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## BENTHIC HABITATS ID AND POLICY CROSS-LINKS TO IMPROVE MARINE CONSERVATION

#### **Abstract**

Identifying benthic habitat and providing clear definition of management units is central to the effective conservation of the marine environment. After the creation of a French marine habitat classification providing a comprehensive list of benthic habitats possibly occurring in national waters, we described each habitat unit (biocenosis and associated sub-units). At the same time, in order to facilitate the implementation of the Habitat Directive in the marine environment and clearly establish which habitat units should be considered as natural Habitat types of Community Interest (HCI), a national marine HCI definition was specified, as long as correspondences with habitats units of the national typology. These tools based on the best scientific knowledge available allowed to highlight knowledge gaps and will ease the assessment, management and reporting tasks both at local and national scales. By sharing these units' definitions with other Member States, and sharing the outputs of these projects internationally, we hope to facilitate the identification of common benthic habitat units and help to achieve a harmonised interpretation of HCI to be managed in the framework of the Habitat Directive.

**Key-words**: benthic habitats, classification, habitats directive, habitat units, description

#### Introduction

Identifying benthic habitat is central to the effective conservation of the marine environment. The use of habitats classifications as common language amongst decision-makers, managers and researchers is necessary to:

- define homogenous working units at local, national or regional scales;
- collect and share habitats occurrence and distribution trends data;
- identify which habitats should be monitored, assessed and managed under national or European regulations.

European directives and international conventions have developed their own list of habitats (European Commission, 2013; European Commission, 2017; OSPAR, 2008; PNUE et al., 2006), but they do not encompass the variability of all habitats at the national level. A national marine habitat classification was thus created in order to provide a comprehensive and hierarchical list of benthic habitats possibly occurring in French waters for both seafronts: Mediterranean (Michez et al., 2014) and North Sea-English Channel-Atlantic (Michez et al., 2019). To ensure an appropriate identification of those habitats, we undertook the description of each habitat unit (biocenosis and associated subunits) of the Mediterranean classification (La Rivière et al., 2021). A similar work is in progress for the Atlantic classification.

The Habitats Directive (HD, 92/43/CEE) defines natural Habitat types of Community Interest (HCI) whose conservation requires the designation of special areas of conservation, but the definitions of the marine HCI are broad and do not represent appropriate management and conservations units for Natura 2000 site managers and

policy makers to work with. In order to clearly establish which habitat units should be considered as HCI, we specified national marine HCI definitions for the nine marine HCI present in national waters (de Bettignies *et al.*, 2021) and made crosswalks with the French national marine habitat classification.

All published information on French habitats will be available online through the HabRef repository (Gaudillat *et al.*, 2021). These tools based on the best scientific knowledge available allow to highlight knowledge gaps and will ease the assessment, management and reporting tasks both at local and national scales, and hopefully also at an international scale.

#### Materials and methods

The French national benthic habitats classification uses a hierarchical structure of 4 levels (biological depth zone-level 1, substrate type and/or salinity-level 2, biocenosis-level 3, facies/association-level 4). Habitat units were described at the levels 3 and 4.

The description of the national habitat units has been undertaken in two phases, first in 2016-2017 and then in 2020. After the creation of a template, the description for each habitat unit of the national Mediterranean classification was based on existing information (Bellan-Santini *et al.*, 1994; Bensettiti *et al.*, 2004; Pérès & Picard, 1964; PNUE *et al.*, 2006), updated or completed by French benthic scientists (Universities, CNRS, Ifremer, MNHN, etc.). The taxonomy has been updated in 2020.

The national reinterpretation of HCI types was undertaken in a second stage, involving Natura 2000 site managers and national benthic habitat experts. Existing approaches for interpreting HCI types from other EU member States were reviewed to serve as a basis (BFN, 2021; European Commission, 2007; 2013; JNCC, 2021; VV.AAAA., 2009). Nine marine HCI types are present in the French waters (EU Codes 1110, 1120\*, 1130, 1140, 1150\*, 1160, 1170, 1180, 8330), two of those being considered as priority habitat types (\*). All the HCI are defined by the European Commission in a unique document referred to as "EUR28" (European Commission, 2013). The reinterpretation work consisted in the description of each HCI type based on the EUR28 definition, and the identification of possible overlays between different types, following a defined template.

#### Results

All descriptions of the national classification habitat units were published in a common PDF catalogue (La Rivière *et al.*, 2021), as long as on each habitat webpage on the INPN (National Inventory of Natural Heritage) website through the HabRef repository (v6, Gaudillat *et al.* 2021) https://inpn.mnhn.fr/programme/referentiel-habitats?lg=en.

All level 3 and 4 habitats units of the French classification were described except for one association (level 4) due to the lack of knowledge and qualified available experts to provide a description. A total of 152 habitat units were published, with each index card providing pictures and information for each identification categories (abiotic factors, distinctive features, variability, characteristic species, associated species, risks of habitat confusion, natural dynamics and geographical distribution) when available (Fig. 1).

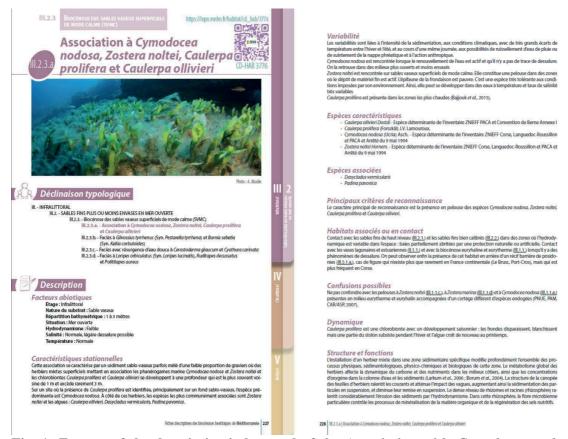


Fig. 1: Extract of the descriptive index card of the Association with *Cymodocea nodosa*, *Zostera noltei*, *Caulerpa prolifera* and *Caulerpa ollivieri* (III.2.3.a) within the Biocenosis of Mediterranean superficial muddy sands in sheltered waters (III.2.3) – from La Rivière *et al.*, 2021

When no information was available in one of the descriptive categories, whether due to a lack of knowledge or a lack of relevant information to provide, the section was not displayed. It should be noted that the descriptive content is not homogenous amongst all habitat units because of the heterogeneity of knowledge.

This work allowed to update the classification with taxonomical evolutions since its original publication in 2014, and the deletion of one unit for which no proof of existence could be found.

The national reinterpretation for each HCI type occurring in French waters was published in a common PDF catalogue (de Bettignies *et al.*, 2021), and will be available on each HCI type webpage on the INPN website through the HabRef repository by the end of 2022 (v7, in prep.). Each marine HCI type is endowed with an index card providing the following information: code and official name from EUR28, alternative French name (when the official French translation is not explicit), reminder of the EUR28 definition, definition of the habitat type according to the French interpretation and details (identification and distinctive criteria, possible overlays, national specificities, reference to other Member States definitions), references used and pictures illustrating the variability of the habitat type that can be encountered in French waters (Fig. 2-3). Unless stated otherwise, all identification criteria should be met in order to qualify a habitat as the considered HCI type.

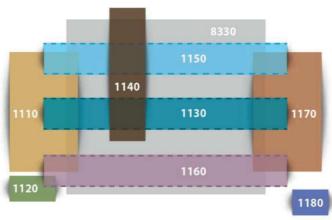


Fig. 2: Overlay possibilities between the 9 HCI types encountered in French national waters. Dotted lines indicate geomorphological types that can never overlap with each other – from de Bettignies *et al.*, 2021

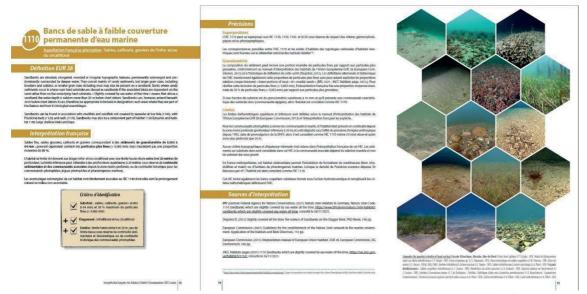


Fig. 3: Extract of the French interpretation index card of the HCI type 1110 "Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time"—from de Bettignies *et al.*, 2021

#### Discussion and/or conclusions

These benthic habitats definition projects provided a description for all habitat units of the French Mediterranean national classification and a clarification of the definition for each Habitats Directive's HCI type based on a national interpretation. Level 3 (biocenosis) of the national classification is generally suitable for conservation and management issues, notably for mapping exercises. Level 4 (dominant lifeforms/communities) is more difficult to map at a large scale but can provide important details and knowledge of ecosystem functioning and environmental status and at a more local scale.

Following these two projects, we were able to establish 550 correspondences between the national classification and the HCI list in order to clearly identify which biocenosis should be managed within the framework of the HD and improve consistency in the management of Natura 2000 sites and reporting at the biogeographical scale.

Although only published in French for now, we hope this work can also be helpful to other Mediterranean countries that share similar benthic habitats to better identify habitats units in their waters. The interpretation of HCI types and the correspondences with the national classification could also improve the comparison of conservation status and/or management measures efficiency assessments across Member States by clarifying which biocenosis are encompassed into each HCI type.

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