

# MSc Student Project

Mapping of essential habitats and population status of sensitive species  
relative to pelagic fisheries

TERMS OF REFERENCE

June 2022

Pelagic Advisory Council

## Background

The Pelagic Advisory Council (PelAC) prepares and provides advice to the European Commission and Member States on matters pertaining to the management of pelagic fisheries. The PelAC represents all relevant stakeholders (namely fishing industry (60%) and other groups of interest including NGO's (40%)) and covers pelagic stocks in all EU areas excluding the Baltic and Mediterranean seas.

The PelAC has established an Ecosystem Focus Group (EFG) with the long-term overarching objective to explore and advise the European Commission on how the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) can be implemented and operationalised in European pelagic fisheries. As part of this exercise the EFG aims, within the means available, to actively contribute to developments of the science agenda influencing both the improved understanding of impacts of pelagic fisheries to its surrounding ecosystem, as well as the impacts of other marine activities to pelagic stocks.

Since its inauguration in 2015, the EFG has prepared a number of recommendations relating to the preservation of essential habitats for pelagic stocks, as well as on the interactions between sensitive species bycaught in pelagic fishing gear. Both these topics have been identified as core priority-themes for the EFG to consider in its future work.

Over recent years, the PelAC has repeatedly expressed concerns regarding the impact of extractive and other non-fishing activities on delicate spawning habitats. In [its 2019 recommendation](#), the PelAC has called for the need for scientific impact assessments of such activities on fish biology, in the context of marine spatial planning. Further to this, both the Pelagic and the North Western Waters ACs developed two separate advice submissions to the Commission in 2020 for a non-recurrent request to ICES [on seismic impacts](#), and for a non-recurrent request to ICES on the impact of [marine wind energy developments](#) on commercial fish stocks, the latter also supported by the North Sea AC. The requests noted that the impacts of these developments on fish, shellfish, spawning grounds and larval development, both in the long- and short-term, remain poorly understood by the scientific community and asked the European Commission to consider a set of research questions as a basis for two separate non-recurrent requests to ICES.

Moreover, the [ICES advice for North Sea herring](#) from the last years repeatedly comment on the need to preserve the stocks' essential nursery and spawning grounds and call for measures to protect these areas from other marine activities. In its [2022 TAC recommendation](#) to the European Commission, the PelAC has underlined the importance of essential spawning grounds for pelagic species, and requested an ICES overview of possible temporal and spatial management measures options for the directed herring fisheries in the North Sea and area 3A.

Finally, in the context of the bycatch of sensitive species, the PelAC has submitted advice such as the [response to the Technical Measures questionnaire](#) in 2021, and the 2022 response to the [consultation on the Fisheries Action plan](#) to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems, underlining the need to better understand the impacts of pelagic fisheries on the population status of sensitive species bycaught in pelagic gear.

## Project Aims and Scope

Depending on the outcomes of such research, the role of closed or restricted areas could become increasingly important. It is the PelAC's view that restricted areas should be thoroughly investigated and should go beyond simply restricting fishing activities, and consider closing-off areas to all activities that may impact juveniles and spawning behaviour. In order to contribute meaningfully to the marine spatial planning of other non-fishing activities in relevant waters, and to advise on area closures for the preservation of pelagic species, the PelAC believes it would be a key starting point to undertake a mapping exercise to identify where are located and what are the characteristics of essential habitats for relevant pelagic stocks, such as spawning, wintering, feeding and nursery areas as well as migration routes, are located in European waters.

Similarly, in the context of the [Roadmap for ICES's bycatch advice](#) on protected, endangered and threatened species published in 2020, and future resulting policy developments, the PelAC believes it would be useful to gain further insight into the population status of sensitive species bycaught in pelagic gear and to assess to what extent pelagic fisheries have an impact on this status. This information would help identify problem areas and progress the debate regarding the design of appropriate mitigation measures.

## Project Objectives

To further strengthen these knowledge areas, the PelAC offers an internship or MSc thesis opportunity for a relevant MSc programme. The project aims to create an overview of existing protections relevant to pelagic fisheries for sensitive habitats under all relevant legislation – e.g. Technical Measures Regulation, Habitats Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive as well as map out existing knowledge on the locations and characteristic of key spawning/nursery/feeding/wintering habitats for herring, mackerel, horse mackerel, boarfish and blue whiting in European waters (excluding the Baltic and Mediterranean seas).

Separately, the project aims to identify key sensitive species (species that are considered endangered, protected or threatened) bycaught in pelagic gear in the Northeast Atlantic, to review existing evidence on the current population status these species, as well as the existing evidence on how the use of pelagic gears contribute to the population impacts on these species.

For both topics, a mapping of the current knowledge gaps would be an important addition to this work, to help fine tune further priorities and future research needs.

The project report will serve as a basis for future PelAC discussions and contribute to the output from the Ecosystem Focus Group on the topics of essential habitat protection, marine spatial planning and bycatch mitigation of sensitive species.

An example of such output would be the development of PelAC advice to the European Commission on the designation of closed/restricted areas based on identified essential habitats, or advice on mitigation measures for the bycatch of sensitive species in pelagic fisheries, as well as recommendations on future research needs on both topics.

Eventually, the findings may also feed into future processes aiming to develop and apply an ecosystem-approach to the management of pelagic fisheries.

## Proposed Outcomes

- Internship/MSc thesis report with executive summary
- Presentation main findings at future PelAC meeting

## Methodology

- Formulation of the research question in cooperation between the student and Pelagic AC Ecosystem Focus Group members
- Desk-based analysis of available information from English literature (ICES advice, relevant legislation, published research and scientific articles from the last decade, impact assessments and anecdotal evidence)
- Interviews with relevant experts in both topics

## Timeline and Delivery

- Final Terms of Reference to be presented for adoption to the Executive Committee in June 2022
- Candidate recruitment: Summer of 2022
- Foreseen starting date: Autumn/End 2022 (depending on MSc programme requirements)
- Project running time: 5-6 months (depending on MSc programme requirements)
- Conclusion report and final presentation at July 2023 meeting (tentatively)

## Candidate requirements

- Undergrad (BSc) degree in a related scientific field such as biology, (marine) ecology
- Enrolment in relevant MSc programme such as fisheries/marine biology, environmental conservation, ecology, ocean governance etc.
- Availability to start internship project end 2022- early 2023
- Excellent writing and presentation skills in English
- Ability to work independently

## About the Pelagic AC

The Pelagic AC is one of the 11 existing stakeholder-led Advisory Councils (ACs) for fisheries in the European Union. Stakeholders' involvement and participation through Advisory Councils in decision-making processes and governance has proven to be a highly effective mechanism in reaching the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and improving compliance with the regulatory framework. Since its inception, the Pelagic AC has improved substantially the dialogue between stakeholders from different backgrounds and has developed advice by consensus in most cases. The Pelagic AC has also been a useful platform to engage in dialogue and collaboration not only with policy makers both national (Member State administrations) and international (representatives of DG MARE and European Commission) but also with the scientific community.

The Pelagic AC has a legal entity of a foundation under Dutch Law. The Secretariat is based in Zoetermeer, sharing an office space with other fisheries-related organisations, such as the Pelagic Freezer-Trawler Association (PFA) and the Dutch Fish Federation (Visfederatie). The Secretariat consists of an Executive Secretary and an Assistant Secretary, and is supervised by the PFA, which is active member and appointed as Head of Secretariat.

## What we offer

The selected intern will be offered a working space by the Secretariat in Zoetermeer, with possibilities to work from home part of the week, if desired. The Executive Secretary will function as the regular point of contact and assist with daily supervision and guidance, together with the Chair of the Ecosystem Focus Group, Gonçalo Carvalho (from NGO Sciaena, based in Portugal) who will do so remotely. Given the complex nature of the project at hand, in-depth supervision from the University involved will be sought as a preference, in which case this project will be treated as an MSc thesis project.

Members of the Pelagic AC (both industry and other groups of interest) meet on a quarterly basis through Executive Committee and Working Group meetings, which usually take place in the Netherlands. The Pelagic AC offers an interesting opportunity to further develop two relevant policy fields, as well as an extensive international network consisting of European fisheries stakeholders, members of the European Commission and European fisheries scientists. The Pelagic AC also offers a new intern the possibility to travel to throughout Europe for relevant meetings if deemed relevant and in line with the project objectives.

## Application

Please send your application by email to Julie Aleksandrova, Interim Executive Secretary ([j.aleksandrova@pelagic-ac.org](mailto:j.aleksandrova@pelagic-ac.org)) and copy to Ludmilla van der Meer, Assistant Executive Secretary ([l.meer@pelagic-ac.org](mailto:l.meer@pelagic-ac.org)) with the following subject line: "Application – Internship essential habitats and sensitive species".

Your application must consist of a CV and a cover letter of maximum 2 pages.