

Putting small-scale fishers first: Securing Cyprus' coastal waters for sustainable fishing



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Key recommendations


1. Establish a preferential access area (PAA) across Cyprus' territorial waters¹ (within 12 nautical miles (nm) of the coast), giving priority to traditional and small-scale fishers by restricting industrial fishing in these ecologically and economically valuable waters.
2. Prohibit bottom trawling inside the 12 nautical mile zone, as already proposed by the Cypriot government in 2021.
3. Ensure Cyprus's marine protected areas (MPA) deliver their maximum intended conservation benefits and their regeneration potential, including in surrounding waters.





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At a glance


~95%
of Cyprus' fishing fleet and employment is **small-scale**, using mainly passive gears close to shore.^{2,3}

22 m 
was the average length of Cypriot bottom trawlers fishing inside territorial waters, compared with the average length of Cyprus's small-scale fishing vessels (8 m).

Only **2** Cypriot bottom trawlers appeared to be active inside the 12 nm zone during 2021-2025, according to Oceana's analysis. 

44 countries 
around the world have already established PAAs where nearshore or coastal waters have been reserved for small-scale fishers by restricting industrial fishing.⁴

2 most landed fish species 
targeted by trawlers are in the top three most important species targeted by small-scale fishers in Cyprus.⁵

2021 
was the year when Cyprus proposed the permanent cessation, within two years, of the last two bottom trawlers active in its territorial waters. This target has still not been achieved.^{5,6}

What are preferential access areas?

Preferential access areas are designated marine zones, often called “artisanal fishing zones” or “inshore exclusion zones”, that grant small-scale fishers priority access to coastal waters while restricting industrial fishing.

They exist to protect local livelihoods and marine ecosystems, promote sustainability, and reduce competition for marine resources. They have been established successfully in 44 countries worldwide.³

1. Why Cyprus' coastal waters matter

Cyprus' territorial waters are ecologically and economically significant. They host biodiverse habitats, like seagrass meadows and coral communities, encompass key breeding grounds for marine species, including sea turtles and migratory fishes, while also underpinning fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, coastal recreation, and other blue economy activities.^{1,8} In 2022, Cyprus' blue economy generated an estimated €1.8 billion in Gross Value Added and employed nearly 56 000 people, with coastal tourism accounting for the large majority of value added and jobs.⁶ Furthermore, small-scale fishers account for 95% of the Cypriot fishing fleet and employment, and primarily depend on inshore and nearshore waters.²

These waters are also under mounting pressure from human activities. Climate change, habitat degradation, declining fish populations, marine

In EU Mediterranean waters, PAAs could be established by extending the narrow trawl-free strip within 3 nm from the shore (or to 50 m depth, if it is reached at a shorter distance from the coast), which has been in place since 2006 under Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006 to protect Mediterranean coastal areas.⁷

litter, invasive species, and coastal development are affecting the condition of ecosystems and the viability of small-scale fishing operations.¹ For an island economy that is highly dependent on coastal tourism, both protecting the health of marine ecosystems and strengthening their resilience is therefore not only an environmental priority but an economic necessity.

In the case of Cyprus, the urgency of building marine climate resilience is particularly high, given the accelerated rate of warming and associated impacts in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 1).^{9,10} Safeguarding coastal habitats can be an important part of that resilience. For example, Mediterranean seagrasses, such as *Posidonia oceanica*, are known to provide essential coastal protection from climate change impacts and their degradation can exacerbate sea-level rise impacts.¹¹

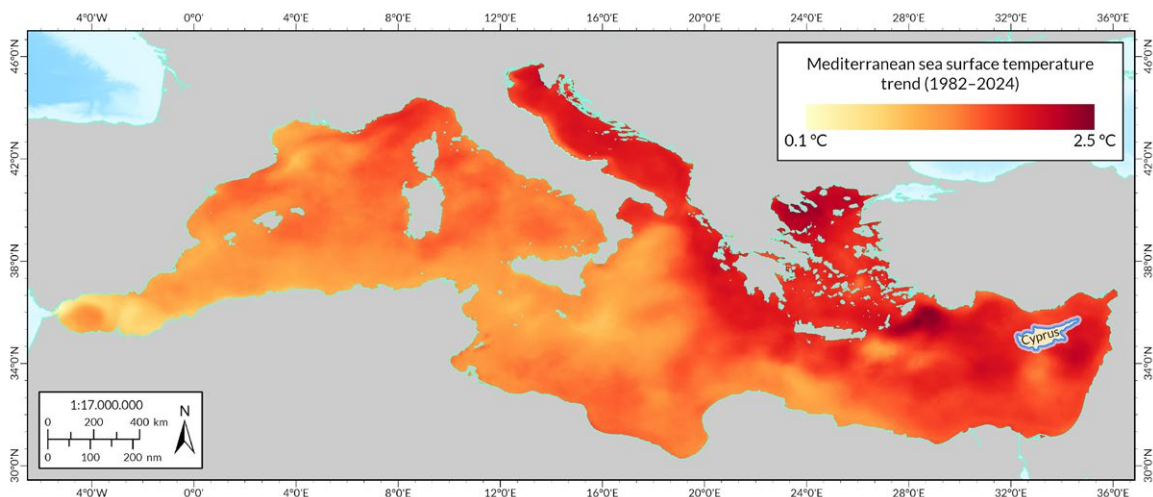


Figure 1. Trend in Mediterranean sea surface temperatures from 1982-2024. Data source: Copernicus Marine Service.¹²

2. Why bottom trawling is a problem

Bottom trawling undermines the long-term viability and resilience of ecosystems and small-scale fishing communities.¹³ It is widely considered to be one of the most environmentally destructive fishing methods, involving dragging heavy gear across the seabed. It damages marine habitats, such as seagrass meadows and coralligenous reefs, reduces biodiversity, and disturbs carbon stored in seabed sediments.^{14,15,16}

For fisheries, the effects can be equally serious over time. Although bottom trawling can produce large catches in the short term, it often leads to overfishing and the capture of many unwanted species (bycatch), including juveniles. In the Mediterranean, where many fish populations are already under pressure, this contributes to declining catches and threatens the long-term viability of fishing communities. As habitats

are degraded and fish populations reduced, fishers must travel further or work harder for smaller returns, creating further economic strain, consuming more fuel, and undermining the sustainability of the sector.¹⁷

Bottom trawling can damage the seabed in seconds, but the harm can last for decades or longer. Bottom trawls are designed to maintain contact with the seabed during fishing and are commonly towed at around 3–5 knots, so the gear passes quickly over any given point while still penetrating the substrate, displacing sediment and damaging seabed life. In sensitive habitats, the effects can be effectively irreversible on human timescales. For example, one study found evidence of impacts on *Posidonia oceanica* meadows eight years after trawling had ceased, and estimated recovery at almost 100 years.¹⁸

Current management in Cyprus' territorial waters

Cyprus manages bottom trawling within its territorial waters through licensing and technical measures, such as gear restrictions, a seasonal closure from 1 June to 7 November, and spatial restrictions. Since 2011, only two licensed bottom trawlers have operated in its territorial waters. During the trawl closure period, trawlers may be licensed to use other fishing gears. Nevertheless, in 2025, the demersal trawl fleet in Cyprus was reported to be exerting fishing pressure above biologically sustainable levels for the available fish stocks, based on biological indicators.⁵

In 2021, the Cypriot government proposed the full withdrawal of bottom trawling within its territorial waters within two years, to balance fishing capacity with resources.⁵ In 2023, Cyprus also informed the European Commission that this measure was scheduled, in its roadmap for the Implementation the EU Marine Action Plan (COM (2023) 102 final).¹⁹



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Competition with small-scale fisheries is direct. The two most landed species targeted by bottom trawlers – picarel (*Spicara smaris*) and bogue (*Boops boops*) – are also among the top three most important species targeted by small-scale fishers in Cyprus.

Demersal trawlers are larger and more powerful vessels than those used by small-scale fishers, which likely put small-scale fishers at a disadvantage. This makes the issue not only environmental, but also one of fairness and equitable access to resources.

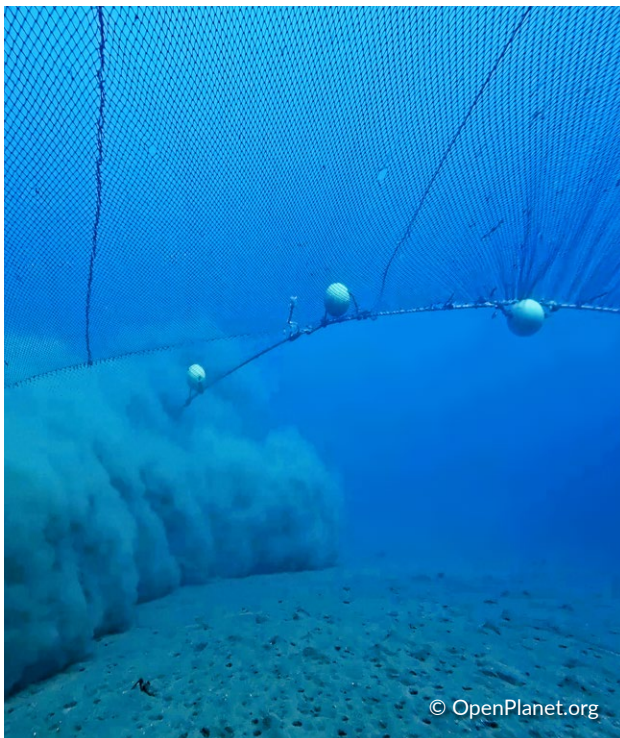
3. Limited bottom trawling activity in Cypriot territorial waters

To assess the potential implications of establishing a PAA in Cyprus, Oceana carried out an assessment of apparent bottom trawling activity in Cypriot territorial waters, during the last five years (2021-2025), using data from Global Fishing Watch.²⁰ For details of the data and methodology used, see Methods.

Findings:

Between 2021–2025, five vessels recorded a total of **more than 750 hours of apparent bottom trawling**. Of these, two Cypriot vessels recorded the most activity, including one vessel representing **86% of the total activity**. The three other vessels, Italian, recorded limited trawling hours (**7% of the total**) on the outer limit of the territorial waters, which need additional investigation to confirm (Figs. 2-3).

In the case of Cypriot vessels, the detection of apparent trawling was made more difficult because some vessels have multiple authorised fishing gears, and official information about these gears may be incomplete. For one of the two vessels mentioned above, its secondary gear is listed as ‘unknown’ in the EU Fleet Register. The data suggest that this vessel may have trawled for a limited number of hours (52 hours in total) inside the territorial waters of Cyprus in 2024 and 2025. This possibility could be further assessed by cross-checking these apparent hours of trawling against other official data, such as from vessel monitoring systems (VMS) (Fig. 2).



Trawl net dragged across the seafloor.

The data also indicate that during 2024, three Italian-flagged trawlers that usually operate outside the territorial waters of Cyprus may have trawled for a very limited number of hours (56 hours in total) inside the 12 nm zone. This potential fishing activity inside territorial waters would need to be better characterised by comparing these observations with other official information, such as VMS data or logbooks (Fig. 3).

The main fishing grounds identified were off Akrotiri Bay, the coast between Larnaca and Limassol, around Cape Gata, in Chrysohou Bay and along the coast of Paphos.

The average vessel length for the vessels operating inside Cyprus’ territorial waters was far greater than the national fishing fleet average: roughly 22 m for Cypriot trawlers, compared to an overall Cypriot fleet average of about 8 m.

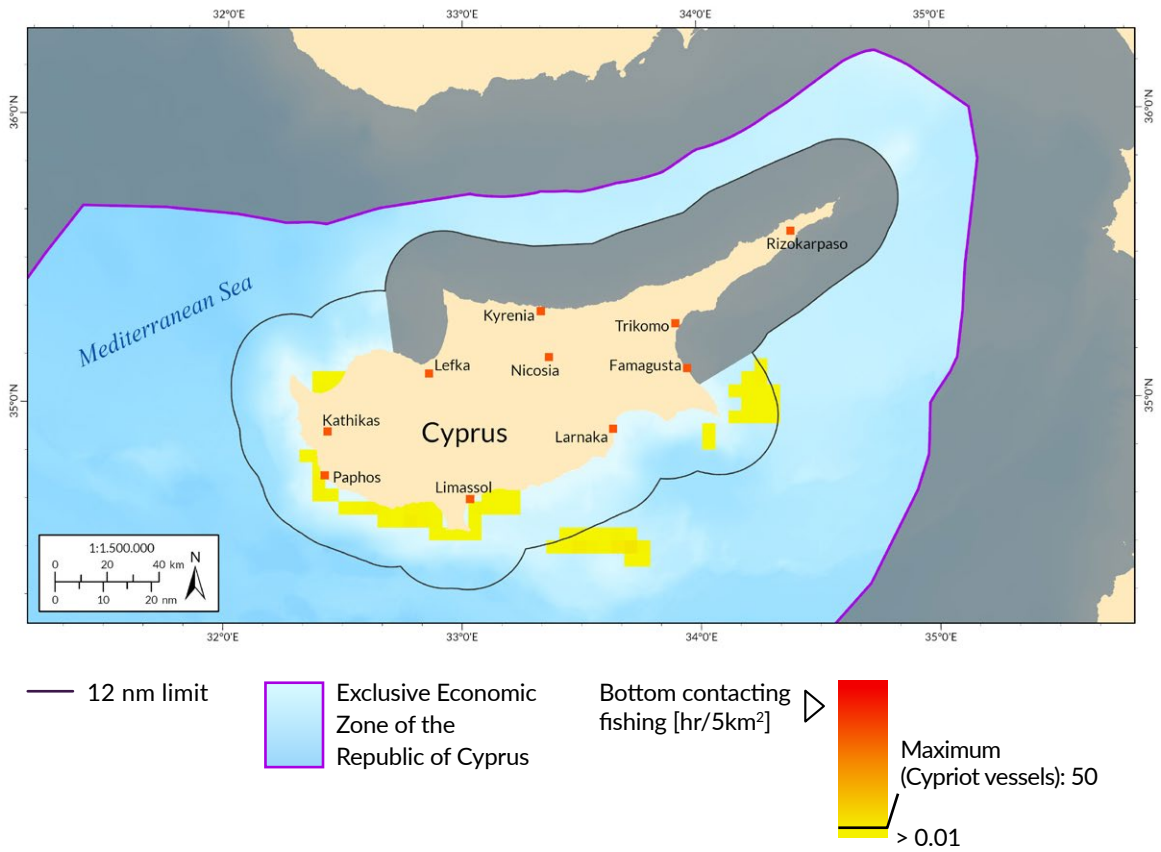


Figure 2. Total hours of apparent bottom trawling by Cypriot vessels in RoC EEZ waters during 2021-2025. Territorial waters adjacent to the occupied areas have been excluded.

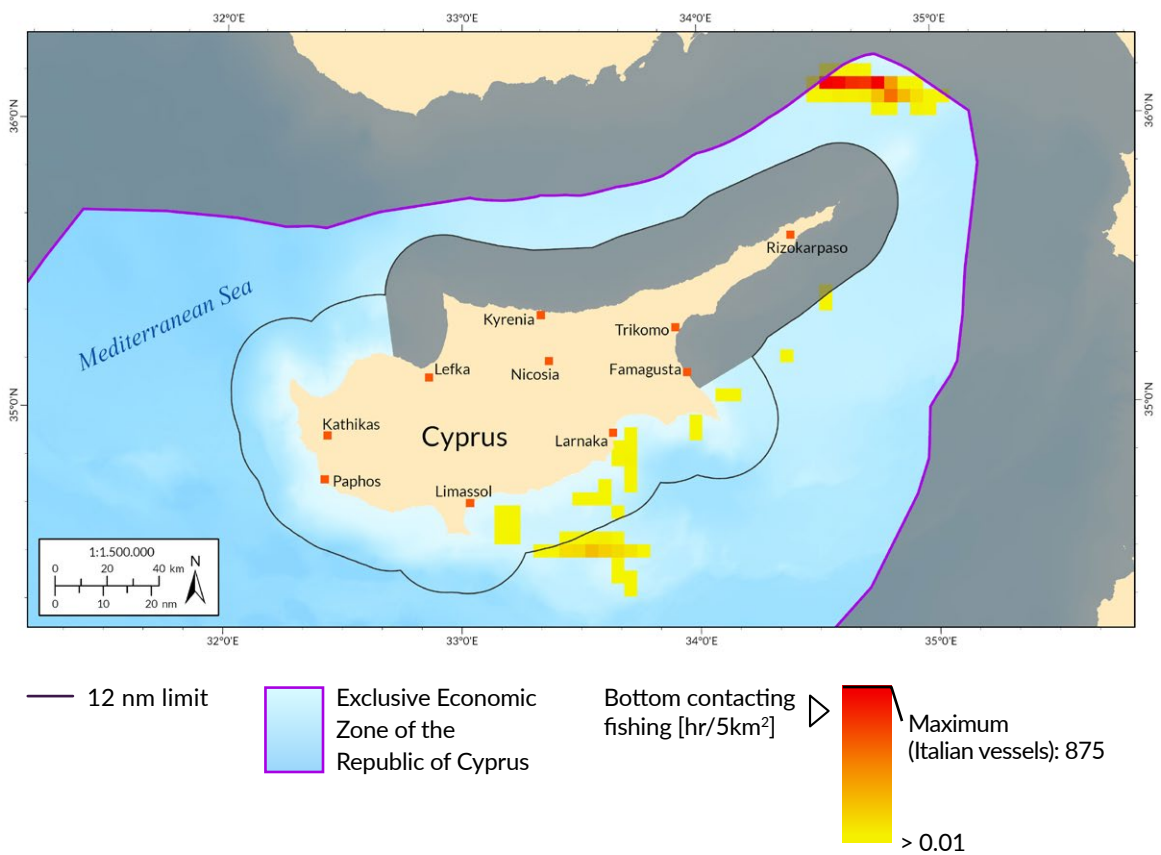


Figure 3. Total hours of apparent bottom trawling by Italian vessels in RoC EEZ waters during 2021-2025. Territorial waters adjacent to the occupied areas have been excluded.

4. Marine protected areas (MPAs) and the case for a trawl-free 12 nm zone

All Cypriot MPAs are located fully or partially inside territorial waters. One large MPA (*Oceanid*) located to the west of the island extends beyond the 12 nm limit, but the national MPA network is predominantly concentrated inside territorial waters, where Cyprus has direct competence to manage fisheries (Fig. 4). Between 2021-2025, minimal bottom trawling activity appears to have occurred inside Cypriot MPAs (only 41 hours of apparent fishing in total, by one vessel).

The main marine habitats protected within the MPA network include iconic *Posidonia oceanica* seagrass meadows, shallow sandbanks, rocky reefs covered by forests of macroalgae, and submerged caves. Some of these areas provide critical feeding and nesting habitats for species such as loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) and green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), amongst others. Key species of fishes and invertebrates found inside Cypriot MPAs are also protected by the

Barcelona Convention, such as the long-snouted seahorse (*Hippocampus guttulatus*).

Bottom trawling can damage the seabed in seconds, but the harm can persist for decades or longer which is why it is deemed incompatible by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in relation to MPAs.²¹ In sensitive habitats, the impacts of trawling can be effectively irreversible on human timescales. For example, *Posidonia oceanica* meadows have been found to still show impacts years after trawling has ceased, with recovery estimated to take decades.¹⁶

Given that almost the entire Cypriot MPA network lies within territorial waters, excluding bottom trawling from the 12 nm zone would add an additional safeguard to some of these protected areas where bottom trawling could still happen.

Establishing a PAA would provide an additional and enforceable way to ensure that MPAs deliver their intended conservation outcomes and reinforce their regeneration potential, including in surrounding waters where additional benefits (such as spillover) may occur.



It would also contribute to Cyprus's commitment to the EU Biodiversity Strategy target of effectively protecting 30% of EU marine areas by 2030.

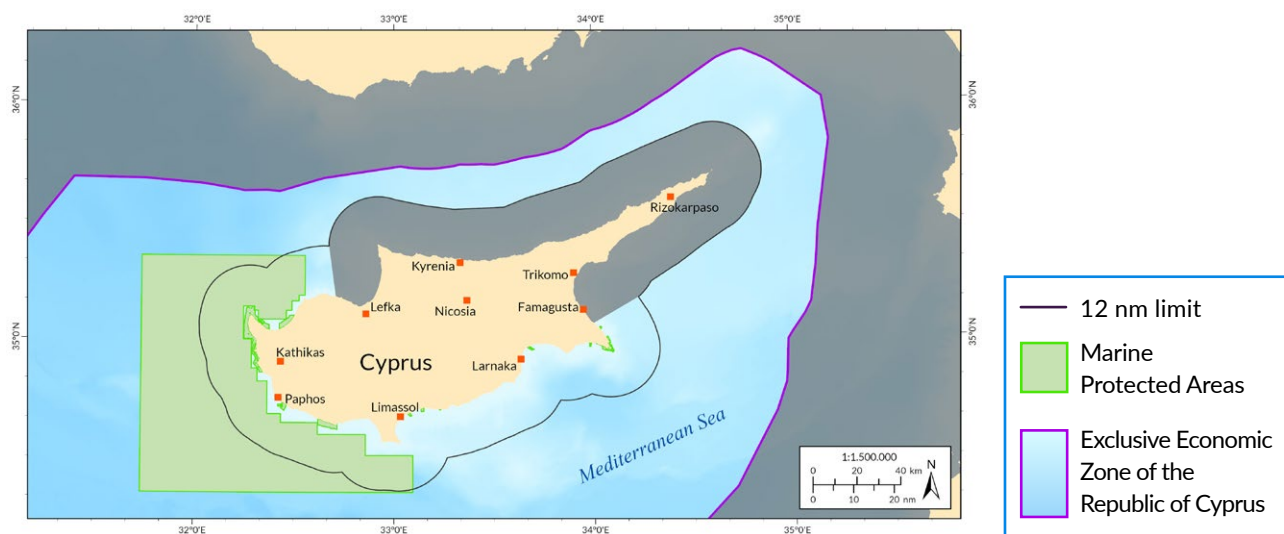


Figure 4. Cypriot network of marine protected areas (MPAs). Territorial waters adjacent to the occupied areas have been excluded.

5. Methods

Oceana analysed apparent bottom trawling activity from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2025 using fishing vessels' automatic identification system (AIS) data from [Global Fishing Watch](#),²² cross-checked against the EU Fleet Register.^{17,23}

The analysis excluded the waters adjacent to the occupied areas of Cyprus. To reduce false positives (i.e. vessels incorrectly identified as engaged in bottom trawling when they were not), vessels with

very low apparent activity were excluded and long navigation associated with activities such as cage towing were removed. Because AIS coverage is incomplete and some vessels may not transmit continuously, the visible footprint should be treated as a conservative estimate of the real bottom trawling footprint.

For more details on the methodology, please go to:

<https://europe.oceana.org/reports/detailed-methods-putting-small-scale-fisheries-first-securing-cyprus-coastal-waters/>



6. Call to Action

The policy logic behind a PAA in territorial waters is straightforward. Cyprus' coastal waters are economically and ecologically valuable. The pressure from bottom trawling fisheries inside the 12 nm zone, albeit limited, should be removed once and for all, in line with the stated commitments of the Cypriot government from 2020.⁵ Doing so by establishing a PAA

encompassing the 12 nm zone would prioritise traditional, small-scale fishers, coastal protection, and the many other benefits that a healthy coastal zone provides for the economy and people of Cyprus. Prioritising low-impact fishing over industrial interests is also a powerful political signal in favour of improving the long-term resilience and productivity of coastal waters.

A trawl-free PAA in territorial waters would therefore deliver four linked benefits:

- **Reducing direct competition for traditional and small-scale fishers**, in the nearshore and coastal zone on which they depend most.
- Delivering a **precautionary and climate-relevant measure at low socioeconomic cost**, because the recorded bottom trawling footprint inside the zone is already limited.
- **Safeguarding ecologically important ecosystems for the future**, supporting the regeneration of key habitats, the species they support, and their values for people and the planet.
- **Ensuring MPAs deliver their maximum intended benefits**, including supporting the potential regeneration of surrounding waters.



A PAA in Cypriot territorial waters would be a practical, precautionary, and politically credible step forward in securing Cyprus' coastal waters for Cypriot small-scale fishers and coastal communities including those dependent on coastal tourism. This decisive measure would reinforce Cyprus' reputation as an ocean leader both regionally in the Mediterranean Sea and at EU level. Most importantly, by aligning ocean protection with economic interests, it would help ensure that healthy marine ecosystems continue to support livelihoods, food provision, and the broader sustainable blue economy in Cyprus, for generations to come.

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