



TOGETHER
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OCEAN LEGACY

HPA ASSISTANCE & GRANT – CALL FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

**DEVELOP HIGHLY PROTECTED AREAS
SUPPORTING BIODIVERSITY AND
LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

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CONTEXT & DEFINITIONS

The Mediterranean Sea represents a hotspot of biodiversity (Gomei et al., 2019), yet current marine protection in the region is insufficient. Figures by MedPan from 2025 (pending validation by the Barcelona Convention focal points) show current Marine Protected Areas¹ (MPAs) coverage at 8.8%, which has risen less than 1% since the previous report from 2020 (Gallon et al., 2025; Claudet et al., 2020). The goal of 30% by 2030, as defined in the Convention on Biological Diversity, now remains only five years away. MPAs in the Mediterranean Sea are also not distributed equally, with 97.4% located in European waters (Gallon et al., 2025), leaving a large portion of the southern and eastern Mediterranean under-protected.

Additionally, only 23% of current Mediterranean MPAs have an implemented management plan (Gallon et al., 2025). Protected areas without implementation create the illusion of meeting conservation goals while providing no ecological or socioeconomic benefit (Turnbull et al., 2021).

MPAs under stricter levels of protection, called **Highly or Fully Protected Areas**, are proven to deliver greater and faster ecological benefits to ecosystems (Gomei et al., 2019; Claudet et al., 2020; Grorud-Colvert et al., 2021).

Highly and fully protected areas are described in the MPA Guide (Grorud-Colvert et al., 2021) respectively as:

- **Highly Protected Areas:** “Only light extractive activities are allowed that have low impact, and all other abatable impacts are minimized. If any anchoring is allowed, it is small scale and for a short duration with a low impact. If any infrastructure is allowed, it is small scale with low impact. Any aquaculture must be low impact, small scale, low density, and unfed. If fishing occurs, it is infrequent and only five or fewer gear types are used that are highly selective and low-impact. Any non-extractive activities are regulated and restricted and of low impact, low density, and small scale.”
- **Fully Protected Areas:** “No impact from extractive or destructive activities is allowed and all abatable impacts are minimized. Non-extractive activities may include recreational, traditional, cultural, or spiritual activities. Examples include minimal impact snorkeling, swimming and SCUBA, tidepooling, cultural/ceremonial gatherings, education, knowledge transmission, and motorized or non-motorized vessels associated with the previously mentioned activities.”



**THERE IS AN URGENT
NEED TO ESTABLISH
MORE CONNECTED,
STRICTER, AND
WIDESPREAD
PROTECTION ACROSS
THE MEDITERRANEAN.**

¹ A Marine Protected Area (MPA) is defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated, and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.” MPAs aim to protect marine ecosystems, preserve biodiversity, and maintain cultural resources.

The fully protected areas are also called No-Take Zones (NTZ), or no-go zone when even passing through the areas is forbidden. Today only 0.04% of current protection in the Mediterranean are at full levels of protection (Gallon et al., 2025). This has only risen 0.01% from the coverage in 2020.

In this call, we focus on both Highly and Fully Protected Areas (HFPAs) under the term Highly Protected Areas (HPAs). For simplicity in navigating across the different categorisation, we consider as HPAs all areas corresponding to **IUCN Categories Ia, Ib, II and III** defined as follows (Day et al., 2019):

- **Ia Strict nature reserve:** Strictly protected for biodiversity and also possibly geological/ geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values
- **Ib Wilderness area:** Usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, protected and managed to preserve their natural condition
- **II National park:** Large natural or near-natural areas protecting large-scale ecological processes with characteristic species and ecosystems, which also have environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities. These are effectively 'no-take' areas with the only form of take allowed for (a) scientific research if that research cannot be conducted elsewhere; (b) for invasive species control; and (c) in some circumstances, sustainable resource use by indigenous people to conserve their traditional spiritual and cultural values, provided this is done in accordance with cultural tradition.
- **III Natural monument or feature:** Areas set aside to protect a specific natural monument, which can be a landform, sea mount, marine cavern, geological feature such as a cave, or a living feature such as an ancient grove. Extractive use (of living or dead material) is not considered consistent with the objectives of category III, other than extraction for research, invasive species control, and sustainable resource use by indigenous people to conserve their traditional spiritual and cultural values, which may be compatible, provided this is done in accordance with cultural tradition

We also consider HPAs as core zones of MPAs, when they match with the definition above.

TOGETHER FOR THE MED |

This call was developed under the umbrella of Together for the Med, a partnership born in 2017 to reduce fishing pressure and protect coastal ecosystems and communities by building bridges between field-action, science, and policy, and improving knowledge exchange and collaboration at the Mediterranean level. Currently, the network contains over 50 partners across 15 Mediterranean countries.

The partnership focuses on two key areas of work:

1. Reduce fishing impacts on biodiversity while supporting Small-Scale Fishers livelihood.
2. Develop and strengthen a network of effective MPAs in the Mediterranean, including through the promotion of Highly Protected Areas¹.

The present call for projects is part of this second area of work and is made possible by the support of the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy project.

OBJECTIVES

This call for projects aims to **support the creation or strengthening of Highly Protected Areas** in the Mediterranean basin by providing technical assistance and small grants (up to 5,000€).

The best candidates will receive both technical assistance and small grants, while the second group of successful candidates will be offered technical assistance only.

In addition to supporting the development of Highly Protected Areas, this call follows two sub-objectives:



THE BEST CANDIDATES WILL RECEIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND SMALL GRANTS, WHILE THE SECOND GROUP WILL BE OFFERED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ONLY.



PROMOTE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INTEGRATION WITHIN THE PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT PLANS

Our aim is to ensure that community needs are heard and met. A consensus on the implementation of the HPA will increase its acceptability and effectiveness in yielding both ecological and socio-economic benefits.

Our goal is to advance effective protection of marine biodiversity in the region, and, by supporting concrete, field-based actions, to foster local engagement and build the capacities to ensure long-term conservation outcomes.



ADDRESS THE UNBALANCED REPARTITION OF MPAs AND HPAs IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

Priority will be given on areas that are less advanced in the achievement of the 30x30 and 10x30 goals, where we aim to support the initial steps in setting up HPAs.

SCOPE OF THE TECHNICAL SUPPORT AND SMALL GRANT

For feasibility reasons, and as a guidance for candidates, we have detailed below suggestions of activities that can be supported thanks to technical assistance and/or a small grant. However, as all sites have specific ecological and socio-economic features that demand targeted response, and as all organisations face different challenges based on their strengths and weaknesses, we encourage candidates to submit the activities that they believe have the highest level of priority for their specific site, even if they are not listed below.

To support serious candidates, we will provide dedicated times to answer questions and help organising responses to the call. See the different times and formats offered in section F) and sub-section “Support for Applicants”. We encourage all interested organisations to apply independently of their levels of advancement in the designation of the HPA and their structure, which is why we kept a light Application form and expect a letter expressing interest rather than a fully detailed project.

1. TECHNICAL SUPPORT AND SMALL GRANT

While all selected candidates will be offered to benefit from technical support, only the best-ranked will receive small grants of up to €5,000 to support the implementation of priority activities.

These grants are intended to help operationalise key actions, strengthen project feasibility, and enhance early impacts on the ground.

2. TECHNICAL SUPPORT CORE PACKAGE AND TAILORED SUPPORT

The technical assistance provided will be structured around two complementary components:

A common core package will be offered to all successful candidates. It aims to strengthen the candidate organisation and build strong foundations for the HPA. It will include an initial assessment using *The BlueDiagnosis*², a tool for evaluating the management effectiveness of a marine protected area. It could be followed by the implementation of two key



APPLICANTS MAY SUBMIT OTHER ACTIVITIES IF THEY BELIEVE THEY HAVE A HIGHER LEVEL OF PRIORITY FOR THEIR SPECIFIC SITES.

² *The BlueDiagnosis* is a tool developed by BlueSeeds for evaluating the management effectiveness of an MPA towards greater sustainability in conservation actions. It can be distinguished by its focus on the durability and sustainability of an MPA rather than its direct impact. Its indicators extend beyond conservation actions to include aspects such as internal organisation, collaboration, financial stability, and openness to change. See Kok and Sisman-Aydin, 2025, for a use case.

strategic tools, the Regional Strategic Analysis (RSA)³ and the development of a Theory of Change⁴, designed to structure and position the projects within a coherent regional framework. The support will be adapted to the project maturity and needs.

Additional tailored support adapted to the priorities of each site will be offered, depending on the capacity and requests of all grantees. Candidates are therefore encouraged to clearly identify and explain their particular needs in terms of technical support, even if they go beyond the scope of proposed activities.

3. ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES FOR SUPPORT

The activities are suggestions based on feasibility, but applicants may submit other activities if they believe they have a higher level of priority for their specific sites. However, candidates are strongly encouraged to only mention their top priority and pick only up to three activities for which they need support. Projects that clearly describe their targeted and most pressing needs will be prioritized.

All applicants are invited to contact the granting team before submitting their application for a first review and guidance from the selection team (see Selection Process).

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OFFERED
Collaborative zoning	- Capacity building on stakeholder identification and engagement - Vocation mapping & strategic regional analysis - Theory of Change
Environmental monitoring	Assessment of management effectiveness, needs and gaps to guide monitoring priorities (including using the BlueDiagnosis tool)
Management, enforcement and capacity building	- Capacity building and technical assistance on management effectiveness and strategic financial planning - Self-financing mechanism support programme
Education, outreach and knowledge exchange	- Support for communication activities and outreach materials development - Facilitation of peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange
Legal designation	- Legal support - Advocacy support
Socio-economic diagnosis and support activities	- Socio-economic diagnosis assessing community needs to develop sustainable and inclusive coastal livelihoods. - Feasibility study for the implementation of a support program for revenue-generating activities or blue entrepreneurship

³ The RSA is a method developed by the French Marine Protected Areas Agency (now French Biodiversity Office) to support the creation and management of MPAs. Its core product is the "Vocation Map": a spatial synthesis co-developed with key stakeholders, that identifies the most suitable areas for each "vocation", including ecological functioning, natural and cultural heritage and human use of the maritime territory. It provides a shared diagnosis and guides decision-making.

⁴ The Theory of Change, as part of the Open Conservation Standards framework, provides a logical and visual description of how and why a conservation project improves the state of biodiversity and human livelihoods that rely on it.

4. ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES FOR THE SMALL GRANT

The suggested activities are based on the priorities of the grant, but applicants may submit other activities if they believe they have a higher level of priority for their specific sites. Candidates are encouraged to focus on one or two key activities that are achievable and relevant to the site.

All applicants are invited to contact the granting team before submitting their application for a first review and guidance from the selection team (see Selection Process).

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE OF ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES
Collaborative zoning	• Stakeholder identification and engagement • Zoning to support sustainable use and conflict reduction among coastal activities
Environmental monitoring	• Ecological monitoring equipment purchase • Baseline study • Trainings
Management, enforcement and capacity building	• Development of management and business plans • Surveillance and monitoring equipment purchase • Development of sustainable financing mechanism for HPA (for example regenerative tourism, visitor or concession fees)
Education, outreach and knowledge exchange	• Trainings and educational programs for fishers, youth, community members, or politicians • Communication activities and outreach material • Development of educational materials • Best practices exchange and knowledge sharing
Legal designation	• Identification of legal obstacles • Advocacy activities
Socio-economic diagnosis and support activities	• Support the development of sustainable revenue generating activities for coastal communities, coherent with the HPA and improving its acceptability • Development of activities that promote the advancement of women and/or youth

5. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligible applicants must meet the following criteria:

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

- Organisations must be based in a Mediterranean country (i.e. with a Mediterranean coastline).
- Applicants based in Algeria, Lebanon, Monaco and Syria are not eligible for grant funding as they are on the FATF grey list, and due to regulatory restrictions, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to distribute the funds within the set timeframe. Applicants are still eligible for technical assistance.
- While all stages of development should apply, the grant will favor areas that are located within an existing MPA or in an area officially under process of MPA designation. The highly protected area may represent a core zone of this area.

THEMATIC SCOPE

- Proposed activities must belong to a project that aim to create, expand, or strengthen a Highly Protected Area.
- Proposed activities must be aligned with the objectives of the call to strengthen the level of protection and effectiveness of MPAs in the Mediterranean basin.
- Proposed activities must take into account community needs, with clear understanding of their benefits and loss with regard to the Highly Protected Area or have an engagement plan to understand and address their needs and concerns. Co-management projects will be prioritized.

ELIGIBLE ENTITIES

Eligible applicants include:

- Public institutions (e.g. environmental agencies, MPA managing authorities)
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- Local communities associations or cooperatives
- Academic or research institutions working in collaboration with management entities
- Private companies involved in marine conservation

Applicants must be legally registered in the eligible country where the project will be implemented. Proof of the organisation's legal status must be included in the application.

Applicants that are part of the Together for the Med Network will be prioritized, and successful applicants who are not part of the network will be invited to join.

TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE DURATION

The technical and financial assistance will be provided for 6 months, starting in March 2026, and ending in September 2026.

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY AND LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

Applicants must demonstrate the technical and administrative capacity to implement the proposed activities.

Applicants must demonstrate the involvement of local stakeholders, such as fishers, municipalities, or civil society.

Collaborative approaches that strengthen local governance and ownership of conservation efforts will be prioritized.

SELECTION CRITERIA

After a first round of pre-selection based on applicants' eligibility, the candidates will be ranked based on the criteria below. In the event of a tie, candidates who are part of Together for the Med partnership will be prioritized.

CRITERIA	EXPLANATION	WEIGHT (ON 100)
Operational feasibility and quality of the proposal	The candidate clearly shows the technical feasibility within the project duration and its own administrative and technical capacity to implement the project. In addition, the candidate is expected to integrate measures to ensure long-term sustainability beyond the grant period.	20
Expected ecological impact	The candidate demonstrates clearly how the project will have a positive ecological impact.	20
Expected socio-economic impact	The candidate demonstrates clearly how the project will have a positive socio-economic impact.	20
Community engagement	The candidates explain clearly how they address community needs and how key stakeholders are involved or will be involved in the decision-making. A focus on minorities, women and/or youth will be positively taken into account.	20
Location	Points will be given to organisations located in non-EU countries, in important ecological and socio-economic areas, and for organisations belonging to Together for the Med partnership.	10
Co-management model	A co-management framework is in place or will be set up during the project.	5
Local relevance	The candidate successfully demonstrates how the project addresses local challenges.	5

APPLICATION, EVALUATION AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

1. APPLICATION PHASE

The call for expressions of interest will be launched in early November 2025. Applicants are invited to submit their proposals **no later than 31 December 2025 (23:59 CET)** through the dedicated online form (<https://form.jotform.com/253211573695056>). The application must include a complete proposal detailing objectives, activities, budget, and partnerships. Only complete applications submitted before the deadline will be considered.

2. SUPPORT FOR APPLICANTS

1. Applicants may submit questions regarding the call until **15 December 2025** by email to margauxjanin@blueseeds.org and yoursbenfadhel@blueseeds.org
2. An information webinar will be held on **December 4, 2025 at 11am Paris time** (recording will be made available thereafter). The webinar will be held in English. Candidates that encounter difficulties with English might favor direct contact via email or bilateral calls (options 1 and 3).
3. Applicants are given the opportunity to request bilateral consultation calls with the BlueSeeds team to finalise their proposals. Slots for these calls will be offered between **25 November and 20 December 2025**. If the granting team faces too many demands for its capacity, projects from the eastern and southern Mediterranean countries will be prioritised.

3. EVALUATION AND SELECTION PHASE

Following the submission deadline, all applications will undergo an eligibility verification to ensure compliance with the call's requirements. Eligible proposals will then be evaluated based on the Selection criteria detailed in previous section.

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to an online interview in January–February 2026 to present their project and discuss the implementation strategy, partnerships, and anticipated challenges.

The selected grantees after the interviews will be notified by **February 15, 2026**. The signature of grant and technical assistance agreements will follow in **March 2026** the latest.

4. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Each supported project is expected to have a duration of six months, from **March 2026** to **September 2026**.

In March 2026, a **field visit** will be conducted for the selected candidates benefiting from the technical assistance and the grant, by the consultancy and/or granting team to establish a baseline diagnosis and, if necessary, refine the support strategy.

5. FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The grant will be disbursed upfront following the field visit. Grantees will have to justify the rightful spending of the grant or may be asked to refund all or part of the grant.

A final report will be requested after completion of the mission and is expected to summarise the activities carried out, outcomes achieved, lessons learned, and next steps for the site's long-term management and conservation.



**APPLICANTS ARE INVITED
TO SUBMIT THEIR
PROPOSALS NO LATER
THAN 31 DECEMBER
2025.**

APPLICATION FORM AND CONTACT

Please, fill the following application form to apply for the grant and technical assistance. Note that we expect a letter expressing interest and duly justifying the objectives and need for support, but not a fully detailed project.

- **Apply here and fill the form:**
<https://form.jotform.com/253211573695056>
- **Join the webinar on 4 December:**
<https://events.teams.microsoft.com/event/c5ba3789-401a-4cd9-80ec-524e5f8d86d9@1003e79d-cc34-4c9e-8d7b-fdd7e8ac866b>
- **Pick a slot to meet (until 19 December):**
<https://calendly.com/margauxjanin/30min>

For any inquiries or questions, please contact margauxjanin@blueseeds.org and yoursrbenfadhel@blueseeds.org with the subject "Call for Expression of Interest – HPA".

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