

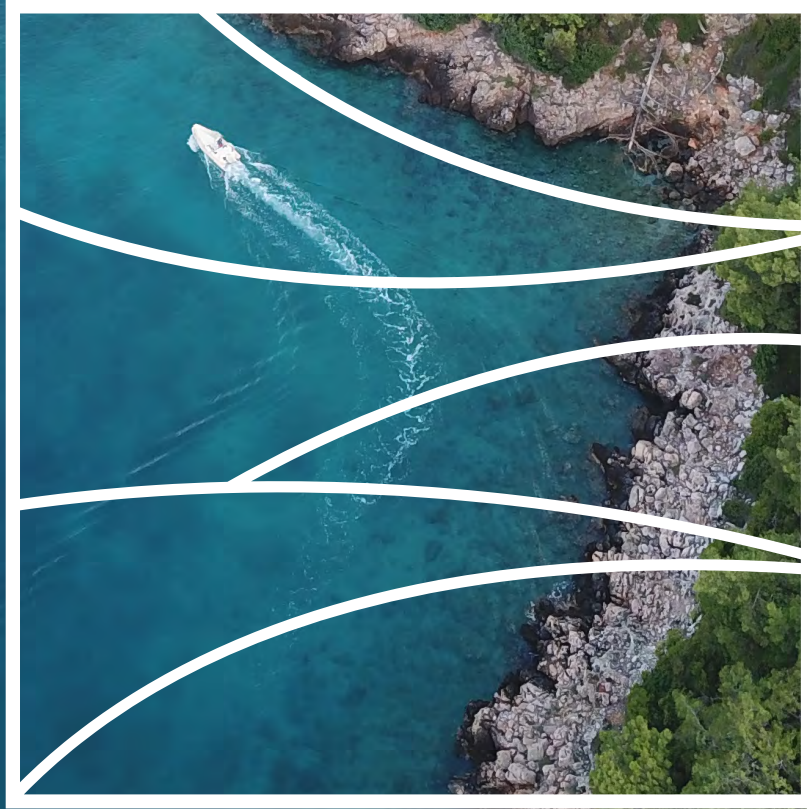


Endangered
Landscapes
& Seascapes
Programme



Cambridge
Conservation
Initiative

Restoration Works



Gökova Bay to Cape
Gelidonya, Türkiye

**Fauna
& Flora**
Saving Nature Together



AKDENİZ KORUMA DERNEĞİ
Mediterranean Conservation Society



Seafuture

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Acknowledgements

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Project summary

Where the central Aegean Sea meets the north-east Levantine Sea, Mediterranean waters provide critical habitat for some of the region's most charismatic species, including Mediterranean monk seal, loggerhead turtle, and sandbar shark. These waters have long provided local people with sustainable livelihoods through fishing, but this traditional way of life is being threatened by illegal and unregulated fishing activity, damage from tourism, and invasive species from the Indo-Pacific.

With support from Fauna & Flora, Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (The Mediterranean Conservation Society, AKD) and their partners are restoring approximately 500 km of vulnerable marine habitat along Türkiye's Mediterranean coast, helping to re-establish healthy ecosystems, provide space for habitat and species recovery, and strengthen the first line of defence against invasive species. This pioneering work has been recognised on the international stage, with the project showcased as a flagship project in the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration in 2022, and AKD President Zafer Kızılkaya awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2023.

Project leads

Fauna & Flora and Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (AKD)

Project location

Gökova Bay to Cape Gelidonya, Mediterranean coast

Country

Türkiye

Seascape size

62,681 ha

Key habitats

Coastal marine habitats, sea-grass beds, rocky reefs, and coralligenous and macroalgal habitats

Focal species

Mediterranean monk seal VU

Dusky grouper VU

Sandbar shark EN

Neptune grass LC

Size and duration of ELSP grant

US\$3,021,500; 6 years



Introduction

The Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme (ELSP) aims to restore natural processes to build the resilience of habitats and species for a better and more sustainable future.

The long-term health of ecosystems requires us to transform our environment through an approach that both looks to the future and repairs the damage that has been done. With a focus on restoring natural processes at landscape and seascape scale, the ELSP is working to provide the space and connectivity that nature needs if we are to have resilient land, sea, and freshwater ecosystems that contribute to human well-being and ecological health.

The ELSP's projects are providing inspirational examples of what can be achieved when non-governmental organisations, government agencies, landowners, the private sector, and communities work together. As its projects breathe new life into degraded ecosystems across Europe, the ELSP is learning from that experience, refining approaches to restoration and impact-monitoring, and strengthening a network of restoration practitioners.

The restoration initiatives funded by the Programme are long-term. Some have time horizons spanning decades, or even centuries, and funding from the ELSP supports just a stage in that long journey. Restoration Works reports are produced at the end of that phase of ELSP support, to share achievements and lessons learned.

Fauna & Flora, Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (AKD) and partners are restoring vulnerable marine habitat along 500 km of coastline between Gökova Bay and Cape Gelidonya on Türkiye's Mediterranean coast. The project is seeking to re-establish healthy ecosystems, provide space for habitat and species recovery, reduce invasive non-native species, and ensure sustainable local livelihoods.

Impact

Community engagement is a core component of the project. Collaboration between NGOs, communities, and government entities ensures inclusive decision-making. Image © AKD



Over 36 Mediterranean monk seals have been recorded in the project area. Image © Zafer Kızılkaya

Project KPIs

26 communities benefitting from the project

40 globally threatened species benefitting from project actions

257 institutions engaged with the project

437 people trained to help enhance nature's recovery

62,681 ha of sea directly under restoration

US\$3,050,432 of co-funding secured

Project highlights

Restoring and protecting landscapes

Between Gökova Bay and Kaş, the coverage of Fisheries Restricted Areas and/or no-fishing zones (NFZs) has been increased by 19,344 ha, to a total of 67,079 ha. Overall, some 62,281 ha are under restoration through patrolling, removal of invasive species, and clean-ups of marine litter (including discarded fishing gear). The marine area under active patrol by rangers rose by 39% to 3,300 ha (2019–23), with patrols expanded from one project area to three; they now cover 12 NFZs. Active enforcement and the effective reduction of fishing pressure in NFZs creates a strong and more resilient trophic web of native species, which appears to have reduced populations of invasive, non-native rabbitfish (*Siganus spp.*) in those areas.

Conserving threatened species

The project area holds 40 globally threatened species. One project innovation – monitoring through solar-powered, remote, and continuous underwater video-recording – has revealed that these include Mediterranean monk seal at four sites, notably 19–22 individuals in Gökova Bay, in addition to recent simultaneous counts of up to 11 sandbar sharks, compared to just one or two during monitoring from 2015–20.

Facilitating sustainable livelihoods

The project has worked with fishing cooperatives to help strengthen and diversify income sources. This has included encouraging pescatourism, and – another key innovation – creating a wholly new, commercially viable fisheries sector focusing on invasive non-native species, whose biomass has been increasing by 2% annually and which negatively impact the marine ecosystem. The project has provisioned cooperatives and more than 1,000 small-scale fishers with the necessary knowledge and skills to harvest non-native species, and facilitated access to markets and supply chains. Since 2020, this new market has incentivised local fishers to harvest 18 tonnes of invasives for economic benefit, and sale revenues from invasives have increased 16-fold.

Engaging communities

Working with local communities from the outset has been central to the project's conservation efforts. Engagement has come through peer-to-peer exchanges, co-management of Marine Protected Areas, extensive collaboration with fishing cooperatives, and empowering stakeholders to protect fish stocks vital to their livelihoods.

Key numbers

18 no-fishing zones created or expanded (2019–23)

36+ Mediterranean monk seals residing in the project area

39 enforcement training sessions held (2019–23), strengthening local capacity to patrol Marine Protected Areas

80% reduction in illegal fishing incidents in Gökova Bay, following increased patrol resource

500 km of coastline along which the project is active

1,145 patrols conducted across the area in 2023 (up from 824 in 2019)

1,500

fishers, from 20 fishing cooperatives and two regional fishing unions, with whom the project has engaged

The vision

Images © Zafer Kızılkaya, AKD



Our long-term vision is to restore the Mediterranean's rich biodiversity by re-establishing natural processes, enhancing ecosystem resilience, and providing sustainable livelihoods for local communities. By expanding Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and implementing effective restoration strategies, we aim to protect critical habitats and bolster marine life.

These efforts will not only rejuvenate fish populations, supporting sustainable fisheries, but also stimulate ecotourism, creating employment opportunities and boosting local economies. Strengthening these ecosystems will enhance their resilience to both climate change and invasive species, ensuring that future generations can continue to benefit from their resources.

Seascape

Aerial view of Gökova Bay. Image © Zafer Kızılkaya



Mediterranean fan mussel (*Pinna Nobilis*). Image © Zafer Kızılkaya



Globally threatened species

This diverse seascape supports 40 globally threatened species. These include some of the Mediterranean's most charismatic and endangered animals, such as:

Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) VU

Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) VU

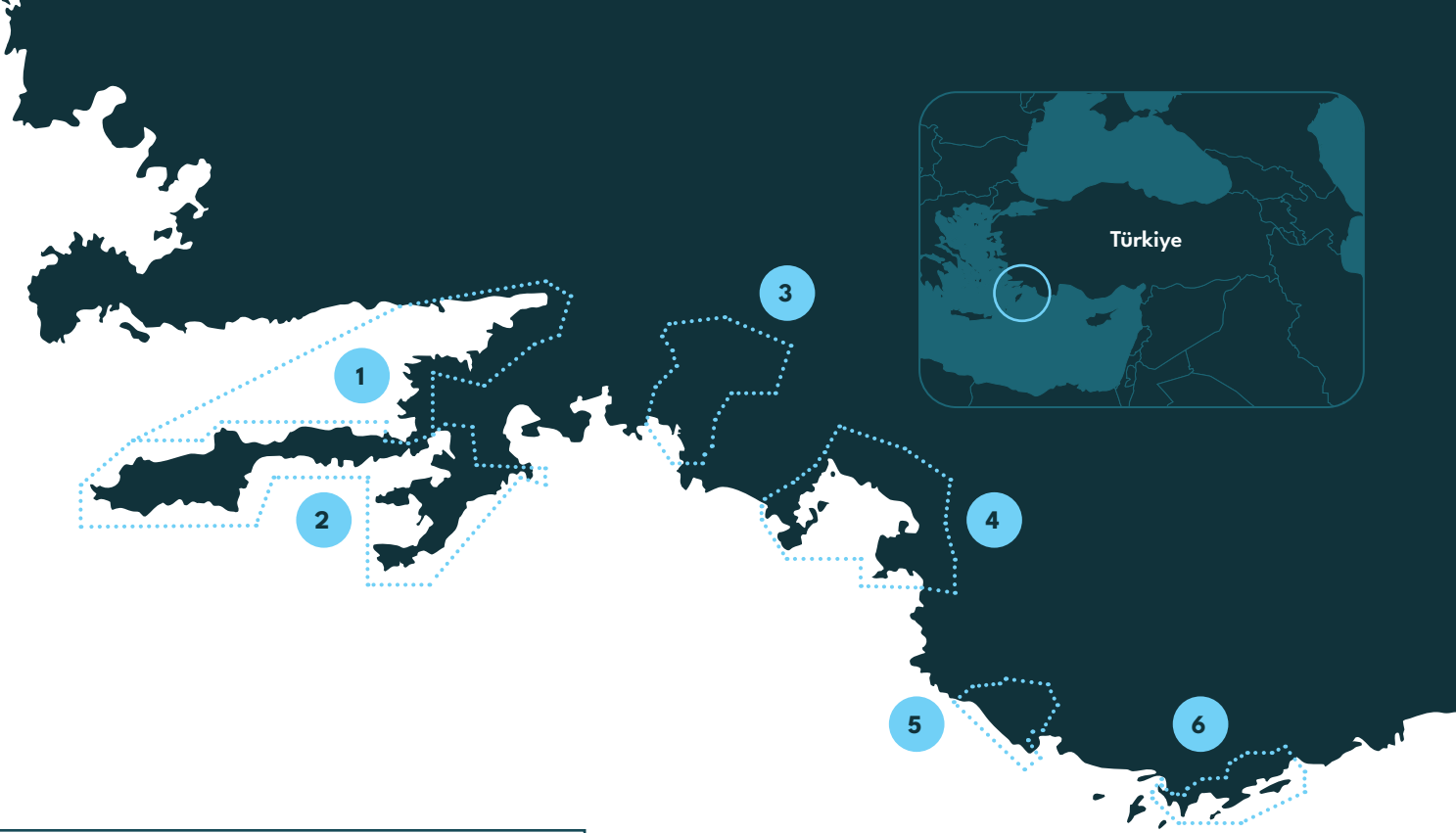
Sandbar shark (*Carcharhinus plumbeus*) VU

Dusky grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) EN

Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) EN

Loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) VU

Mediterranean fan mussel aka noble fan shell (*Pinna nobilis*) CR



The 500 km of coastline from Gökova Bay to Cape Gelidonya lies along the southern Mediterranean coast of Türkiye, within the globally significant Mediterranean Basin biodiversity hotspot. This area is also recognised as part of the WWF Global 200 Ecoregions, highlighting its ecological importance on a global scale. The coastline straddles the boundary between two Ecologically and Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs, as identified by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity), the Central Aegean Sea and the North-East Levantine Sea.

Throughout the project area, extensive sea-grass beds – comprising Neptune grass (*Posidonia oceanica*), a Mediterranean endemic – and coralligenous habitats remain largely intact, naturally protected due to their inaccessibility. These habitats provide critical ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, coastline stabilisation, and nursery grounds for marine life.

The seascape is ecologically connected to surrounding terrestrial protected areas, forming a network that supports both biodiversity and local livelihoods. Traditional fishing communities rely on these waters for sustainable small-scale fisheries, while nature-based tourism, such as diving and ecotourism, plays an increasingly vital role in the regional economy. The region also holds historical and cultural significance, with centuries of maritime activity, including ancient trade routes, sunken cities, and traditional fishing practices that continue today.

The project area includes six Special Environmental Protection Areas

- 1 Gökova Bay, a critical marine biodiversity hub with extensive sea-grass meadows;
- 2 Datça-Bozburun Peninsula, which is characterised by intact coastal forests and rich marine life;
- 3 Dalyan-Köyceğiz, which has one of the Mediterranean's key nesting beaches for the globally Vulnerable loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*);
- 4 Fethiye-Göcek, a vital area for marine conservation, particularly of sea-grass beds, and yacht- or boat-based tourism;
- 5 Patara, which boasts the longest beach in the Mediterranean, a crucial habitat for nesting loggerhead turtle and green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*);
- 6 Kaş-Kekova, known for its underwater biodiversity and cultural heritage, including submerged ruins, and for dive tourism.

The problem

The coastal ecosystems from Gökova Bay to Cape Gelidonya face significant threats.

Illegal, unregulated, and unsustainable fishing – by industrial and small-scale fisheries, plus a rapidly increasing number of amateur fishers – is depleting fish stocks at an alarming rate. Illegal trawling in nearshore habitats damages rocky reefs and essential breeding grounds for fish. Discarded fishing gear, such as ghost nets, entangle marine life and degrade seabed habitats. Key commercial fish species are being over-exploited, further disrupting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. As fish populations decline, adverse impacts cascade throughout the marine food web, leading to a weakened and imbalanced ecosystem with reduced productivity and resilience.

Climate change is driving rapid environmental transformation in this part of the Mediterranean. Rising sea-surface temperature are altering species distributions and ecosystem dynamics. The increasing presence of invasive Indo-Pacific species, entering the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal (a process known as Lessepsian migration), is disrupting native ecosystems. For example, rabbitfish are overgrazing macroalgae, leading to habitat loss in rocky reef ecosystems, while pufferfish (*Lagocephalus* spp.) are damaging fishing gear, exacerbating economic hardships

faced by small-scale fishers. Overall, these changes destabilise marine food webs and reduce the availability of native fish species on which both marine predators and coastal communities depend.

The region's natural beauty and biodiversity attract high levels of **tourism**, yet **weak management** has led to environmental degradation. Unregulated boat-mooring damages beds of Neptune grass. Human disturbance impacts caves where the globally threatened Mediterranean monk seal breeds plus nesting beaches for green turtle and the globally threatened loggerhead turtle, disrupting critical stages in their respective life cycles. Tourism also leads to an increase in recreational fishing, often by visitors unaware of protected-area rules. Overall, although tourism boosts local economies, unsustainable practices are eroding the very ecosystems that support the industry, creating a long-term risk for both nature and local economies.

Small-scale fisheries are a vital part of the local economy, yet **highly inadequate monitoring and regulation** is exacerbating unsustainable practices. More than 9,000 registered fishing vessels operate along Türkiye's Mediterranean coast, more than 80% of which are small-scale fishers. Apart from at Gökova Bay, there has been no active monitoring of small-scale fisheries, making it impossible to accurately

track fish stocks or implement effective conservation measures. As a result, fisheries data are severely underreported, and the true extent of stock depletion remains unknown, hampering efforts to develop sustainable solutions.

Without urgent and effective conservation interventions, it has become evident that ongoing degradation of this seascape would irreversibly damage both nature and the coastal communities that depend on it. To enhance ecosystem resilience and protect livelihoods, we were clear about the need for **targeted interventions** to:

- strengthen fisheries management and enforcement to combat illegal fishing and over-exploitation;
- implement climate-adaptation strategies to enhance ecosystem resilience;
- improve regulation of tourism activities to minimise environmental impacts; and
- expand Marine Protected Areas and actively manage existing conservation zones.

This project has started to turn the tide to secure ocean ecosystem recovery in the Eastern Mediterranean – both for the benefit of nature and to provide resilience for the communities that depend on the area's natural resources.

“It took us twenty years to manage to agree and finally establish the no-take zones. Neither the sea, nor I, have another twenty years to wait for somebody to make it work, for then it will be too late.”

Working together

The project partnership

Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (AKD) engaged directly with local communities, advocating for sustainable marine resource management while encouraging local and national government bodies to promote the designation of new NFZs and enhance enforcement in existing Special Environmental Protection Areas. AKD's marine rangers played a key role in monitoring protected areas and supporting enforcement actions, working closely with the Turkish coastguard to combat illegal fishing and ensure compliance with conservation regulations. **Fauna & Flora** was responsible for overall project and grant management as well as sharing global expertise in marine conservation by providing direct technical and capacity-building support to AKD.

Other project partners

UNEP-WCMC
Ege University
Bangor University
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation
Ministry of Interior
Jena Optronik



Community engagement has helped build local ownership of seascape protection. Image © Zafer Kizilkaya

Local engagement

Collaborative management helps ensure that both conservation and community needs are met, protecting marine biodiversity, preventing resource depletion, and promoting long-term sustainability for local livelihoods. This is achieved through a close partnership between the project and small-scale fishery cooperatives, which share responsibility for the management of marine resources, MPAs, and NFZs. Deeply embedded in the social fabric of the coastal communities, the cooperatives understand local challenges, traditions, and practices – and their local knowledge is integrated into scientific assessments and management strategies. The cooperatives introduce and advocate for practices that reduce overfishing, educate local fishers on low-impact techniques that significantly reduce damage to marine ecosystems, and are instrumental in enforcing sustainable fishing quotas and compliance with fishing regulations.

On the conservation menu

Among their other contributions to the project, small-scale fishery cooperatives are actively involved in the targeted harvesting of invasive non-native species, aiming to reduce the animals' ecological impact while capitalising on their market potential. This approach aligns with a broader strategy of utilising invasive species to mitigate their adverse effects and derive economic benefits – enabling fishers to adapt to, contribute to, and benefit from seascape restoration.



Image © AKD

“ In Gökova Bay we earned money from grouper and shrimp for years. After a certain period – due to dredging, trawling, purse seining, and other factors – this income dropped to zero. When Gökova Bay was placed under protection and the ranger system was introduced, our members began earning money again.

CAN GÖRGÜN, PRESIDENT, AKYAKA FISHING COOPERATIVE

Nature restored



Against a backdrop of threats including overfishing, illegal fishing, unregulated tourism, marine litter, and climate change, the project has aimed to restore vulnerable marine habitat along a 500 km of coastline between Gökova Bay and Cape Gelidonya on Türkiye's Mediterranean coast. Working across 62,681 hectares of this globally significant biodiversity hotspot, the project has sought to re-establish healthy ecosystems, provide space for habitat and species recovery, reduce invasive non-native species, and ensure sustainable local livelihoods. By expanding Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and implementing effective restoration strategies, the project has helped protect critical habitats and bolster marine life.

Restoring and protecting marine ecosystems

In 2012, AKD and Fauna & Flora started to tackle the growing threats to marine life and coastal livelihoods in Gökova Bay that were posed by overfishing, destructive fishing, coastal development, and pollution. Initial work was carried out on a limited scale, but the project’s approach proved successful. Subsequent ELSP funding enabled the Gökova Bay model – including the supportive experiences of fishers in that area – to be applied to a much larger area.

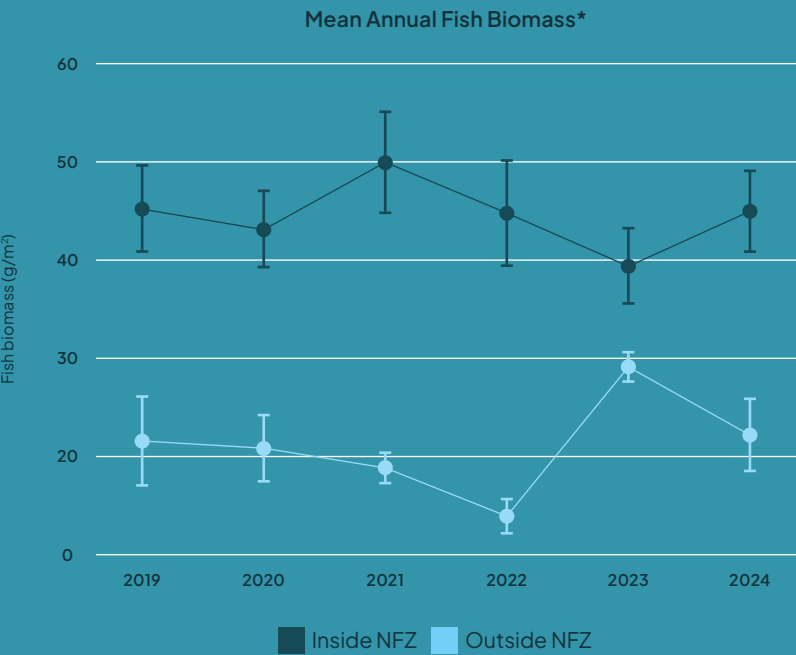
From 2019–24, the project secured a 41% expansion in the protected area between Gökova Bay and Kaş. A total of 67,079 ha is now classified as either Fisheries Restricted Areas (where trawling and purse seining are prohibited) and/or NFZs (where both professional and amateur fishing are banned). Within the current Special Environmental Protection Areas (SEPA) of Gökova Bay, Datça-Bozburun, Fethiye-Göcek, and Kaş-Kekova, we used critical-habitat mapping to identify key areas for new NFZs.

Using the model previously established in Gökova Bay, the project actively engaged government stakeholders, local community leaders, and fisheries cooperatives to promote expansion of the NFZ network, leading to their official designation and significantly expanding MPA coverage. Overall, 62,281 ha of the seascape are under restoration through patrolling, removal of invasive species, rehabilitation of sea-grass beds, and clean-ups.

Expanding its stakeholder network, the project also transformed ineffective ‘paper parks’ into actively managed and effective conservation zones, with illegal activities deterred, critical habitats restored, and ecological services enhanced. Collaborating closely with local government officials and the Turkish coastguard, larger community-based marine-ranger teams now conduct regular patrols, using the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) to enforce regulations more effectively. From 2019–23,

the marine area under active patrol by rangers rose from 2,004 ha to 3,300 ha, growing from 824 patrols in a single project area (Gökova) to 1,145 patrols across three areas (additionally Fethiye-Göcek and Datça-Bozburun), and now covering 12 NFZs.

The establishment of NFZs and robust marine-ranger enforcement systems have strengthened native biodiversity and the ecological resilience of key areas. The populations of globally threatened apex predators are increasing. Sandbar shark has returned and is now recorded regularly. As many as 40 Mediterranean monk seals now occur (19–22 in Gökova, two in Datça-Bozburun, six in Fethiye-Göcek, and 9–10 in Kaş), including newborn pups. This is a significant proportion of the global population (444–600 mature individuals) in a relatively small area. Further recovery is expected thanks to the provision of artificial ledges, reduced disturbance, and the greater availability of fish prey following their protection.



Monitoring spotlight: no-fishing zones bring multiple benefits

Data collected from 2019–24 in Gökova shows that fish biomass has stayed significantly higher inside than outside NFZs (see left), despite an increase in invasive species biomass outside the NFZ. Data show that NFZs harbour a greater proportion of native species, and a higher proportion of predatory fish, which suppress invasive fish numbers. Therefore active enforcement and effective reduction in fishing pressure can not only result in higher fish biomass, but support a more complete and stable trophic web, ultimately increasing seascape resilience.

*The bars on this graph represent the standard error of the mean, or how far the mean estimated here is likely to deviate from the population average. This tells us how confident we can be when comparing treatments across time.

A starter using common lionfish, an invasive species. Since 2020, around 18 tonnes of invasive species have been harvested for sale, with revenues increasing 16-fold and lionfish now served in dozens of restaurants. Image © AKD

Engaging and benefitting communities

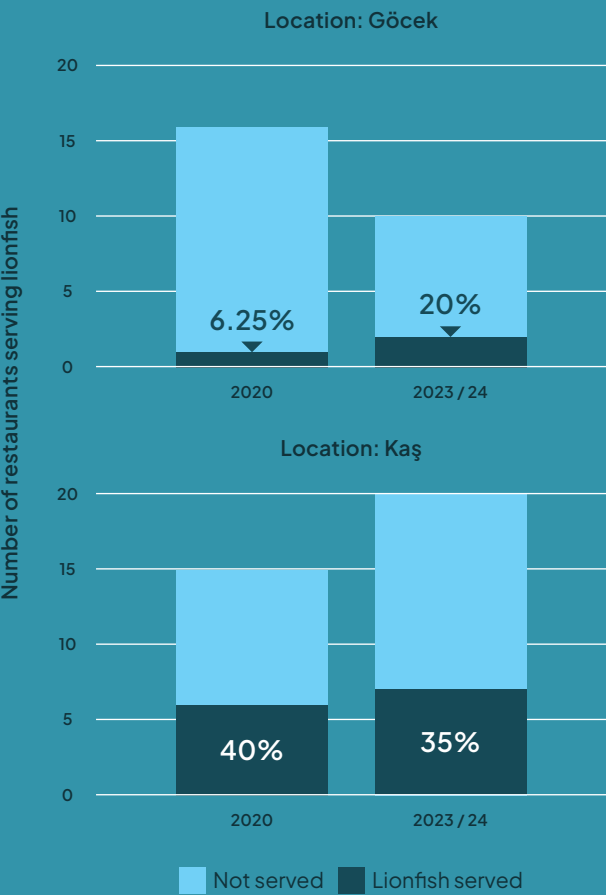
Engaging local communities has been central to the project's restoration efforts. The project facilitated peer-to-peer exchanges through which Gökova community members shared their experiences – including the benefits of protected seascapes – with other communities. This fostered a sense of ownership and a commitment to restoration measures. Using behaviour-change methodologies, the project encouraged sustainable fishing practices and habitat protection. Collaboration among NGOs, communities, and government entities ensured inclusive decision-making, empowering stakeholders to safeguard fish stocks vital to local livelihoods.

The project developed business plans to generate revenue that has supported management activities, including patrols by rangers. Since 2019, the project has transformed attitudes to invasive non-native marine species, educating people on these species' adverse impacts on ecosystems and fisheries. In a remarkable innovation, the project has created a wholly new market for the consumption of edible non-native species, whose biomass has been increasing by 2% annually. Collaborating with well-known chefs, running competitions to develop recipes, distributing recipe leaflets, and organising festivals to promote species such as common lionfish (*Pterois miles*) as culinary delights have helped create a wholly new commercially viable fisheries sector. AKD Ltd, a trading subsidiary, has provided cooperatives and more than 1,000 small-scale fishers with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in the sector, and furnished access to markets and supply chains. Since 2020, approximately 18 tonnes of invasive species have been harvested for economic benefit. The number of local restaurants ordering common lionfish from AKD Ltd rose from four to 27 (2020–23), and revenues rose 16-fold from 2019–23. Additional economic diversification has been provided by the project encouraging pescatourism.

Monitoring spotlight: broadening sources of income from marine resources

Monitoring has tracked changes in restaurant behaviour and market demand for invasive fish over time. While surveys in two areas (Kaş and Göcek) showed only a modest increase in the number of restaurants serving lionfish, broader regional data reveal that more restaurants are ordering lionfish and the quantity sold has increased, indicating growing demand and acceptance of invasive fish cuisine. This market-based approach not only helps fishers earn income but also contributes to reducing pressures on native species and habitats.

Exploring additional funding avenues, we assessed the area’s potential for generating blue carbon, recognising the contribution of healthy sea-grass meadows to carbon sequestration. Over 95% of the carbon in sea-grass meadows is stored in the sediment, underscoring their importance in climate mitigation strategies. Our findings highlighted the economic value of protecting these ecosystems, attracting investment in conservation and sustainable tourism. This resulted in Türkiye’s government initiating the first large-scale, environmentally sensitive mooring project in Fethiye–Göcek Special Environmental Protection Area; this is expected to become operational during 2026.



Invasive Indo-Pacific species like common lionfish have disrupted Mediterranean ecosystems. Image © Zafer Kızılkaya

Strengthening conservation and fisheries decision-making

Evidence-based decision-making has facilitated seascape restoration, marine-resource management, and economic outcomes. Building upon Gökova Bay’s Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management Plan, the project supported the development of additional plans at new sites.

Comprehensive and scientific ecosystem monitoring – including assessments of fish biomass, sea-grass beds, macroalgae, and water temperature, plus trialling innovative marine technology to continuously monitor Mediterranean monk seals and sandbar sharks remotely – guided the project’s adaptive management strategies. The project has also established the monitoring of fish landings through local fishing cooperatives, assessing changes in landing volumes and fisher revenues. Mobile recording technologies facilitated regular data compilation, informing adaptive fisheries management. This initiative empowered fishers with data-driven insights, promoting sustainable practices and enhancing economic outcomes.

Impact on policy

Contribution to global targets

The project aligns with key global biodiversity and sustainable development targets, including under the United Nations' Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), respectively. These include GBF targets 1 (Plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss), 2 (Restore 30% of all degraded ecosystems), 3 (Conserve 30% of land, waters and seas), 4 (Halt species extinction etc.), 10 (Enhance biodiversity and sustainability in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and forestry), and 11 (Restore, maintain and enhance Nature's contribution to people); and SDGs 1 (No poverty), 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 13 (Climate action), and 14 (Life below water).

Monitoring ecological and socio-economic change across the Gökova Bay to Cape Gelidonya seascape provides new insights into marine restoration in Türkiye. Image © Zafer Kızılkaya





Relevance to European Union policy

Although Türkiye is not an EU member state, its candidacy status makes the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 relevant. The project's initiatives align with the Strategy's goals, particularly in: establishing protected areas (creating NFZs contributes to the EU's target of legally protecting 30% of the EU sea area), restoring degraded ecosystems (through rehabilitating sea-grass beds and other marine habitats), and promoting sustainable practices (through engaging local communities in sustainable fishing).

Relevance for national policy

The project's outcomes contribute to several key national policies, over and above those that ultimately deliver global targets. Successfully enhancing fish stocks and promoting sustainable livelihoods align with the goals of sustainable economic growth, environmental protection, and climate change mitigation that are emphasised in Türkiye's Twelfth Development Plan (2024–28). By monitoring sea-grass beds and strengthening the ecological resilience of marine habitats, the project contributes to ecosystem-based adaptation strategies outlined in the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan.

Key insights

Community members participate in a workshop run by Ula Artcraft Club and AKD, where they learnt how to make jewellery from invasive lionfish spines and fins. Image © AKD



The project provides a range of valuable insights for the seascape-restoration community, which are presented here for different stakeholder groups. By sharing these lessons, the project aims to serve as a blueprint for future seascape-restoration initiatives.

For local fishing communities

Co-managing the MPA with local fishing communities leads to more sustainable fishing practices and increases support for active management. In Gökova Bay, collaboration with small-scale fishers has been pivotal in restoration efforts. Economic diversification is also important for sustainable livelihoods. Pescatourism, sustainable fishing practices, and the creation of a market for invasive species can all boost local economies while reducing pressure on marine resources.

For government and other policymakers

Shifting from state-dominated to area-based community management (collaborative governance) enhances conservation outcomes and stakeholder buy-in. Collaborating with NGOs provides government institutions access to their conservation experience. Integrating protected areas and policies, by aligning MPAs with national development and climate strategies, ensures cohesive and effective conservation efforts – and provides a strong basis for ambitions to match the EU's target of legally protecting 30% of the EU sea area.

For conservation and environmental NGOs

Community engagement is key. Building trust and involving local stakeholders from the outset are crucial for project success – but there is no one-size-fits-all solution, because every area has a unique stakeholder composition and thus needs a bespoke approach. Adaptive management is also vital. Continuous monitoring and flexibility allow for responsive and effective conservation strategies. As things change over time, understanding what works and what does not is important for long-term conservation success.

For academic and research institutions

Incorporating ecological knowledge from local communities and environmental or conservation NGOs enriches scientific research and enhances conservation strategies. Interdisciplinary approaches help too: combining natural and social sciences provides a holistic understanding of conservation challenges and solutions.

For the international conservation community

This project offers a replicable, scalable model for other regions. It demonstrates that community-driven initiatives can achieve significant conservation outcomes, and that successful projects can inform and inspire policy frameworks at regional and global levels, promoting broader adoption of effective conservation practices. For example, the ELSP-funded project led directly to a European Commission-funded initiative, operated by the Republic of Türkiye's Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change, entitled 'Restoring Marine Ecosystem Connectivity in South Western Türkiye with Network of Marine Protected Areas Boosting Climate Change Resilience'.

The future

To fully realise its vision for Gökova Bay to Cape Gelidonya Project – a thriving marine ecosystem that supports both biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods – AKD will focus on five key strategic actions over the next 15–20 years.

Securing sustainable funding

The project is dedicated to securing long-term funding and continuing to build partnerships with local authorities, universities, NGOs, and international donors. Diversifying its funding base is critical for maintaining long-term activities and scaling up impacts.

Upscaling the project

Two significant opportunities on the horizon will contribute to the long-term sustainability of marine conservation efforts in the region. Firstly, Türkiye's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is embarking on a three-year project to designate marine Natura 2000 sites in the country; with AKD involvement in the designation process, this will complement the ELSP project. Secondly, on behalf of Türkiye's Ministry of Environment, AKD has developed a European Union Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) Programming Framework project on 'Restoring Marine Ecosystem Connectivity'. Starting in 2026, this will focus on establishing new MPAs and build institutional capacity, including the establishment of an official with responsibility for MPAs ('MPAs Deputy') within the Ministry.

Continuing to strengthen partnerships and engage communities

Continued collaboration among local communities, governmental bodies, NGOs, and international organisations is essential. These partnerships can enhance resource-sharing, knowledge exchange, and coordinated conservation efforts. During the ELSP project, the Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRA) and NFZs were designated with the full consent of local communities, and government officials discussed NFZ and FRA location and size with them. The project will continue to foster environmental stewardship by involving local communities in decision-making processes and raising awareness about the importance of marine conservation. The project will also enhance the skills and knowledge of local stakeholders by supporting training that empowers them to actively participate in conservation and management.

Enhancing legal frameworks and expand protection measures

Advocating for robust environmental laws and policies will provide a stronger foundation for marine conservation. Clear regulations and stringent enforcement mechanisms are vital to deter illegal activities and ensure sustainable resource use. Enforcement is currently inadequate in protected areas. NFZs form just 0.04% of the Mediterranean, and only 20% of this area receives adequate enforcement. In summer 2025, the first government enforcement boat patrolled Gökova Bay, but enforcement activity takes place only every 2–3 weeks. In contrast, AKD rangers are in the field all the time. Identifying and designating additional critical habitats for protection will bolster biodiversity. Implementing comprehensive marine spatial planning will balance ecological preservation with sustainable human activities.

Promoting sustainable economic development

Integrating sustainable practices into local economies, such as ecotourism and responsible fishing, can support livelihoods and reduce pressure on marine ecosystems. This approach ensures that economic growth aligns with conservation goals.

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