The underwater treasures of Cyclades are coming to light

The sea floor of Gyaros is currently the best mapped marine area in Greece according to the results of the scientific study that WWF Greece publicised

More than 50% of the underwater area of Gyaros is covered with protected habitats such as seagrass beds and dense coralligenous formations known in Greek as *traganes*. This important discovery adds further scientific evidence to the unique importance of the marine "Natura 2000" area of Gyaros and highlights the immediate need to adopt measures for their protection. The study was conducted for the purposes of the CYCLADES LIFE project, which aims at: the creation of an innovate model of marine protected area in the Gyaros island, together with the societies of Syros and Andros.

The ecological significance of both marine habitats is of utmost importance. They safeguard a healthy coastal environment and provide shelter for numerous fish species. The European Council has acknowledged the need for their protection at the Regulation for fishery in the Mediterranean EC 1967/2006. More explicitly, *P.oceanica*, found only in the Mediterranean is the sole marine flowering plant. It absorbs CO2, releases oxygen and protects the coast from erosion. Coralligenous formations (*traganes)* are very important fishery grounds, constitute biodiversity hotspots and are considered CO2 pools. In short, the marine environment of Gyaros hosts two types of habitats that secure fish for both fishermen and consumers while at the same time protect our coasts and enrich the sea and the atmosphere with oxygen.

These facts came to light in the summer of 2014 during the scientific study that was conducted by the Laboratory of Marine Geology and Physical Oceanography of the department of Geology of the University of Patras for the purposes of the CYCLADES LIFE project, a project coordinated by WWF Greece.

“Although sea grass meadows have been studied to some extent in our country, they still remain fairly unmapped and their exact distribution and size are unknown” stated the Professor of Oceanography at the University of Patras and head of the study George Papatheodorou. “We know that the Aegean Sea has the largest coralligenous formations in the Mediterranean, but only a small portion of them have been studied”.

During the study, an area of total ground coverage of 57,3 km² was mapped, making the Natura 2000 marine area of Gyaros, the best mapped Natura 2000 marine area in Greece. According to its results, the marine habitats of the island present high divergence and are of significant ecological value since over 24 km² are covered with Posidonia seagrass beds and dense coralligenous formations.

“One of the CYCLADES LIFE project’s goals is the protection of the above mentioned marine habitats” stated the project’s Coordinator Dr. Spyros Kotomatas. “This study is only one of a number of preparatory studies that are being conducted for the project’s purposes. The collection of scientific information for the natural environment of Gyaros will allow us to collectively design and suggest, together with the involved stakeholders, the necessary management measures for their protection.”

The CYCLADES LIFE project is being implemented by the Ministry of Productive Reconstruction, Environment and Climate Change, the Decentralized Administration Authority of the Aegean, the Development Corporation of Local Authorities of Cyclades S.A, Harokopeio University, the Italian Tethys Research Institute and the NGOs MOm/Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal and WWF Greece.

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