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3rd Mission for Natural Heritage Annual Institutional Dialogue

Bridging practice and policy for
Mediterranean environmental governance

Report



Barcelona, 25 November 2025

Prepared by Natyra Zhjeqi for MedCities

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the discussions held during the **“3rd Mission for Natural Heritage Annual Institutional Dialogue - Bridging practice and policy for Mediterranean environmental governance”**, organised by MedCities and CREA in Barcelona on 25 November 2025 in the framework of the Natural Heritage Mission (Interreg Euro-MED Programme). The Dialogue brought together a wide range of institutional actors and project partners working on Mediterranean environmental governance and nature restoration.

The event took place in a context marked by the thirtieth anniversary of the Barcelona Process and the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. Against this backdrop, the Dialogue aimed to reflect on how evolving policy and legal frameworks - including the recent Ocean Pact, the Pact for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Convention system, the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development and the UfM GreenerMed Agenda, can support Mediterranean environmental governance and nature restoration, and how they connect to the work of territories and projects under the Natural Heritage Mission.

Context and structure of the Institutional Dialogue

The Dialogue opened with an institutional framing by MedCities and the Interreg Euro-MED Joint Secretariat. The **first session** focused on **Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and multilevel governance**, examining the Ocean Pact, the Pact for the Mediterranean, the role of the Union for the Mediterranean and the Barcelona Convention system, and perspectives from national administrations, regions, and cities.

The **second session** addressed the implementation of the **Nature Restoration Regulation** through national restoration plans, with examples from Spain, France and Greece, and with contributions from the Barcelona Metropolitan Area and four Natural Heritage Mission projects.

Key messages on governance

The institutional opening underlined that the Dialogue took place at a **demanding and symbolic moment** for the Mediterranean. MedCities emphasised that the Dialogue should lead to **practical tools and solutions** that participants can apply in their own



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contexts. The Interreg Euro-MED Joint Secretariat presented the programme as a **territorial cooperation instrument** with a particular focus on governance, capitalisation and the “space to fill” between local initiatives and higher-level strategies.

Presentations by the European Commission, the Union for the Mediterranean and Plan Bleu showed that Mediterranean environmental governance is now framed by an **increasingly dense set of frameworks**, which from an implementation perspective, can create complexity if their objectives and procedures are not sufficiently aligned.

Contributions from Tunisia, Montenegro, Sardinia, the Euroregion, Pyrenees-Mediterranean, Dubrovnik, and Marseille brought these issues down to the scale of **territories**. They highlighted how many institutions share competences over the same rivers, coasts and wetlands, and how regional and local authorities are working to combine environmental protection with social and economic considerations.

The experiences of Sardinia in combining different funds for protected areas, and of Dubrovnik in reconciling tourism with natural and cultural heritage protection illustrated both the possibilities and the day-to-day complexity of multilevel governance.

A strong message, especially from the **Euroregion Pyrenees–Mediterranean**, was the centrality of the **human dimension**, arguing that **policies will not succeed if they do not reach citizens** and if people cannot see a future for themselves in Mediterranean territories. This concern was echoed in several interventions that referred to the need for **strategies and rules adapted** to functional territories and local specificities, rather than uniform approaches designed far from the places where they are applied.

The contribution from **Lebanon** from the public, added a **specific non-EU perspective on governance**. It pointed to structural problems in decision-making, where major land and infrastructure projects are often decided mainly by engineering bodies, with limited independent environmental and scientific input. The intervention underlined that **this is not only a technical issue but one of governance and political will**, and reforms are needed to create conditions in which scientific expertise can play a stronger role and coordination across sectors becomes **less dependent on ad hoc efforts**.

The experience of **Marseille**, showed how a city can work to tackle long-standing pollution in the Calanques area, and to develop a strategy for the protection of Posidonia seagrass meadows; examples illustrated **how scientific monitoring, citizen mobilisation and political dialogue with port** and state authorities can be combined to gradually change practices and put environmental concerns more firmly at the centre of local development choices.



Key messages on Nature Restoration Plans and project contributions

The session on Nature Restoration Plans confirmed that the **Nature Restoration Regulation** requires substantial analytical and governance effort. The keynote by IUCN Europe set out the main obligations for Member States and highlighted both the **pressures on Mediterranean ecosystems** and the potential benefits of restoration in terms of climate adaptation and mitigation, risk reduction and ecosystem services.

Presentations from Spain, France, Greece and the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, showed different institutional arrangements and stages of progress, but shared key challenges:

- building robust **knowledge bases** and mapping tools;
- **clarifying responsibilities** and coordination mechanisms between ministries, agencies and territorial levels;
- organising **participation and consultation**;
- and, **aligning ambitions** with realistic financial analyses and funding strategies.

The example from the Barcelona Metropolitan Area illustrated that subnational authorities can play an important role in integrating restoration objectives into planning **for rivers as spaces for nature and people** and in coordinating multiple competences along the same river systems

Four Natural Heritage Mission projects, **COASTRUST, LocAll4Flood, WE GO COOP and Wetland4Change**, presented practical tools and approaches that can support restoration planning and implementation.

They showed, for example, **coastal stewardship approaches** built on local agreements, **ways of working with communities** on flood risk and restoration, **“wetland contracts”** that clarify who does what over time, and **tools that help authorities** understand how **wetland restoration contributes** to climate mitigation and adaptation. Interventions from the floor and from the moderator explicitly referred to the **interface between projects and policy**, encouraging administrations to pay closer attention to what projects are already doing, as they can offer ready-made solutions and tested methods for implementation.

Taken together, the discussions pointed to a small set of priorities for the coming years:



- **More coherent frameworks** (easier for administrations to navigate in practice).
- **Stronger multilevel governance** (with regions, cities and cross-border structures better equipped to adapt rules and funding instruments to Mediterranean realities).
- **Closer attention to citizens, participation and social acceptability** (including in non-EU countries where coordination and the use of scientific expertise often depend heavily on political will).
- **More systematic use of the knowledge, tools and methods** already emerging from Natural Heritage Mission projects (so that project results can inform national plans, regional strategies and local decisions in a more consistent way).

1. Introduction

This report presents a synthesis of the discussions held during the **“3rd Mission for Natural Heritage Annual Institutional Dialogue – Bridging practice and policy for Mediterranean environmental governance”**, organised by MedCities in Barcelona on 25 November 2025 in the framework of the Dialogue4Nature project (Interreg Euro-MED Programme).

The Dialogue was conceived as a space for exchange between representatives of the **European Commission** (including its Representation and DG MARE and DG MENA), the Union for the Mediterranean, the UNEP/MAP – Barcelona Convention system (through Plan Bleu), national and regional authorities, local governments and the Natural Heritage Mission community of practice. Its aim was to connect institutional perspectives with experiences from territories and projects, focusing on Mediterranean environmental governance and the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation.

The report follows the structure of the event. It first presents the **institutional opening**, then the session on **Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and multilevel governance**, followed by the session on **Nature Restoration Plans** and project contributions, and concludes with the closing segment and a synthesis of cross-cutting messages and emerging priorities



2. Institutional opening, framing the dialogue

The institutional opening set the scene for the Dialogue, linking it to the broader political moment for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and to the work of the Interreg Euro-MED Natural Heritage Mission.

Ms **Clare Hart**, MedCities Acting President and Vice-President of Montpellier Métropole, described the dialogue as part of a landmark moment for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation that offers an opportunity to take stock of what has been achieved and what remains to be done to make the Mediterranean a sustainable region.

Ms Hart noted that in **the current Mediterranean polycrisis**, cooperation across territories and institutions, even with compromise, is essential to generate more solid ideas for the future. She stressed that the dialogue should **go beyond general statements and generate practical tools and solutions** that *participants can “put in their bag”, and put into practice in their own contexts*. She also underlined **the importance of keeping local authorities at the heart of these reflections**.

Linking this to the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, she stressed that the **Mediterranean has a strong potential to contribute to global sustainability**, and that MedCities seeks to nurture this contribution within its self-described “Mediterranean family”.

Mr Christoph Maier, Project Officer at the Interreg Euro-MED Joint Secretariat, explained that Interreg Euro-MED is a **territorial cooperation** and governance-oriented programme, with a **strong focus on capitalisation and upscaling**, and that it explicitly works on **“filling the space” between local or regional initiatives** and higher-level strategies and policies.

He explained that the programme supports climate change resilience, sustainable mobility, natural heritage and other priorities, and that the Natural Heritage Mission is one of the key entry points for nature-related work. **He emphasised the importance of feedback from territories and of bottom-up contributions** to future orientations, encouraging participants from the Mission community to use the dialogue as a space to share their experience and expectations.

He situated the current programming period in a context of multiple crises and transitions, in which **cohesion policy and territorial cooperation must adapt to new needs**. He also noted that the **configuration of the next programme period is still under discussion**.



3. Advancing Euro-Mediterranean cooperation for transformative environmental governance

This session explored how **new and evolving policy frameworks at EU and regional level**, in particular the Ocean Pact and the Pact for the Mediterranean, **can support transformative environmental governance in the Mediterranean**. It also examined how these frameworks are perceived and implemented at national, regional and local levels, and what this implies for multilevel governance and the Natural Heritage Mission community.

3.1. The Ocean Pact and the Pact for the Mediterranean: new frameworks for cooperation

Mr **Dario Vaschetto** (DG MARE, European Commission) presented the **Ocean Pact** as a way to bring together existing EU commitments concerning the ocean and to provide a more coherent framework for their implementation. He highlighted how **the Pact** seeks to **connect different strands** of work – such as maritime spatial planning, marine protected areas, decarbonisation of maritime activities and support to coastal communities – under a common umbrella.

Ms Justine Belaïd (DG MENA, European Commission) then introduced the Pact for the Mediterranean. She explained that the Pact is organised around **three pillars** and aims to address **economic, social, environmental and security-related** challenges in an integrated manner. Environment and climate issues feature prominently, with specific references to the **green and blue transitions**. She stressed that the Pact is intended to be developed and implemented in **close cooperation with Mediterranean partners**.

Belaïd also acknowledged the **shifting political narrative in Brussels**, noting that the **European Green Deal, while still in place, is now frequently framed in terms of economic “competitiveness”**. Within this context, she explained, the Pact for the Mediterranean was designed through **broad consultations** to remain as inclusive as possible and to **keep environmental priorities visible despite this new framing**.

Ms **Alessandra Sensi** (Union for the Mediterranean) showed how the **new EU pacts interact with UfM ministerial declarations** and roadmaps on environment and the blue economy within a structured approach based on political declarations, implementation roadmaps and labelled projects that ensure continuity and follow-up. She noted that the **Pact for the Mediterranean explicitly refers to UfM processes**,



and that both it and the Ocean Pact provide further opportunities to strengthen UfM's role, with growing EU-UfM cooperation increasingly reflected in joint initiatives.

Mr **Antoine Lafitte** and **Ms Insa Behrens** (Plan Bleu – UNEP/MAP Regional Activity Centre) provided the perspective of the **Barcelona Convention system**, focusing on the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD). Mr Lafitte recalled that Plan Bleu's mandate is to observe and analyse the state of the environment, conduct foresight work and monitor the MSSD, which serves as a transversal framework for Contracting Parties and is currently being reviewed with particular emphasis on climate change, nature-based solutions and sustainable finance.

Ms Behrens showed how **the MSSD and its flagship initiatives link global agendas with EU and UfM frameworks**, including on ecosystem restoration. She recalled that the **Barcelona Convention is the main legally binding framework** for protecting the Mediterranean Sea and coasts and stressed that better alignment between global, regional and EU levels is needed to support local and national actors.

3.2. Multilevel governance: national, regional and local perspectives

The second part of the session examined the implications of this evolving framework for **multilevel governance**, bringing in perspectives from national administrations, regions and cities.

Ms **Sihem Filali** (Ministry for Environment, Tunisia) identified **three main governance challenges** in her country:

- 1) a gap between policies and actual land-use and infrastructure decisions;
- 2) fragmentation of capacities across many institutions; and
- 3) limited mainstreaming of biodiversity and land issues into broader policies and public awareness.

She briefly outlined how **international and regional frameworks** are reflected in Tunisia's national strategies, and stressed the need for **adequate financing, capacity-building and better land-use policies** to support implementation, including through **more targeted agricultural subsidies** and greater attention to gender in land management.



She highlighted that **women in rural areas serve as crucial stewards of biodiversity and traditional land knowledge**, often managing water and farms day to day, and argued that they must be **fully recognised and engaged as partners in land management decisions**, given their **frontline role in safeguarding and restoring ecosystems**.

Speaking online from Montenegro, Ms **Sanela Metjahic** (Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Northern Region Development) underlined that the Ocean Pact and the Pact for the Mediterranean represent both an opportunity and a **demanding agenda for non-EU partners**.

She noted that they offer prospects for cooperation and investment in areas such as wastewater and plastic pollution, but also come with stringent requirements for project preparation, implementation and monitoring. She emphasised the **importance of inclusive, participatory governance**, citing the **recent designation of a marine protected area in Montenegro**, where local fishers and residents were involved from the outset, zoning was adjusted through dialogue and a community stewardship model was co-developed, an approach she saw as **embodying the spirit of the Ocean Pact** on the ground.

Ms Emanuela Manca (Autonomous Region of Sardinia) presented the experience of Sardinia as the second-largest island in the Mediterranean, with a high share of its territory designated as protected areas, which are a main focus for restoration efforts. She explained that the region is working on improving policy coherence for nature restoration through **multi-level governance**, including the preparation of a regional law on nature. She illustrated how Sardinia is combining different funding sources, for instance **using the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Cohesion Fund** to support two parks, one regional and one national. Also, she stressed that this is **“daily hard work”** which requires **close cooperation with local authorities and actors**.

Mr Xavier Bernard Sants (Euroregion Pyrenees–Mediterranean) brought in the perspective of a cross-border regional cooperation structure linking three regions in the north-western Mediterranean, working closely with the MedCoopAlliance.

In his view, **the core challenge** is not only about projects and technical solutions, **but about reaching citizens**. He warned that there are growing **doubts among parts of the population** about what Europe does and about **the relevance of nature protection policies**, especially in a context of upcoming elections in several countries.



He stressed that international, European and national policies “will not be successful if we do not reach the citizens” and if people do not see how they can live and make a living in Mediterranean territories. For him, the first pillar of any pact has to be the human dimension.

Drawing on his experience as a former director of a natural park, he underlined the **relationship between people and their territories**. He gave the example of discussions with fishers: in some areas there are still fish, but **fewer and fewer fishers**, which raises questions about livelihoods and the social fabric of coastal communities. He cautioned that policies designed mainly in Brussels, **without sufficiently integrating local knowledge and realities**, are unlikely to work as intended.

Bernard Sants argued that strategies and rules must be adapted to **functional territories** and local specificities. He called for **more flexible, place-based approaches** and inviting programmes such as **Interreg Euro-MED to evolve further** in this direction, so that rules and funding frameworks better match Mediterranean realities.

His message to EU and Mediterranean institutions was that, **if rules and instruments are not sufficiently adapted** to territorial contexts, there is a **risk of losing both natural heritage and public support**. Yet he **remained optimistic** that, with a **change of mindset and adequate finance** and human resources grounded in “the reality on the ground”, large programmes and pacts can be translated into policies that people recognise as meaningful and fair.

Ms Jelka Tepšić (City of Dubrovnik) described efforts to reconcile Dubrovnik’s global tourism profile with the protection of its natural and cultural heritage. She described how Dubrovnik launched a **Respect the City** programme, inspired by the SDGs, to **improve residents’ quality of life alongside visitors’ experience**, as a way to reconcile tourism growth with heritage preservation.

On natural heritage and environmental protection, she explained that the city includes a nature reserve established in 1948 and a sanctuary for over 150 bird species, and highlighted the strong focus on awareness-raising about environmental protection. She underlined that Dubrovnik is **“following demanding paths”** in terms of certification schemes established by Croatia and the EU in the tourism field, and considered these recognitions as confirmation that, after years of intensive tourism pressure, it is possible to maintain the Mediterranean in good environmental and cultural condition.

Ms **Marie Pelatan** (City of Marseille) presented concrete examples of environmental governance in Marseille, illustrating how cities can act as laboratories for change. She



first described the **de-pollution process in the Calanques area**, where past industrial activities had left a legacy of pollution with implications for health, nature and residents' sense of safety. She explained how **cooperation between the city, the state, the port and civil society organisations**, supported by scientific monitoring, has been essential to address this situation.

Her second example focused on the city's strategy for the protection of **Posidonia seagrass meadows**. The plan is structured around three pillars: **developing knowledge** in collaboration with scientists and organisations such as Plan Bleu; **taking an operational role** in management and restoration activities; and **raising awareness among citizens** and decision-makers about the importance of Posidonia.

Pelatan underlined that **all this work takes place in a complex port context**, where powerful economic interests are at stake. Marseille is seeking to gradually shift practices by **combining scientific evidence, citizen mobilisation and political dialogue with the port authorities** to put environmental concerns more firmly at the centre of decisions.

*She attributed Marseille's recent progress to **three key factors**: a vibrant civil society that brings local knowledge, strong scientific input to guide decisions, and, above all, steadfast political will at the helm. Without committed leadership, she noted, even well-designed environmental initiatives would not take hold.*

3.3. Questions from the floor and non-EU Mediterranean perspectives

The discussion that followed further underlined the importance of **enabling conditions and governance quality**, particularly for **non-EU Mediterranean partners**.

An intervention from the floor by **Mr Maasri (Lebanon)** raised concerns about the way **"scientific" decisions are taken in many Mediterranean countries**. He observed that major decisions on land use and infrastructure are often dominated by engineering departments, with relatively **limited involvement of environmental and scientific expertise**.

He invited institutions and policy-makers to reflect on how law and governance reforms can better ensure that environmental and scientific considerations are systematically integrated into decision-making, and not subordinated to narrow technical or economic interests.



Panellists strongly agreed. Ms **Marie Pelatan** explained that in Marseille major works **require scientific backing and dialogue with local communities**, while Mr **Xavier Bernard Sants** highlighted the **role of regional authorities and more adaptive planning cycles** in helping territories respond to changing realities.

Other interventions, including from Ms **Emanuela Manca** and Ms **Insa Behrens**, pointed to regional projects that link scientific work with local and regional governance through scenarios and participatory methods.

4. Nature Restoration Plans: policy and territorial solutions to global challenges

The afternoon session focused on the implementation of the **EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)** through national restoration plans, and on how experiences from the Natural Heritage Mission projects can provide concrete territorial solutions and tools to support this process.

4.1. Framing the Nature Restoration Regulation

Moderating the session, **Ms Carla Danelutti** (IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation) recalled that the Nature Restoration Regulation is the first EU law to set **binding, long-term restoration targets**.

Ms Claire Boudouin (IUCN Europe, Brussels) provided the keynote presentation. She recalled that the Regulation calls for restoring **at least 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030** and, more broadly, **at least 20% of EU land and sea by 2030**, with further increases by 2040 and 2050. Member States must prepare **national restoration plans** explaining how they intend to meet these obligations.

Boudouin highlighted two main types of targets under the Regulation:

- **Area-/surface-based targets**, requiring restoration measures for specific habitat types (many corresponding to Habitats Directive habitats); and
- **Indicator-based targets** by ecosystem type (forests, wetlands, agricultural ecosystems, marine ecosystems, urban ecosystems, etc.), where Member States must improve selected ecosystem indicators.



Turning to the **Mediterranean context**, she saw both **significant opportunities and serious challenges**; many ecosystems are degraded and under pressure from agriculture, tourism, urbanisation, infrastructure, while **climate change** and **water scarcity** further complicate restoration. At the same time, **restoration can bring important co-benefits** in terms of climate adaptation and mitigation, risk reduction, ecosystem services and opportunities linked to nature-based tourism and green jobs.

She briefly presented the work of **IUCN Europe** in supporting implementation, including (i) helping countries to prioritise measures with the highest co-benefits, (ii) analysing funding options, and (iii) providing technical support on monitoring and reporting arrangements. From this work, she noted that several **governance lessons** are already emerging, including the need to clarify responsibilities, avoid duplicating existing processes, and build on ongoing efforts that already contribute to restoration objectives. She also stressed the importance of **translating national strategies into action at local level**, backed by adequate funding and capacity.

4.2. National and subnational approaches

Spain

Mr Manuel Oñorbe (Ministry for the Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge, Spain) presented Spain's approach to its **National Restoration Plan**. He first recalled some of the key obligations in the Regulation regarding terrestrial and marine habitats, noting that Member States must ensure that at least **30%** of such habitats are in good condition by 2030, **60%** by 2040 and **90%** by 2050. In addition, they must re-establish habitats of certain species and address specific obligations concerning **urban, agricultural and marine ecosystems**, which are central to Spain's work.

He explained that, to respond to these requirements, Spain's National Restoration Plan will have to **identify, quantify and map the areas to be restored, describe the restoration** measures to be implemented, **set out a timeline** and **monitoring programme**, and **analyse financial needs** and potential funding sources. The plan must also explain how stakeholders are involved in its preparation, through a clearly defined **participation process**.

France

Mr Aurélien Carré (National Museum of Natural History – MNHN) explained the governance set-up France has put in place to prepare its restoration plan, with OFB and the joint service **PatriNat** providing the scientific and technical backbone. They manage



and analyse national nature data, support reporting under the Birds and Habitats Directives, classify and map habitats and assess the protected areas. A dedicated restoration team and ministerial units work by ecosystem type, guided by an internal steering committee that sets the level of ambition for each ecosystem.

Carré stressed that PatriNat's work focuses on quantifying and **mapping habitats** in poor condition, **identifying priority areas** for restoration, **assessing connectivity needs** and **testing indicators** and levers for action. He noted that, despite the amount of data already available, **there are still important gaps** that will need to be addressed over the coming decade.

He also underlined the importance of assessing the **effectiveness of restoration measures**. In his view, questions about whether protected areas and interventions actually **deliver the expected outcomes**, and **how to measure** this, will be central in the coming years. *He stressed that the institutions often know "how they are doing things", but not always whether these measures work as intended.*

Greece

Ms Anastasia Kolokotsa (Natural Environment and Climate Change Agency – NECCA, Greece) explained that, in Greece, the Ministry of Environment retains overall responsibility for the restoration plan, while NECCA supports stakeholder engagement, planning and monitoring. The plan is being structured around the main ecosystem types and must set out objectives, measures and a monitoring and updating framework. She informed participants that the Ministry has signed a contract with NECCA to support this process, but that the **consultation phase has not yet started**.

Barcelona Metropolitan Area

Mr Álvaro Sainz (Barcelona Metropolitan Area – AMB) brought a metropolitan perspective, focusing on how subnational authorities can contribute to restoration goals. He explained that the AMB is working to **"recover" its rivers as spaces for nature and for people**, rather than viewing them mainly as corridors for transport and infrastructure.

He illustrated this with the example of the **Llobregat River**, where **multiple authorities and competences overlap** along the same stretch: the parks authority, the Catalan Water Agency, the state road authority, the Catalan transport system, the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona and several municipalities. This configuration, he



stressed, makes it essential to find ways to **align objectives and actions if restoration is to be effective.**

He added that in parts of the Llobregat River, the AMB is even removing old concrete channel walls from the 1960s to restore natural banks and biodiversity – a tangible example of ‘recovering’ a river for nature and people that requires coordination among all the overlapping authorities.

A second example concerned the **Besòs River**, where similar overlaps are compounded by coastal and port dynamics. Here, the aim is to create new space for birds and biodiversity and to improve people’s access to nature, while coordinating between different bodies responsible for flood risk, infrastructure and land-use planning. His examples underlined the importance of **territorial coordination** and of giving rivers a more integrated role in metropolitan planning.

4.3. Discussion with institutions: compliance and social acceptability

In the discussion, one participant asked about the **consequences of non-compliance** with the Regulation, particularly if a Member State fails to submit a plan or delivers a weak plan. Responding, **Mr Manuel Oñorbe**, referring to experience under the Habitats Directive, explained that, in case of persistent non-compliance, infringement procedures can ultimately lead to consequences for **EU funding**, although this usually takes time and there is a strong emphasis on dialogue and progressive improvement.

He also noted that restoration itself is a **long-term process**. While the Regulation sets milestones for 2030, 2040 and 2050, *the key issue will be whether Member States demonstrate real effort and progress over time.*

Another question raised, concerned the **social acceptability of restoration measures**, and how this is taken into account when designing national restoration plans. He pointed out that measures such as removing infrastructure, changing land uses or rewetting areas can face opposition.

In his reply, **Mr Álvaro Sainz** underlined that, in the metropolitan context, citizen use and experience of restored areas are crucial. He explained that in some river projects, earlier **investments in accessibility and leisure** had helped **people reconnect with rivers**, which later made it easier to accept more transformative measures. *He stressed that interventions such as removing concrete must be carefully explained and designed, with*



a clear vision of where such material is truly needed and where it should be removed, so that citizens perceive tangible benefits rather than just constraints.

4.4. Solutions from the Natural Heritage Mission community projects

The second part of the session showcased **four Interreg Euro-MED projects** from the Natural Heritage Mission community, illustrating how their tools and approaches can support national and subnational restoration efforts.

COASTRUSTsolution (COASTRUST)

Ms Flaminia Squitieri (SUSDEF) presented the **COASTRUSTsolution**, which promotes **coastal stewardship** in several Mediterranean countries. She explained that the project supports local strategies developed in dialogue with stakeholders and provides a framework for **formal agreements** between them. Her key message was that politicians and technical officers need **practical tools** to build trust and participation around restoration efforts.

She mentioned a case in **Sardinia**, where a local coastal stewardship initiative has brought together different actors around shared objectives, and a promising case in **Andalusia** where work is under way with technical support from Submon. By the end of the project, COASTRUST aims to deliver a **replicable methodology and guidance** that other territories can use to apply coastal stewardship in their own contexts.

LocAll4Flood

Ms María Soria (BETA - UVIC) explained that the project works with local authorities and communities to **co-produce knowledge** about flood risks, **combining scientific data with local memories of past events** and practical experience. This helps to identify areas where restoration of floodplains and wetlands can reduce risk and improve ecosystem services.

Her intervention illustrated how local engagement in mapping and planning can increase understanding of the benefits of restoration and facilitate **acceptance of measures** that might otherwise be controversial, such as allowing more space for rivers. She suggested that this type of approach could be useful when designing measures under national restoration plans.

WE GO COOP

Mr Giancarlo Gusmaroli (MedWet) framed his contribution around a question he has



often asked wetland managers and policy-makers: *if you had the funding and political support you need, what would make the biggest difference to improve your situation?* Summarising the many replies, he noted that **“we already know how to restore something – and we have been doing that for decades”**; the real challenge lies in **coordination and commitment**, rather than in technical know-how.

He then introduced the concept of the **wetland contract**, a formal cooperation framework that goes beyond general stakeholder engagement by setting out clear, jointly agreed commitments for action. He explained that the current project is capitalising on **around 45 years of experience** with wetland contracts in several countries. The tool is gaining visibility at national and regional levels, for example through references in Spain’s “white book of governments”, ministerial circulars in France and case studies in Greece.

Gusmaroli stressed that wetland contracts can be used as **implementation tools** for restoration plans, helping to organise responsibilities, align measures and secure long-term commitment from local actors and authorities. He also mentioned efforts to build a **community of practice** around wetland contracts and invited interested participants to join.

Wetland4Change

Finally, **Mr Christoph Schröder** (University of Málaga) presented **Wetland 4 Change**, which focuses on how wetlands can contribute to **climate mitigation and adaptation**. He highlighted two “wetland-based solutions” which the project is analysing in depth: **Greenhouse gas mitigation** through improved wetland condition; and **flood regulation**, protecting people and assets against flood hazards.

The project works in **five pilot sites** (Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Morocco) and aims to deliver **decision-support products**, not just local demonstrations. These include:

- **methodologies** for data collection and mapping;
- spatially explicit **ecosystem-service maps**; and
- **metrics and decision-support matrices** to guide management and restoration choices.

Schröder linked this to a challenge mentioned earlier in the session: the frequent lack of **spatially explicit information** on wetland conditions and services. He argued that without this type of information, it is difficult to prioritise areas and design cost-effective measures. The tools developed by Wetland for Change are intended to help authorities



and practitioners integrate wetlands more systematically into restoration planning and climate strategies.

5. Cross-cutting messages and emerging priorities

Across the different sessions, several **recurrent themes** emerged, cutting across the specific topics of Euro-Mediterranean governance and Nature Restoration Plans. Together, they point to a set of priorities for future work at regional, national and territorial level, and for the Natural Heritage Mission community.

6.1. Coherence and complementarity between frameworks

A first cross-cutting message concerned the **growing density of policy and legal frameworks** relevant to Mediterranean environmental governance. The Ocean Pact, the Pact for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Convention and the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, together with UfM ministerial declarations and roadmaps, **form an increasingly articulated architecture**.

Speakers from the European Commission, the Union for the Mediterranean and Plan Bleu stressed that **these frameworks are not starting from zero**: many obligations and priorities are already in place, and the **new pacts** are partly an effort to bring together existing commitments and give them **clearer political visibility**. At the same time, interventions from national and regional authorities showed that, from the perspective of administrations, **the multiplication of strategies**, roadmaps and initiatives **can create complexity if signals are not sufficiently aligned**.

The Dialogue suggested that one of the main governance challenges for the coming years will be to further clarify how these frameworks complement each other in practice, and how they can jointly support implementation on the ground, rather than adding layers of procedures or reporting.

6.2. Multilevel governance and the role of territories

A second recurring theme was the need for **effective multilevel governance**, in which European, regional, national, regional and local levels work together in a more coordinated and predictable manner. National and subnational contributions on Nature Restoration Plans, as well as the examples from Sardinia, the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, Dubrovnik and Marseille, illustrated how complex the distribution of competences



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can be for land, water and marine management, and how many institutions may be involved along a single river, coastline or wetland.

Regional and local authorities emphasised the importance of being involved early in the design of policies and plans, not only in their later implementation. Examples such as Sardinia's work on a regional nature law and on combining different funding instruments for protected areas, AMB's efforts to "recover" rivers in a metropolitan context, and Marseille's strategies for the Calanques and Posidonia meadows showed that **territorial authorities are already experimenting** with integrated approaches that combine environmental objectives with social and economic considerations.

The interventions of the Euroregion Pyrenees–Mediterranean and other regional actors also pointed to the potential role of **intermediate levels** – such as regions and macro-regions – to bridge EU and national frameworks on one side and local actors on the other. In this respect, the dialogue highlighted the **need for continued investment in the capacity** of these levels to coordinate, mediate and adapt rules and funding to territorial specificities.

6.3. Citizens, social acceptability and the human dimension

A third key message concerned the **human dimension** of environmental governance. Several speakers stressed that nature protection and restoration policies will not succeed if they do not reach citizens and if people do not see how these policies relate to their lives and livelihoods.

The intervention by the Euroregion Pyrenees–Mediterranean was particularly explicit in this regard, warning that **parts of the population are questioning what Europe does** and the relevance of environmental policies, especially in a pre-electoral context. Examples from coastal communities, such as **fishers facing changes in resources and regulations**, illustrated how environmental measures can interact with social and economic pressures. Contributions from projects like LocAll4Flood and COASTRUST showed that **co-produced knowledge** and local stewardship mechanisms can help build understanding and acceptance of restoration measures.

The Lebanese intervention on land and infrastructure decisions, and the exchange that followed, also pointed to structural issues in decision-making in several Mediterranean countries, where major projects can be decided mainly by engineering bodies with limited involvement of environmental and scientific expertise.



6.4. Knowledge, data and effectiveness

Another recurrent thread was the importance of **knowledge and data**, and of better understanding the **effectiveness** of measures. Presentations by IUCN Europe, OFB-MNHN and PatriNat showed how demanding the data and analytical requirements of the Nature Restoration Regulation are, even in countries with relatively strong information systems. Existing datasets (such as Article 17 reporting and Natura 2000 information) often need to be complemented, combined and translated into more operational tools for planning.

At the same time, several contributions stressed that the challenge is not only to generate more data, but also to use it to answer practical questions about **what works and where**. The work under way in France to assess the effectiveness of protected areas and Natura 2000 measures, and the decision-support tools being developed by Wetland for Change, point in this direction. Project experiences also illustrated the value of connecting scientific knowledge with local knowledge, for example in flood risk mapping or coastal stewardship.

The dialogue indicated that, going forward, issues such as **data gaps, interoperability between sources, territorial mismatches and evaluation of impacts** will be central to making restoration efforts more strategic and to ensuring that limited resources are directed where they can have the greatest effect.

6.5. Non-EU Mediterranean perspectives and shared challenges

The contributions from non-EU Mediterranean partners, including Tunisia, Montenegro and Lebanon, underlined that the **benefits and demands of new frameworks** such as the Ocean Pact, the Pact for the Mediterranean and the Nature Restoration Regulation are **not felt in the same way across the region**. For non-EU countries, these frameworks offer opportunities for cooperation, investment and alignment with EU standards, but they also **come with requirements** in terms of capacity, data, project preparation and monitoring that can be difficult to meet.

Speakers from these countries highlighted **implementation challenges** linked to fragmented institutions, limited resources and structural issues in decision-making, such as the dominance of certain sectors or professions in land and infrastructure decisions. Their interventions reinforced the idea that **support for governance reforms**, capacity-building and long-term partnerships is essential if regional



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frameworks are to translate into tangible improvements in environmental conditions and resilience.

6.6. Contributions from the Natural Heritage Mission community

Finally, the Dialogue showed that the **Natural Heritage Mission community** can play an important role in supporting both **policy development and implementation**. The projects presented in the afternoon demonstrated a range of practical tools: coastal stewardship frameworks, locally grounded approaches to flood risk and restoration, wetland contracts to structure commitments over time and wetland-based decision-support tools linked to climate mitigation and adaptation.

Across these examples, several common features emerged: a strong focus on **participation and co-production**, attention to **territorial specificities**, and an interest in making tools **replicable and scalable** beyond individual pilot sites.

Closing reflections by MedCities and the Union for the Mediterranean stressed the importance of **capitalisation, transfer and “amplifying” good practices**, and of making them more visible and territorial..

Several contributions thus underlined the need to further **strengthen links between Mission projects and policy processes**, so that the methods, tools and lessons developed in the community can more systematically inform national plans, regional strategies and local decisions..

In this perspective, the active involvement of **territories and people** was seen as **essential** if the region is to move from commitments to tangible results.

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