

Malta hosts first Mediterranean Seagrass Workshop

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A dense meadow of the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* (photo: J.A. Borg)

With a long tradition of marine biological research, the Department of Biology at the University of Malta hosted the first weeklong Mediterranean Seagrass Workshop (MSW 2006), which wrapped up at the Corinthia Jerma Palace Hotel in Marsascala yesterday.

The workshop brought together 110 seagrass biologists and experts from the Mediterranean region to discuss their current knowledge about the state of Mediterranean seagrasses, and to present aspects of their latest research, results, and technologies.

A main objective of MSW 2006 was to attract participants from North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, since data on seagrasses from these regions are lacking. It was for this reason that Malta was chosen as the venue. The workshop also welcomed researchers from outside these areas, including England, America, and the Netherlands.

Seagrass is widespread in Malta, and the islands support very extensive seagrass meadows, including the *Posidonia oceanica*, an endemic species which extends to unusual depths of up to 44 metres.

"These are the deepest known records for the Mediterranean, occurring because of our unusually clear and transparent coastal waters" MSW 2006 organiser and marine ecologist, Dr Joseph A. Borg, from the University of Malta's Department of Biology, said.

Dr Giuseppe di Carlo from IAMC-CNR Laboratorio di Ecologia Marina, Palermo, was also one of the organisers. "The idea for the workshop was born in 2004, but we started being really active organising it last

June. We hope to hold the conference every two years in different Mediterranean venues," Dr Borg added.

The Mediterranean constitutes one of the oldest cradles of civilisation, while its waters harbour a high biodiversity; a large percentage of the marine species (around 20 per cent) in the region are endemic.

However, extensive coastal development coupled with the heavy pressure of anthropogenic activities on its waters, have led to loss of marine habitat in the region.

Being located in shallow coastal areas close to human settlement, seagrasses are bearing the brunt of disturbance from anthropogenic activities, with the result that degradation and loss of seagrass habitat is widespread in the Mediterranean Sea.

The workshop focused on three main themes: Seagrass biology and ecology; Ecosystem services of seagrass beds; and Monitoring, management and restoration of seagrass habitat. It is hoped that presentations within all three themes will promote active discussion on findings of recent studies, help workers to identify new topics for research, and encourage exchange of ideas for collaboration.

The meeting also featured over 100 oral and poster presentations on the biology of Mediterranean seagrasses and three round table meetings, which focused on current problems, findings and issues.

One of which addressed topics relating to the use of *Posidonia oceanica* as a bio-indicator in relation to the Water Framework Directive. EU legislation states that all Mediterranean countries have to use seagrass to test coastal waters - classification coastal water codes range from high, good, moderate, poor and bad, with waters needing to be measured at least moderate to good - and monitoring is planned to be initiated in Maltese waters in the next few years.

Selected oral and poster presentations from MSW 2006 will be published as short papers in a special issue of the journal *Biologia Marina Mediterranea*, while a further selection will be published as full articles in the journal *Marine Ecology, an Evolutionary Perspective*.

The workshop was sponsored by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, the Mediterranean Action Tourism Authority, Air Malta and SeagrassNet; and the holding of MSW 2006 would not have been possible without the support of the Head of the Department of Biology (UOM), the Computing Services Centre (UOM) and the assistance of members of the various local, international and scientific committees.

For further details visit <http://events.um.edu.mt/msw2006/>