

Spanish government opens for increased marine protection

Title

In October the Spanish government opened a **public consultation** process for the designation of a network of marine **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** and **Sites of Community Importance (SCIs)**. The government proposal endorses a recommendation produced by SEO/BirdLife (BirdLife in Spain) in 2009 and includes 39 marine SPAs (based on an **original list of 44 marine Important Bird Areas**) and four marine SCIs. Once approved, these areas will increase the marine **Natura 2000** Network in Spain by about 50.000 square kilometres, including some of the largest marine protected areas in Europe.

The now on-going public consultation process is very important for Europe as it aims to ensure the protection of some of the richest marine nature sites in the continent. Besides, most EU countries are still lagging behind in terms of marine protection and management, and Spain's model could incentivise them to improve on that side.

The process of marine SPAs designation by the Spanish government started in 2009, when SEO/BirdLife presented the marine IBA inventory as the result of an EC funded LIFE project also supported by the Ministry of Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs (MARM). In October 2011, the Spanish Government already proposed 41 marine SPAs. Unfortunately, the process was stopped after criticism from other administrations and stakeholders, claiming that they had not been properly involved in the last steps preceding the proposal.

With regard to the sites left out in the government's proposal, the Strait of Gibraltar stands out as of particular concern. The area is a unique migration corridor to seabirds and SEO/BirdLife (BirdLife in Spain) will push for its prompt inclusion in the proposal of marine SPAs.

The designation of marine SPAs is only the first step towards the conservation of seabirds and marine wildlife at sea. For SPAs to be completely effective, it is necessary to develop and implement appropriate management plans and accepted by all stakeholders.

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