

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 5, No 2 (2024)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.40822](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.40822)

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To cite this article:

Borzoni, G. (2024). The Mediterranean Protection Between Environment and Politics: Fifty Years After UNEP/MAP 1975. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 5(2), 159–165. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.40822>

The Mediterranean Protection Between Environment and Politics: Fifty Years After UNEP/MAP 1975¹

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Abstract

The year 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP), launched under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). This milestone holds profound significance, not only for the preservation of the basin, but also within the broader framework of environmental and political diplomacy over the past decades. This contribution aims to reflect on the importance of this anniversary, both as the culmination of past political initiatives and as a testament to the environmental progress achieved thus far, while drawing out key lessons that can inform future efforts.

Keywords: Environment, Diplomacy, Mediterranean, UNEP, MAP, Barcelona Convention, Pollution, Sustainability, Development, Phases.

Introduction

On February 4, 1975, at the conclusion of the Barcelona intergovernmental meeting on Mediterranean protection by the Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), a Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) was officially established. Signed by sixteen coastal states, the plan aimed at fostering mutual cooperation for the protection of the Mediterranean basin, while providing a foundational regulatory and operational framework for future developments. From the outset, indeed, member countries requested that the UNEP Executive Director initiate a legal and technical follow-up to get to draft a framework agreement, complemented by specific protocols addressing the prevention of pollution from hydrocarbons and other hazardous substances, as well as discharges from ships and aircraft. In response to this recommendation, a Conference of plenipotentiaries of the Mediterranean coastal states was held one year later, once again in Barcelona, from February 2 to 16. This led to the adoption of the Convention for the protection of the Mediterranean Sea against pollution, which entered into force two years later, in 1978. Comprising 35 articles and two protocols (specifically addressing the prevention of pollution by dumping from ships and aircraft, and cooperation in combating Mediterranean pollution by oil and other harmful substances in case of emergency), this agreement emerged as the legal and operational instrument of the MAP, further specified over time through the addition of five more supplementary protocols

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Borzoni, G. (2024). The Mediterranean Protection Between Environment and Politics: Fifty Years After UNEP/MAP 1975. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 5(2), 159-165. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.40822>

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(UNEP/MAP, 2019). As part of this following process, nearly two decades after its adoption the convention was amended on June 10, 1995, and renamed the Convention for the protection of the marine environment and the coastal region of the Mediterranean. Beyond its intrinsic value, both the MAP and the Convention represent a particularly compelling outcome also from a political and diplomatic perspective, not only in relation to the origins of the process leading to the agreement but also in terms of its enduring impact.

A Different Periodization

Regarding the first aspect – origins – the historical reconstruction is traditionally framed within the early 1970s, the period to which it formally belongs, indeed an exceptionally prolific era for environmental protection. However, earlier significant stages can be also identified which, directly or indirectly, contributed to shaping the foundational background, underscoring the enduring presence of environmental issues within the broader diplomatic dynamics of the 20th century. As early as the first half of the 1950s, the issue of marine pollution had already prompted the signing of the London Convention on May 12, 1954 (UNO, 1954). Notably, this agreement echoed recommendations formulated decades earlier within other environmental meetings, particularly the 1926 Washington Conference. While the core provisions of the London Convention focused on prohibiting the discharge of oily mixtures within 50 miles of the coast, its significance lays not only in this initial regulatory measure but also in the ongoing process of revision and strengthening that followed. Over the subsequent decade, a series of amendments progressively tightened these restrictions, adapting them to the increasing scale of marine pollution.

There was no time to waste. Symbolically, the Torrey Canyon disaster of March 1967 underscored the urgent need to regulate state intervention and establish clear liability norms; all concerns that took center stage at the Brussels Conference two years later. This culminated in the adoption of the 1969 Brussels Conventions, which addressed both the authority of contracting states to intervene in cases of pollution on the high seas and the liabilities arising from environmental damage. This development, in turn, set in motion a broader regulatory process that led to a succession of key international agreements, including the 1972 Conventions on marine dumping, signed in Oslo (February) and London (November). The following year, the landmark IMCO (Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization) Conference on marine pollution laid the groundwork for the adoption of the Convention for the prevention of pollution from ships (UNO, 1977). Particularly relevant for our purposes is its absolute prohibition of discharges in designated “special areas,” a category that included the Mediterranean.

The persistent regulatory path described thus reveals a clear legal and political continuity between these early international efforts and the Mediterranean-focused initiatives that emerged in the early 1970s. As negotiations on pollution control progressed, increasing emphasis was placed on the development of regional agreements, refining and adapting existing principles to the specific geographic and environmental contexts in which they were to be applied. A prominent example of this approach was the adoption of the 1974 Paris and Helsinki Conventions, which primarily addressed land-based sources of pollution. In terms of geographic coverage, this sequence of agreements effectively completed a regulatory cycle extending from the North Atlantic to the Baltic Sea—the next logical step would, at last, concern the Mediterranean.

UNEP, the Mediterranean Action Plan and the Barcelona Convention

This political trajectory gained further momentum following the landmark Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in June, 1972. Particularly, the conference follow-up, marked by the adoption of Resolution 2997 (XXVII) by the UN General Assembly on December 15, 1972, led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (UNO, 1972). In turn, UNEP's Regional Programmes (RPs) introduced a geographically defined framework that expanded legal provisions and overarching obligations, laying the groundwork for more comprehensive environmental governance. Therefore, since the second session of UNEP's Governing Council in Nairobi 1974, the Mediterranean was explicitly addressed. On that occasion, the necessity of prioritizing measures for marine biodiversity conservation and pollution prevention was emphasized, ultimately leading to the convening of the aforementioned Barcelona intergovernmental meeting on Mediterranean protection, where the MAP was formally adopted.

The Action Plan provided a structured platform for cooperation, enhancing scientific assessments and strengthening governance mechanisms through multilateral engagement. Its initial Phase I focused on monitoring and controlling marine pollution, thereby supporting the development of national environmental policies, and promoting integrated planning strategies for sustainable resource management. Additionally, the MAP fostered collaboration between developed and developing nations, setting a precedent for discussions on sustainable development that sought to reconcile economic growth with ecological preservation. Given the extensive range of activities to be organized and implemented, six Regional Activity Centres (RACs) were established from the outset, each tasked with specific functions. These centres played a crucial role in translating the vision of a sustainable Mediterranean into a coordinated network of scalable initiatives, thereby cultivating specialized expertise while maintaining a cohesive strategic direction (UNEP/MAP, 2025).

However, the initial structure of MAP lacked robust legal enforceability, which hindered the establishment of a truly cohesive regional governance framework for coastal resource management. To address this shortcoming, the principle of Integrated Coastal Management (ICM) was incorporated into Phase II, a process that gained momentum at the beginning of the Nineties (MAP Phase II, 1995). The evolution of the legal and institutional framework once more reflects broader global environmental developments, particularly those influenced by the post-1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The outcomes of the Rio Conference served as both a contextual foundation and an impetus for the amendment process, which commenced in 1993 during the eighth ordinary meeting of the contracting parties in Antalya and continued with the establishment of the MED 21 Conference on Mediterranean Sustainable Development in the following year. The primary objective was to align regional governance with international environmental law and explicitly incorporate the littoral zone within its scope, ensuring harmonization between local policies and global sustainability frameworks, which had inspired the drafting of Agenda MED 21. The most significant milestone in the restructuring of the political and operational framework occurred at the 1995 Conference of plenipotentiaries, which amended the Barcelona Convention. Not only was the Convention renamed, but two additional protocols were also adopted – one addressing waste disposal from ships and aircraft, and the other concerning the establishment of Specially Protected Areas (SPAs). Furthermore, the conference resulted in the adoption of the new Barcelona Resolution, which set forth an Action Plan for marine environmental protection and sustainable coastal development within the Phase II framework.

As evidenced, the Barcelona Convention and its ancillary protocols constitute a comprehensive regulatory framework designed to mitigate marine pollution from both terrestrial and maritime sources while ensuring the preservation of marine and coastal biodiversity. This framework has emerged as a fundamental mechanism, delivering tangible benefits to both coastal communities and the broader international community, in line with core sustainability principles governing the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the continued commitment of the contracting parties has led to significant progress, including the long-anticipated establishment of effective governance structures, the creation of a Mediterranean Trust Fund, and the enduring promotion of cooperative efforts, even amidst geopolitical complexities.

A Multi-Decade Development to be brought to Completion

If these achievements underscore the resilience and efficacy of the system established under the Convention, they also highlight ongoing challenges, particularly regarding the MAP's limited

capacity to enforce behavioral change at the state level (Skjærseth, 2003). To address such concerns, member states' compliance with MAP provisions is monitored through a formal national reporting system. The establishment of a Compliance Committee in 2008 further strengthened this process by promoting adherence and facilitating corrective measures where necessary. This mechanism not only ensures that contracting parties meet their reporting obligations but also serves as a crucial source of information on the Convention's implementation status, enabling evidence-based policymaking at both national and regional levels.

Based on a well-structured division of thematic intervention areas, significant political and managerial progress has been achieved in recent years. For instance, in response to challenges such as incomplete protocol ratification and limited data-sharing, the legally binding Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), enacted in 2011, represents a major accomplishment. Furthermore, sustainable development considerations have continued to inspire collective decisions and activities among participants. Notably, within the framework of Agenda 2030, the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development has undertaken the mission of integrating the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national, regional, sub-regional, and local levels within the specific Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (UNEP, 2005), as reaffirmed at the 19th meeting of the contracting parties in 2016. This adaptive capacity – evident in the repeated amendments and reforms affecting both the Convention and its additional protocols – arguably represents the most significant legacy of the original MAP.

Yet, significant challenges persist in terms of the operational effectiveness of Mediterranean environmental cooperation. Scholars have extensively documented these shortcomings, emphasizing persistent gaps in implementation and enforcement (Massoud et al., 2003). Despite the regulatory instruments introduced under MAP Phase II, their effectiveness remains constrained by delays in national adoption and weak enforcement capacities in certain member states. Additionally, the Mediterranean Trust Fund (active since 1979), along with financial contributions from contracting parties and the European Union, has proven insufficient to support the full implementation of envisioned measures (UNEP, 2024). Moreover, in terms of ensuring procedural quality, the path toward full accountability remains incomplete (Office of Internal Oversight Services, 2022). The scientific community continues to stress the urgent need to integrate environmental policies with economic and social development objectives. This goal is all the more pressing given recent reports – including the Mediterranean Assessment Report (MAR 1, 2020) and the State of the Environment and Development in the Mediterranean (SoED, 2020) – which indicate a worsening environmental situation. Rising levels of marine pollution, accelerating biodiversity loss, and increasing

anthropogenic pressures pose serious threats to the resilience of coastal ecosystems. At the same time, persistent socioeconomic disparities between the northern and southern shores hinder the development of a cohesive and effective response. From a political and integrated perspective, an approach centered on ecosystem-based management and multilateral cooperation is therefore essential to develop adaptive strategies and mitigate these pressures.

The fiftieth anniversary of the MAP thus arrives at a crucial moment. Nearly two decades ago, in their well-documented 2006 Blue Plan Report, Guillaume Benoit and Aline Comeau warned of the Mediterranean's "fairly gloomy prospects for 2025", should meaningful action fail to materialize (Benoit & Comeau, 2006). Now that this deadline has been reached, if the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) is to reaffirm itself as a "success story" (Yeroulanos, 1982), substantial progress is urgently required to translate its vision into more effective, long-term environmental stewardship.

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