

Eight new protected sites for dolphins, turtles and seabirds

Dolphins, turtles and seabirds to benefit from eight new marine protected areas, covering 3,450 square kilometres around the Maltese Islands

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The eight new protected marine sites. Photo: ERA

Eight new marine protected areas covering a total of 3,450 square kilometres have been designated for dolphins, seabirds and turtles.

The new areas – which will join Malta’s five existing Natura 2000 protected marine sites – were selected on the basis of two EU projects that mapped out the areas most critical to the conservation of loggerhead turtles, bottlenose dolphins Yelkouan and Scopoli’s shearwaters and European storm-petrels.

The EU Life+ Migrate project, which started in October 2012 and will end this April, focused on the loggerhead turtle *il-fekruna tal-baħar il-komuni* and of the bottlenose dolphin *id-denfil ta’ geddumu qasir* in

Maltese waters.

It was led by the Environment and Resources Authority, the Environment Ministry and a Spanish firm specialising in marine resource conservation, and was co-financed by Bank of Valletta.

Migrate manager Carmen Mifsud said that her team's surveys and scientific work had proved useful in gathering information about these species and in identifying suitable Natura 2000 sites.

The Malta Seabird Project, which also formed part of EU Life+, was led by BirdLife Malta in collaboration with the environment ministry, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo das Aves.

It is the largest seabird conservation project in Malta.

Natura 2000 sites are an ecological network of protected areas that are designed to protect Europe's ecologically important habitats and species.

Designating a marine area as protected does not mean closing it off to public access, or even prohibiting fishing there. However, it requires the government to monitor and manage the site sustainably, so as to ensure that protected populations in these areas are safeguarded for future generations.