetlands managed for objectives other than biodiversity conservation but which can still deliver long-term in-situ conservation outcomes, thus providing ancillary conservation e.g., reservoirs and water impoundment structures built to meet water requirements for agriculture and drinking water supply may also serve as habitats for wetland-dependent species such as migratory waterbirds and fish;
- the protection of sacred and/or heritage sites containing wetlands, which also provide in-situ conservation of wetlands and/or wetland-dependent taxa.

74. The Ramsar guidance provides four scenarios of how protected areas and OECMs might operate together in any given wetland location to deliver in-situ conservation and wise use of wetlands:

- Ramsar Site(s) (which could be either protected areas or OECMs) nested within a broader wetland OECM:

[13] https://www.unesco.org/en/iggp/geoparks/about

- Ramsar Site (which could be either protected areas or OECMs) and wetland OECM adjacent to each other
- Ramsar Site(s) (which could be either protected areas or OECMs) and wetland OECM geographically separated from each other
- Ramsar Site formed partly as a protected area and partly as an OECM

4. Managed cultural and archaeological sites.

75. These may be terrestrial or marine, and include sites that contain antiquities, war graves or shipwrecks, are of important cultural and traditional significance to local communities, as well as archaeological sites and battle areas. They provide important opportunities to provide ancillary conservation, and in many cases where they are managed by local communities, they may have a primary conservation objective. The main barriers for these areas to meet the OECM Criteria may be: their size (many are small and may be of insufficient size to deliver meaningful biodiversity benefits; risks of extraction and negative impact; and the feasibility of establishing biodiversity monitoring; and potential sensitivity about disclosing information (e.g. if there is a risk of looting and trafficking archaeological objects (Jonas et al., 2024a; Birdlife International, undated). The forthcoming mOECM Guide gives detailed information on sites managed for Stewardship and Sustainable Cultural and Spiritual Practices which can be used in assessments of such areas (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

5. Fishery managed areas

76. Some areas managed through fishery measures may meet the OECM but need particularly careful assessment, using the FAO guidance (FAO, 2022; Agardy et al., 2025).

77. Sites with permanent fishing restrictions or perennial seasonal closures to protect spawning sites are of particular interest. For example, Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs) (defined as geographically defined areas in which all or certain fishing activities are temporarily or permanently banned or restricted in order to improve the exploitation and conservation of harvested living aquatic resources or the protection of marine ecosystems) are of particular interest, as these have often been established in areas of known biodiversity importance that cover vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) and sensitive species.

78. Small-scale fisheries (SSF) managed areas, including community-based closures, customary fishing zones, and co-managed areas, may in some cases be considered for OECM assessment. In many parts of the Mediterranean, SSF operate through locally adapted governance systems that combine place-based knowledge, spatial or temporal management measures, and local compliance mechanisms. Examples include the "cantonnements de pêche" in France established by "prudhomies de pêche" and that are recognised at national level. While biodiversity conservation may not always be the primary management objective, such systems may contribute to positive and sustained conservation outcomes as a secondary or ancillary effect. Where these areas have clearly defined boundaries, effective and sustained governance, and demonstrate (or can reasonably be expected to achieve) in situ biodiversity conservation based on available evidence, including monitoring data, proxy indicators, or well-documented local ecological knowledge, they may be assessed against the CBD criteria for potential recognition as OECMs.

79. Two particular concerns that have been raised in the context of fisheries OECMs are (Stolpe et al, 2024; Birdlife International, undated):

(a) potential lack of guarantee of the long-term persistence of measures: Some fishery measures, including FRAs, are short-term regulatory instruments and have to be renewed on a regular basis. If this is renewal can be guaranteed to take place, this would provide a degree of certainty but if not, such sites would not be able to guarantee long-term sustainability. Others may be seasonal measures, or rotational harvesting areas, that are implemented every year. Where these are part of a long-term over-all management regime, they could be expected to provide a long-term biodiversity outcome if other aspects of the Criteria are also met.

(b) In many cases, a lack of a means to regulate or exclude other harmful activities from occurring within a fishery management and associated lack of information on the extent to which non-fishing pressures could undermine the biodiversity outcomes. Mechanisms would need to be put in place to ensure regulation of other damaging activities occurs (see the mOECM Guide for detailed guidance on this). For example, management measures throughout the 1000m FRA in the Mediterranean were not considered adequate for recognising the whole area as an OECM (See Annex 1).

80. A commercial fishing closure that stays in place only until an overfished area recovers, is probably not an OECM. Similarly marine areas managed with the objective of maintaining or enhancing single stocks, populations or species only, are unlikely to meet the criteria. A fisheries measure that merely maintains a target species abundance or increases the catch per unit effort should not qualify as an OECM, unless an ecosystem approach and ecosystem-based management are fully implemented so that all ecosystem components are equally taken in consideration by the management measure. However, an assessment may be worthwhile to see if whether that stock, population or species plays a particularly important ecological role. For a whole area managed by a Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (RFMO), most of which are very large, to qualify as an OECM, there would need to be appropriate measures throughout the area. However, individual areas within an RFMO could be identified as OECMs if they meet the criteria, as is the case with the NEAFC OECM (see Section 6).

6. Aquaculture/mariculture, inland fisheries management areas and coastal salt work operations

81. Guidance on identifying OECMs in inland waters, where fisheries and fisheries-related activities including aquaculture take place, has been produced by FAO (Lechuga et al, 2025) and may be important to refer to when assessing coastal areas for their suitability for OECMs. Inland fisheries may share many characteristics with small-scale coastal marine fisheries, particularly as they are invariably small-scale and artisanal. Identifying OECMs in such small-scale situations can be more challenging as noted above. FAO considers that the criteria will necessarily have to be applied in a flexible manner, but with the necessary rigour to ensure that only areas that achieve, or are expected to achieve, positive and sustained outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity are recognized as OECMs.

82. In the case of aquaculture and mariculture, the public domain use authorisation for such area is often time-bound (20 to 30 years). So, although an aquaculture zone may have positive outcomes for biodiversity conservation, it may not meet OECM criteria unless measures are in place from the beginning, and there is a mechanism in place for keeping the conservation values after the potential end of the aquaculture operations. Further discussion on this can be found in the mOECM Guide which reviews evidence from aquaculture studies relating to the negative and positive impacts on biodiversity, consideration of where the process lies on the semi-intensive to intensive scale, of the potential for the introduction of invasive species, transmission of disease, and the risk of eutrophication and subsequent harmful algal blooms and oxygen depletion. The original ecological nature of the area that is converted e.g. areas such as wetlands, inlets and estuaries must also be considered.

83. As yet there is no specific guidance for assessing commercial and artisanal salt works (salt pans, salinas) but many of these may be good candidate OECMs, given that they are often sites of important biodiversity value (such as the commercial salt works at Salins de Giraud in southern France. The general guidance should be used.

7. Regulated shipping areas

84. Two spatial management measures designed to reduce damage to biodiversity from shipping are Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs)14 and Areas to Be Avoided (ABTAs), both of which are implemented through the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

85. A PSSA is an area with recognized ecological or socio-economic or scientific significance. Specific measures can be implemented in a PSSA, such as routeing measures, strict application of MARPOL discharge and equipment requirements for ships such as oil tankers; and installation of Vessel Traffic Services (VTS). An ATBA is a more general ships routing measure that defines an area within which either navigation is particularly hazardous or for a variety of reasons should be avoided by all ships or certain classes of ships. Both measures do not prohibit shipping per se but restrict certain types of ships and/or put in place measures to control their speed and routing ships e.g., Traffic Separation Schemes (TSSs). Such measures can reduce the likelihood of negative impacts on marine biodiversity, particularly for cetaceans that are vulnerable to ship strike, but concentrating shipping activity within smaller areas may result in more prominent impacts in these areas than in other unregulated areas (Birdlife undated;)

86. An OECM assessment of such an area would need to establish that those shipping activities that are permitted within the area have no negative impacts on the marine biodiversity, and that there are no negative impacts from other activities (see the forthcoming mOECM Guide). Measures in PSSAs and ABTAs are not necessarily legally binding, and there is not always compliance, as found in The North-western Mediterranean Sea PSSA was designated in 2023, covering the entire Pelagos Sanctuary and the Spanish Cetacean Corridor, an area where ship strikes were a primary source of mortality of sperm and fin whales. This region is characterised by a high level of maritime traffic. Under the PSSA, ships were required to implement a variety of voluntary reductions, including reducing speed. However, studies have shown that to date these have not achieved a reduction in mortality, and there are calls to make the measures mandatory (Bravo Vila, et al. 2025).

8. Port areas and infrastructure

87. Ports may have buffer zones or other areas in which public access is prohibited. In some cases, ports may be required to temper environmental impact by creating artificial structures that provide settlement habitat for marine fauna and flora. There may thus be some sites related to ports and associated infrastructure that could be screened as potential OECMs. A very careful threat analysis would be needed, using the evidence presented in the mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al. in review).

9. Cable protection zones

88. The prohibition of the use of bottom towed fishing gears and ship anchoring in these zones can protect benthic habitats and species, but cable protection zones are limited in size thus restricting the biodiversity benefits they provide. In addition, the installation and presence of cables can have negative impacts on benthic habitats and species, and so a thorough assessment would be required (Birdlife, undated). For evidence relating to the impacts of such areas on marine biodiversity, see the section on Artificial Structures in the mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al. in review).

10. Renewable energy areas (e.g. wind farms, tidal energy, wave power plants)

89. These may be terrestrial or marine. A thorough, case-by-case assessment, considering the renewable energy's project's lifespan, potential cumulative impacts on biodiversity in line with CBD requirements, and whether robust mitigation and monitoring measures can ensure long-term biodiversity conservation would be required. Installations that severely impact marine biodiversity resulting in species mortality due to collisions with physical structures, disturbance of spawning grounds, noise generated during construction/ decommissioning phase, and destruction of habitat of marine species would not meet the criteria.

[14] https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/environment/pages/pssas.aspx

90. The exclusion of fishing around offshore wind turbines may have biodiversity benefits if the area is a sufficient size. However, there can be significant negative impacts on some habitats and (groups of) species, including shifts in ecological communities, during construction, operation (and potentially decommissioning) of the infrastructure. There is also potential for loss of any biodiversity gain if the enterprise is decommissioned (WWF, 2025; Birdlife undated).

91. Artificial structures, such as offshore wind platforms, often act as aggregation devices, but can result in the appearance of and colonisation by species that were not in the original ecosystem. If the net effect is an increase in species numbers and enhanced ecological processes, it could be considered "biodiversity-positive" but it will be essential to consider whether there is a negative impact on biodiversity through initial construction or submersion of the artificial structure, and long-term monitoring will be required to capture fluctuations over time. It is important to distinguish between native and non-native species and ensure that ecological characteristics of the area are not disrupted. The mOECM Guide provides further evidence of impacts of such activities on marine biodiversity.

11. Military zones

92. These may be terrestrial or marine. Such areas, subject to current, rather than historic, military activity are invariably closed to the public and other forms of activity. There are many examples (terrestrial and marine) of such sites that have led to the development of important biodiversity as a result of the lack of disturbance. In some cases, this has led to their designation as protected areas. There may however be significant negative impact from the military activities that do take place, even if infrequent, and the presence of arms remnants, which are often highly toxic or may detonate. A further challenge may be lack of access for undertaking biodiversity monitoring (Birdlife, undated; Jonas et al., 2024a; Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

SECTION 6. ADDITIONAL POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN IDENTIFYING MARINE OECMS (MOECMS)

93. It may be particularly difficult to determine whether a marine area meets some of the criteria, particularly Criterion C. Quantifying marine biodiversity is difficult due to the open and fluid nature of marine systems, the geographically wide nature of connections between ecosystems, patchy information, and the difficulty and cost in monitoring in the marine environment, particularly in offshore areas and pelagic systems (Agardy, 2024). Much of what is known about 'success' comes from predictive models and from findings extrapolated from case studies in one location to situations in similar ecosystems in other locations (proxy studies). This can be particularly challenging for countries with limited monitoring programmes in place, limited or no capacity for analysis, and often no baseline against which to measure change (Agardy, 2023).

94. This has resulted in the more detailed guidance for mOECMs. To identify mOECMs, the general process described in Section 4 is used (i.e. the three steps laid out in the IUCN site identification tool), with reference to the FAO guidance for fisheries based OECMs (FAO, 2022; Agardy et al., 2025) and to the forthcoming mOECM Guide for other sectors (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review).

95. The key steps, as proposed for assessing Criterion C for a potential mOECM, are as follows (Agardy, 2023; Agardy et al., 2025; Grorud-Colvert et al., in review,):

1. Describe
   - the biodiversity attribute(s)
   - the activities underway in the area, the threats and pressures affecting the biodiversity attributes and the known sensitivities of the key biodiversity features to these
   - the management measures in place
2. Anticipate the kind of biodiversity outcomes arising from the management measures in place or planned
3. Determine if studies exist to show biodiversity outcomes:
   - If information exists, summarise to present supporting documentation
   - If information is not readily available, do a study
   - If studies are not possible, look at proxies and make inference with compliance data and local knowledge where this is available.

96. As when identifying and managing protected areas, it is important to consider the potential socio-economic impacts on existing users of the area, particularly small-scale and local marine resource-dependent communities, such as fishers. As in the case of MPAs, the recognition of area-based measures may affect access, use patterns, or livelihoods. It is therefore recommended that the assessment process includes consideration of potential displacement or restriction effects, and, where relevant, the identification of appropriate mitigation or adaptation measures. This should be undertaken in a participatory manner, consistent with the principles of FPIC, to help ensure that OECMs contribute to social well-being as well as ecological sustainability.

OECMs based on fisheries measures

97. For fisheries-based OECMs, Agardy et al. (2025) described how surveys and monitoring data being collected in priority areas (i.e., areas with distinctive biodiversity features or attributes) can be used to demonstrate biodiversity-positive outcomes. Sufficient evidence would also be needed to demonstrate that the site is able to achieve biodiversity conservation outcomes by only managing fisheries. There would need to be evidence that no other impacts existed, which would require consultation with the agencies dealing with different sectors (e.g. fisheries, environment, productivity and infrastructure) (GFCM, 2024).

OECMs based on other marine management measures

98. For assessing the threats and pressures affecting the biodiversity attributes and the known sensitivities of the key biodiversity features to these, the forthcoming mOECM Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., in review) provides detailed information from a review of evidence for the negative and positive impacts on biodiversity from many of the activities that take place in the marine environment. It gives a qualitative assessment of the extent to which such activities might be compatible with the criteria for an OECM. Compatibility with an OECM will depend on intensity and scale, specifics of the activities involved, frequency, duration, and scale, and whether impacts are direct or indirect.

99. The following activities are covered:

- Mining, mineral, oil and/or gas prospecting or exploitation (areas within which such activities take place are unlikely to be suitable for an OECM assessment).
- Shipping
- Dredging, dumping, and related pollution
- Anchoring
- Renewable energy
- Recreation, tourism (boating, diving, snorkelling, and related activities)
- Artificial structures
- Fishing
- Aquaculture/mariculture
- Security/military activities
- Ecological restoration
- Research and monitoring, for which some practices can cause harmful and irreversible impacts on sensitive marine environments.
- Stewardship and cultural activities: generally no adverse impacts and usually compatible with an OECM.

100. Full assessment of candidate mOECMs will also need to consider the potential negative impacts of the many land-based sources (LBS) of pollution from, for example, plastics and solid waste, untreated or inadequately treated wastewater, and agricultural run-off, and the impacts of desalination plants.

101. Two other aspects of the marine environment may need special consideration:

1. Consideration of the water column vs the seabed

If measures apply only to the seabed (e.g. a benthic closure), and not to the pelagic zone, they may not meet the OECM criteria. For example, if a Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME) is impacted by oil and gas drilling, or environmentally damaging intensive fisheries operate in the water column above, then such benthic closures should not qualify as OECMs because the vertical connectivity is demonstrated to have a fundamental role in the ecosystem functioning (Stolpe *et al*., 2024). Some benthic marine communities might be of outstanding biodiversity value but the adjacent water column itself might not be particularly noteworthy. Similarly, the pelagic waters of some offshore areas, such as upwelling areas or ephemeral oceanographic fronts, may be very high, but the adjacent benthos may not be distinctive. Flagging a portion of the three-dimensional space as an ecological priority can be the basis for highly effective management, whether that is through focused ABMT or by broader marine spatial planning, but it creates challenges for databases and mapping of measures.

In Norway, an assessment, using the IUCN WCPA site assessment tool, of a range of managed areas including lobster reserves, coral reef protected areas, protected bottom habitat areas, conservation zones, kelp harvesting areas (Dunshea *et al*., 2024) found that lobster reserves and four coral reef protected areas met the OECM criteria. However, the protected bottom habitat areas (nearly 30% of Norway's total ocean area) were not recognised as OECMs because: they are vertically zoned and only protect a subset of biodiversity from a single threat (bottom fishing); "new fishing areas" could be opened to bottom trawling

in the future; petroleum facilities overlap with parts of the areas and new exploration leases are being granted within the areas; and large areas overlap and/or are adjacent to the large areas now at risk from deep-sea mining exploration and exploitation. Marine areas managed through 'vertical zoning; where the measures apply only to the seabed or a portion of the water column may thus not meet the criteria. Such an approach has already proven controversial in MPAs.

2. Areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) or the High Seas

Identifying OECMs in the High Seas would require an assessment following the process described in this guidance. The complexity of establishing protected and conserved areas in the Mediterranean in ABNJ is currently the subject of a new review being prepared through SPA/RAC (Agardy and Scovazzi, in prep).

The only reported OECM in the High Seas so far, was identified and reported by NEAFC[15]. It lies in the North East Atlantic and covers the 20 individual sites closed to bottom fishing to protect VMEs that do not lie within MPAs. The sites are managed individually but have been identified collectively as an OECM. They cover approximately 7% of the ABNJ, a much smaller area than the closed area fisheries measure itself, a large part of which is in designated MPAs.

[15] www.ospar.org/site/assets/files/37958/neafc-ospar-joint-oecm-narrative-final_clean.pdf

SECTION 7. REPORTING CONFIRMED OECMS

102. Once a given area satisfies all CBD criteria, following the full assessment, its final recognition as an OECM is the prerogative and responsibility of the relevant country (or countries). This is covered by questions 2 and 7 of the IUCN WCPA site identification tool and is described in detail in Section 6 of Jonas et al. (2024).

103. In terms of reporting, generally, one agency, or a focal point, is responsible for compiling reports to the Secretariat of the CBD, and submitting data to the World Database on Protected and Conserved Areas (WDPCA)16. The WDPCA is maintained by the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in Cambridge, UK, and is the authoritative source of data on protected areas and OECMs for the CBD. It is thus the basis for monitoring and reporting on progress towards Target 3 of the GBF and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Every two years, UNEP-WCMC releases the Protected Planet Report on the status of the world's protected areas and OECMs.

1. Who can report a confirmed OECM?

104. There are several ways in which confirmed OECMs can be reported.

Government: Governments can report data for all sites in the country, including protected areas and OECMs, across the range of IUCN governance types. However, reporting by governments of protected areas and OECMs under non-state governance must be done with the permission of the non-state governing authority, and in the case of Indigenous peoples and local communities, with the FPIC of these groups.

Regional bodies: Reporting agencies can include entities that facilitate data collection at a regional level, where relevant.

- In the case of fisheries-based OECMs, RFMOs may identify and report them on behalf of their Member States, where the Secretariats have been instructed to do so. The RFMO must sign and return a Data Contributor Agreement, and it is assumed that there has been communication at the national level between concerned ministries in order to pre-inform/notify the CBD focal points about the OECM submission. This arrangement is primarily for mOECMs in international waters, and may be less relevant to the Mediterranean.
- In the case of Member States of the EU, the monitoring and reporting of MPAs and OECMs are coordinated through a process involving Member States and the European Commission. Member States are responsible for identifying, designating, managing and monitoring protected areas and, as for their protected areas, should report their OECMs to the EIONET Central Data Repository[17] (also known as the Common Database on Designated Areas (CDDA)). Confirmed OECMs are included in a specific section of the CDDA which is managed by the European Environment Agency (EEA). Reporting is conducted via an electronic tool developed by the Commission and the EEA, ensuring transparency and public accessibility (European Commission, 2022; WWF, 2025)
- The MAPAMED (MArine Protected Areas in the MEDiterranean) GIS database holds information for Mediterranean MPAs and marine OECMs, as well as other sites of interest for marine conservation. It is administered jointly by UNEP/MAP-SPA/RAC and the MedPAN Association. MAPAMED data is validated by all the SPA/BD Focal Points of the SPA/RAC. MedPAN and SPA/RAC are responsible for the collection of MAPAMED data from different sources and monitor existing databases and

[16] Note as before: The WDPCA combines the previous World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) and World Database on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (WD-OECM), which existed as distinct databases until 2025.
[17] https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/cdda/

regularly solicit members and partners of their respective networks in order to identify sites to be added or updated in the MAPAMED database.

Non-state actors: these include Indigenous peoples, local and fisheries communities, scientific bodies, heritage bodies and private actors. In addition to submitting data through their governments, such bodies can report directly to the WDCPA if the OECM is under their own governance, or if they are doing so on behalf of, and with the consent of, another non-state governing authority (e.g. an NGO can submit data on a protected area or OECM with the agreement of the non-state governing authority).

2. How is a confirmed OECM reported to the WDCPA?

105. The WDPCA comprises spatial data (points and polygons) and tabular information on each site. Each protected area or OECM has its own unique identification number, displayed in a 'SITE_ID' field. The 'SITE_TYPE' field differentiates protected areas and OECMs. General reporting requirements for the WDPCA are that spatial data and associated attributes, either a polygon boundary or the central latitude and longitude point for each OECM, are sent to UNEP-WCMC. The following information is required (UNEP-WCMC is unable to update the databases using information in other formats):

- Spatial data for each protected area or OECM in a GIS format (ideally polygon. Point if polygon unavailable);
- Tabular information – basic descriptive information and information on the source of the data see the *WDPA and WD-OECM Manual*[18] for more details
- A signed data contributor agreement available:
    a. *English*: The data contributor agreement (in English) can be downloaded here for governmental sources and here for non-governmental sources.
    b. *French*: L'accord de partage des données (en Français) peut être téléchargé ici pour les sources gouvernementales and ici pour les sources non-gouvernementales.

106. Optional fields for data providers to report on are:

- a field (OECM Assessment / "OECM_ASMT") for reporting the tool or approach that was used to determine that the site meets the OECM definition. Accepted values for this field include: IUCN WCPA Tool 2023, IUCN WCPA Tool 2022, Draft IUCN WCPA Tool (Pre-2022), FAO Handbook 2022, CBD Criteria 2018, National Approach, Other Approach, Combined Approaches, Not Assessed, Not Reported, Not Applicable.

- a URL link or reference to OECM site-level information (e.g., document including details of how the site fulfils each element of the OECM definition), in the WDPCA's Supplementary Information field ("SUPP_INFO").

107. Once the OECM has been reported, UNEP-WCMC confirms that the upload of the requested information has been completed or notifies the sender of any problems, and also notifies the relevant CBD country focal point(s) of the OECM submission, requesting comments with a 28-day deadline. If no comments are received the proposed OECM is implicitly considered valid. There is no requirement for an external auditor or verification organism. An OECM can be withdrawn from the WD-OECM at any time as per country decisions.

108. The Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness (GD-PAME) is currently a separate database, also held at UNEP-WCMC, that collates data on effectiveness for the world's protected

[18] Read/Download version 1.6 in English & Read/Download version 1.6 in French

areas and OECMs, from a range of effectiveness assessment methods. A protected area or OECM must be included in the WDPCA before an assessment can be reported to the GD-PAME. Reporting to the GD-PAME alongside the WDPCA means that national contributions to implementing the GBF Target 3, including its qualitative elements, can be tracked. Records in the two databases are linked by the SITE_ID. The GD-PAME will ultimately be incorporated into the WDPCA.

3. What are the steps in reporting confirmed OECMs?

109. At the national level, a transparent process of registering and reporting OECMs should be established, ideally as part of the overall national OECM process (see Section 3). Countries generally have their own systems for reporting on their protected and conserved areas and these should be followed and/or adapted to include OECMs.

110. Where a full assessment shows that a site meets all the OECM criteria, the next steps are therefore to:

1. Communicate formally the result of the final assessment, with documentation, to the national governance and management authority(ies), and to local communities and other rights-holders and stakeholders. Although the latter should have been involved throughout the process, formal communication of the result is still required.

2. Securely store the information on the assessment process and results, including supporting data, for future reference. Establishment of a national database is advised (see section on national process).

3. Where initial consent (step 2 in Section 4) was only for undertaking the assessment, obtain consent to report the site as an OECM if it meets the criteria.

4. Report the confirmed OECM to the WDPCA.

5. If the management body ceases its activities in the area, management is not transferred to another entity, or the area is designated as a protected area, the competent authority should remove the OECM from official databases to prevent the incorrect listing of an OECM.

SECTION 8. CONCLUSION

111. Despite the plethora of guidance and initiatives on OECMs, there are still several aspects of OECMs that may be challenging in the identification process (Agardy, 2023; Stolpe et al., 2024). Countries need to recognise these when embarking on the process, but this does not mean that there should be a delay in initiating actions to identify OECMs. Political risks must be recognised including those of diverting attention from MCPAs that either need to be established or that need more effective management. A key risk is the potential misuse of the OECM designation as a means to meet conservation targets without delivering real outcomes. It is crucial to ensure that OECMs are not used as a substitute for effective marine protection or to legitimize activities incompatible with biodiversity conservation, such as industrial fishing or oil extraction.

112. National authorities also need to start to integrate the identification and management of OECMs into their marine spatial planning and other conservation planning processes. Close regional co-operation will be necessary to strengthen collaboration and knowledge sharing among the Mediterranean countries and, for OECMs to have long-term benefits and to be sustainably managed, there must be involvement of all stakeholders and local communities at all stages in the process.

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ANNEX 1. PROGRESS IN IDENTIFYING AND REPORTING OECMS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Initial discussions on identifying and reporting OECMs in Mediterranean countries took place in 2020 at a workshop organised by IUCN Med (IUCN/WCPA, 2020), with an initial focus on the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and covering both terrestrial and marine contexts. Some Mediterranean countries have assessed sites and recognised OECMs, or now have national processes in place. Funded by the EU, the University of the Aegean is undertaking a review of OECMs as part of the Biodiversa Project (Petza et al., 2024), which will provide information on how well Mediterranean countries are progressing.

1. Southern Mediterranean countries

Algeria: Under Algeria's cultural heritage and environmental management framework, certain 'Parcs Culturels' have been recognised as OECMs. Key instruments include Executive Decree No. 87-231, establishing the Ahaggar Cultural Park, and Executive Decree No. 09-408, defining the organisation and competencies of the Tindouf Cultural Park Office. These are terrestrial OECMs, and have been reported to the WDCPA, as well as some terrestrial Biosphere Reserves and hunting reserves. An IUCN-WCPA initiative has identified potential for assessment of some marine and coastal sites as OECMs (e.g. artificial reefs, and regulated or controlled fisheries areas) (IUCN-WCPA 2020).

Egypt: Some sites have been 'pre-identified' on the Mediterranean Egyptian coast including Al Shewaila-Matruh, Ras Al Hekma (Matruh), Sunken City (Port East Alexandria), Bardaweel Lake (North Sinai Ramsar Wetland), some oil platforms (in coordination with the oil sector), the Nile Delta Fan, and the Nile Delta cold hydrocarbon seeps.

Lebanon: In 2020, a number of areas were recommended for assessment including Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve, private protected areas, ecotourism trails, areas with fisheries restrictions, buffer zones of Biosphere Reserves not declared as protected areas, and community-managed Himas (IUCN-WCPA, 2020). Since then, under the BioConnect project (a joint effort between four national partners to improve management and to create and/or recognise new Protected Areas and OECMs) an ecological assessment of the coast area has been undertaken. Ten areas, including many KBAs, have been put forward for OECM assessment, including Al Kharayeb (a community managed sand dune erosion control project) and a private area that includes commercial salines and lands owned by a monastery). Many Himas have now been formally recognised as protected areas and so will not be assessed as OECMs. In November 2025, a government decision was passed to approve a national body for collating information on OECMs. Fishery management areas have also been recommended for assessment (see text below on fishery management areas).

Libya: A national Protected Areas and OECM strategy has been developed, and a preliminary list of OECMs drawn up following a SPA/RAC supported ecological survey of the coast. Sites identified for assessment include a transboundary salt marsh area (with Tunisia), many locations important for water birds and Posidonia, and a buffer zone around a port that is closed to public access.

Morocco: The 2024 Master Plan for conservation areas identifies a network of over 350 sites that might be suitable for protected areas or OECMs, and several have been reported to the WDPCA including Cultural parks, Biosphere Reserves and hunting reserves. Initial discussions about Jbel Moussa archaeological site indicate this might be suitable for OECM assessment. Although proposed as a protected area, the designation process may take a long time but parts of the area are already effectively managed, such as the Ramsar Site, and might already meet the criteria for an OECM.

Tunisia: In 2020, a number of sites including El Bibane lagoon and Ramsar site, other important wetlands, oases, voluntary no-take fishing areas, and artificial reefs were recommended for assessment (IUCN-WCPA, 2020).

2. Northern Mediterranean countries

France: has prepared national guidance for OECMs (Comité français de l'UICN, 2022). Potential marine and coastal OECMs that could be assessed include: artificial reefs managed by the city of Marseille; community-led fisheries long-term closures/artisanal fishing zones; fisheries reserve managed by community (prud'homie) of small scale fishers in Cap Roux (France), and wind farms (e.g. in the Gulf of Lion).

Italy: has applied to the CBD Secretariat for recognition as an OECM an area identified under Law 83/2012 "*for the protection of the environment and the ecosystem ... will prohibit prospecting, exploration as well as the cultivation of liquid and gas hydrocarbons at sea ... in the sea areas located within 12 miles from the coastlines along the entire national coastal perimeter and from the outer perimeter of the above-mentioned protected marine and coastal areas ...*" as revised by the new D.L. 18/11/2022, no. 176 'Urgent support measures in the energy sector and public finance'. Italy has submitted the necessary documentation to the CBD and the Secretariat has referred this UNEP-WCMC, who have stated that this must be approved by the EEA. As yet, this site is not listed on the WDCPA.

3. Fishery-based OECMs

A process is underway to consider the potential for recognising areas managed through fishery measures as mOECMs in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, supported by the FAO-GFCM. An FAO/GFCM expert meeting was held in 2022 to define a way forward (FAO, 2023).

The Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals (France, Italy and Monaco) and the Cetacean Corridor in the Western Mediterranean (Spain), both recognised as Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) and listed in the WDCPA, were initially considered but were excluded from recognition as OECMs since they are protected areas.

An initial screening was undertaken of eight other areas, in national waters, crossing international boundaries, an in 'high seas', with results as as follows:

a. The Jabuka/Pomo Pit FRA (Adriatic Sea, within the jurisdiction of both Italy and Croatia): considered to be suitable for a full assessment.
b. Three FRAs in the Strait of Sicily, partly in Italian waters and partly high seas: two (the East of Adventure Bank and the West of Gela Basin) merit full assessment with the provision that this will need to take governance changes into account, especially those related to the ongoing discussions around Italy's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); East of Malta Bank FRA was not considered suitable to take forward.
c. The Velebit Channel demersal fishing ban in Croatia: designated as a special habitat under the Marine Fisheries Law (i.e. categorised as an important spawning, feeding sites etc.). The next step would be an in-depth analysis to clarify how the measures contribute to the biodiversity in the area in the context of the four pillars of ecosystem services.
d. Three fisheries management areas in Lebanon: an artificial reef deployed in 2021 off the village of Barbara in the Keserwan-Jbeil governorate; a pilot measure to limit bycatch and illegal fishing; and the Batroun Conserved Area, an area under direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture. Further information is required for an initial assessment of these sites.
e. The GFCM 1,000 m FRA: considered as a weak candidate for OECM designation, given the lack of dedicated management for the entire area and a specific monitoring plan. It was suggested however that the portions of the FRA falling under territorial seas could be assessed by the countries concerned, if suitable protection measures restricting all potentially harmful human activities are in place. Such areas include those overlapping with EBSAs, sea mounts and their summits, mud volcanoes and other areas hosting Vulnerable Marine Ecosystem (VME) indicators.

Several of these potentially meet the first two key criteria, in that they are FRAs and therefore managed, and overlap with EBSAs which shows that there is existing evidence of important biodiversity components. It was

suggested that the results should be brought to the GFCM Subregional Committee for the Adriatic Sea, the Subregional Committee for the Central Mediterranean and the Working Group on Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems and Essential Fish Habitats to discuss the possibility of proceeding with full assessments.

Other areas considered worth screening included the Eratosthenes Seamount, and the Palmahim Disturbance Cold Water Coral Gardens and Cold Seeps (proposed FRA), and areas where clams are collected by women in Tunisia. The workshop resulted in the compilation and discussion of the main challenges related to the application of the criteria, with initial recommendations on how to address them; agreement on next steps to undertake a more in-depth evaluation of the case studies presented for discussions during GFCM subregional committee meetings; and the assessment of the implications, opportunities and potential difficulties that arise from identifying fishery-related OECMs in the Mediterranean (FAO, 2023).

ANNEX 2. EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL GUIDANCE AND PROCESSES DEVELOPED IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Many countries are now producing their own national guidance. A few examples are presented below, as this experience might be useful if Mediterranean countries are considering developing a national process.

Australia. The National OECMs Framework provides guidance on recognition of land-based OECMs (DCCEEW, 2024). It identifies principles to guide OECM recognition, provides information on implementation of these principles, and includes a site assessment tool. Identifying and recognising OECMs in marine areas may be considered in future. Fitzsimons et al. (2024) identified that the number of categories/mechanisms that would meet the OECM definition is relatively small; there is a high risk of potentially perverse outcomes in classifying an area as an OECM.

Canada: (Case Study 2 in WWF and CIDSL (2026). The OECM concept has been operationalised through policy guidance (not regulation) in this country. The federal departments responsible for terrestrial and marine conservation – Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) – developed detailed national guidance documents (in 2019 for terrestrial and 2022 for marine[19]) that outline a common approach for identifying, assessing and reporting OECMs. Although the guidance is non-binding, it is widely recognised as authoritative across federal, provincial, municipal, private, territorial and Indigenous governance systems. It provides a coherent national framework, enabling consistent assessment of candidate OECMS with different governance, tenure and management arrangements. A two-level criterion for assessing whether a potential OECM is effectively managed is applied (Government of Canada, 2022): 1. There must be a mechanism for preventing incompatible activities and managing all other activities; 2 The mechanism should compel all governing authorities to prohibit incompatible activities. Such a high standard is useful in ensuring that OECMs meet the effectiveness criterion. Fisheries area closures that meet OECM criteria are known as “marine refuges” and a number have now been recognised and reported.

India: criteria and guidelines have been developed by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), National Biodiversity Authority of India (NBA) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to identify OECMs in India (UNDP, 2022). A 14-category classification, clustered under three broad groups- terrestrial, waterbodies, and marine, was developed covering a broad spectrum of potential OECMs including unique agricultural systems, biodiversity parks, industrial estates, coastal waterbodies, and important marine biodiversity areas.

Indonesia is identifying marine and coastal OECMs (Estradivari et al., 2022 and 2024.)

Oman (Case Study 4 in WWF and CIDSL, 2026): this country has developed a national process specifically for marine and fisheries-based OECMs. This builds on its existing well-established marine and fisheries management framework rather than creating a new biodiversity-specific designation. The Law on Aquatic Living Resources (Royal Decree 20/2019) authorises a wide range of spatial management measures, including seasonal closures, spawning aggregation zones, no-take areas and gear restrictions. When these sites meet the criteria of CBD Decision 14/8, they are confirmed as OECMs through coordination between the Environment Authority and MAFWR. This model demonstrates how sectoral mandates can serve as a legal and operational basis for OECM implementation without the need for new environmental legislation.

Philippines (case study 10 in Jonas et al., 2024): The Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has prepared a draft administrative order (yet to be approved) which, among other things:

- Clarifies the relationship of OECMs to protected areas, which are already regulated through the country’s National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act.
- Recognises that the ‘governing authority’ of an OECM is the institution, individual, a communal group, or other body acknowledged as having responsibility, accountability and authority in protecting, restoring and managing, including decision-making in their resource management unit.

[19] https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/oceans/publications/oecm-amcepz/guidance-directives-2022-eng.html

- Adopts guiding principles on OECMs, including that they have a documented contribution to biodiversity conservation, that they are recognised through a rights-based process, and that their identification considers ecological representativeness and connectivity.
- Adopts a three-stage process for identification of OECMs, based on IUCN's guidance for potential OECMs and then candidate OECMs which are subject to full assessment.
- References the country's KBA inventory as a key source of potential sites.
- Establishes a national OECM registry, to hold information relevant to OECMs.
- Establishes a national institutional framework for implementation of the order, by expanding the role of the existing National NIPAS review committee to become the National NIPAS and OECM Review Committee (NNORC), including expanding the remit of the committee's technical working group.
- Provides for support to capacity-building, monitoring, evaluation and reporting for the governing authorities and the institutions involved in the assessment of OECMs.
- Addresses the need for on-going funding and support to recognised OECMs through an 'adopt an OECM' scheme to encourage private sector partnerships, and by mandating DENR to put in place programmes to support recognised OECMs, including annual awards, technical assistance, certification and assistance to explore potential climate/ carbon payments.

South Africa (Case study 7 in Jonas et al., 2024). Four principles are considered central to an inclusive and robust process: Principal stakeholders, e.g. state ministries, environmental NGOs, and representative bodies of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, to be engaged one-on-one to familiarise them with the OECM concept; Stakeholder workshops to be inclusive and representative of all affected stakeholders (especially previously marginalised groups); A policy and technical review to be undertaken by professionals (e.g. environmental lawyers) to better align the national legal frameworks to support the OECM criteria; Potential OECMs identified and a sample assessed at ground level against the OECM definition using the IUCN site-level tool.