

Introduction

The Republic of Malta, one of the smallest countries in Europe, is located in the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 100 km south of the Italian island of Sicily, 300 km north of Libya and 500 km east of Tunisia. The archipelago, a remnant of the land bridge which once connected Sicily with North Africa, includes three populated islands: Malta, the largest is to the southeast, Gozo (Ghawdex) to the northwest, with Comino between them. In addition there are 18 uninhabited islands, of which Manoel, Filfa and the Fungus Rock (known as Il-Ġebbla tal-Ġeneral/ the General's Rock in Maltese) are of historic and ecological significance.

The country's 253km of coastline is primarily rocky with steep cliffs on the south sides of the islands and some sandy beaches on the north sides. The eastern sides of the islands are dominated by large bays while the western side has a concentration of natural harbours. There are no permanent lakes or rivers in the country, although some seasonal streams run during the rains. The weather on Malta is generally mild, although gale force winds often blow between December and March and rain is most common between October and December.

Majjistral Nature and History Park, Malta's first national park, includes the coastline from Golden Bay to Il-Prajjet and ix-Xaghra l-Hamra. Within that area is a 6km stretch also designated as a Special Area of Conservation of International Importance. The park is co-managed by the Heritage Parks Federation which consists of three NGOs: Din l-Art Helwa, the Gaia Foundation and Nature Trust-Fee Malta. The country also has 183 sq km of Marine Special Protected Areas.

Malta hosts two RAMSAR sites, Ghadira on the northwest coast of Malta and Is-Simar, also on Malta, just inland from Xemxija Bay. Ghadira has a large brackish coastal pool which is bordered by dunes, rare plants and fish, and also serves as a resting and feeding site for numerous species of migratory bird. Is-Simar consists of the edge of a marsh, reedbeds and pools and hosts rails, herons and egrets.

In addition, Malta has 14 Marine Protected Areas around the country which comprise 30 percent of the waters under its jurisdiction.

At-risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (V), Endangered (E) or Critically Endangered (CR).

Avian species – Sandpipers, redshanks, egrets, stilts, plover, spoonbills, flamingos, coots, gulls and terns are found on Malta, some resident, some wintering and some on migration. Comino Island is an important breeding site for Yelkouan shearwater and hosts many migrants, especially during spring. Filfa Islet, southwest of the island of Malta, is an important breeding site for Caspian gulls, Scopoli's shearwater and European storm-petrel.

The Ghawdex Marine Important Bird Area, encompassing waters of the Malta-Gozo channel, the immediate area offshore of Ta Cenc and Rdumtal-Madonna, is an important rafting area for Yelkouan shearwater and European storm-petrel and a major migratory channel for ducks.

Species of special concern include the Yelkouan shearwater (V), 10% of whose global population is found on Malta, common pochard (V) and saker falcon (E), which forages in intertidal regions.

Marine mammals – there are eleven whale and dolphin species found in the Mediterranean, some of which may pass through Maltese waters, however, bottlenose, striped, common and Risso's dolphin, long-finned pilot, and Cuvier's beaked whales are most often found here. Fin (V) and sperm(V) whale may be seen further offshore.

Marine reptiles – loggerhead (V), leatherback (V), green (E), hawksbill (CR) and Kemp’s ridley (CR) sea turtles have been sighted in Malta’s waters. Areas where they are most often found include Golden Bay, Hondoq ir-Rummien on Gozo, Gnejna, Ghar Lapsi, Saint Paul’s Bay and the Blue Lagoon on Comino. There is some limited green and loggerhead nesting on the beaches of Ghadira, Ramla and Fajatat Bays.

Regional Seas

Mediterranean Sea

Past experience

While there have not been any large spills in the waters of Malta, small spills linked to port activities have occurred.

Response: the role of the authorities

Under the National Marine Pollution Contingency Plan (NMPCP) Transport Malta’s Porting and Yachts Directorate is responsible for maintenance and implementation of the plan, except when spills are declared a national disaster, in which case, the Civil Protection Department takes over.

The Armed Forces of Malta serve as focal point for pollution reports and provide aerial and marine surveillance, and manpower as need. Should a Tier 3 Response be required, REMPEC and/or EMSA may be called on. Two EMSA response vessels are based in Maltese ports.

The Ministry for the Environment, Climate Change and Planning oversees the environmental protection aspects of response while the Environment and Resources Authority enforces environmental legislation and regulations during an incident.

Oiled wildlife response

Formal guidelines?

There are no formal guidelines, nor reference to oiled wildlife in the NMPCP, however, there are some processes in place should a spill occur.

Response objectives and strategy

Although there are no formal guidelines on response to oiled wildlife personnel from government agencies and NGOs have been trained in basic oiled wildlife rescue and care, thus there would be an effort to rescue and care for oil-impacted animals.

Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

Rehabilitation would be allowed, with euthanasia utilised when necessary on welfare grounds.

Impact assessment

Marine biologists from the University of Malta would likely be involved in impact assessment with groups such as Nature Trust-Fee Malta, Birdlife Malta, Ecomarine Malta and the and The Biological Conservation Research Foundation (BICREF) assisting.

Notification and early response

Nature Trust-FEE Malta would be notified as part of their contract with the Environment Agency and the Environment and Resources Authority, with response efforts initiated as necessary and other responders brought in as needed.

Wildlife responders

Nature Trust-FEE Malta is contracted by the Environment and Resources Authority to rescue and rehabilitate oiled wildlife. They work closely with the Armed Forces and Civil Protection Department on wildlife issues and have conducted oiled wildlife response trainings for the Civil Protection Department Volunteer section, Birdlife Malta and Friends of the Earth.

Birdlife Malta also rehabilitates seabirds, raptors and other avian species and is active in research projects such as monitoring the Yelkouan shearwater population. Friends of the Earth is more involved in environmental education and activism.

Cooperation between stakeholders

Malta is a signatory to the Barcelona Convention, with states bordering the Mediterranean Sea. As of 2014, a draft bilateral agreement for joint oil spill response with the Sicilian Coast Guard was being developed.

Permanent facilities

The Malta Aquaculture Research Center at San Lucjan (San Lucian) has a small turtle rehabilitation unit, however, a new multi-species wildlife rescue and rehabilitation facility which will be housed within the Xrobb L-Ghagin Nature Park, is expected to be completed in late 2021/early 2022 and all wildlife will be taken there once it opens.

Current processes

Nature Trust-FEE Malta holds regular trainings for oiled wildlife responders.

Documentation and references

General references

ITOPF Country Profile (2015)

Birdlife International Country Profile

REMPEC Country Profile

Sea Alarm MEDITERRANEAN Regional Wildlife Response Profile.v.07.2020_rev.

Notarbartolo di Sciara, G. 2016. Marine Mammals in the Mediterranean Sea: An Overview in Mediterranean Marine Mammal Ecology and Conservation, Advances in Marine Biology Series Vol. 75 University of Malta Document: Southern-Central Mediterranean Cetacean and Marine Conservation Research finds long-term collaborative assistance in the AFM from the Conservation Biology Research Group, Dept. of Biology.

Majjistral Nature and History Park–The Birds List.9.2018 from Wildlife Lists of Majjistral Park (<http://mt.majjistral.org/wildlife-lists-of-majjistral-park>)

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