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## Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
■ Geographic position	
■ Natural characteristics of Mali Ston Bay	
Protected natural values of Mali Ston Bay	7
■ Special marine nature reserve Mali Ston Bay	
■ The area of European ecological network Natura 2000 HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev	
Biodiversity of Mali Ston Bay	10
■ Biodiversity of sea	A.
■ Biodiversity of land	
Cultivation of bivalves in Mali Ston Bay	15
Code of Conduct in Mali Ston Bay	18
AND CARRY TO SECURE AND ADDRESS OF THE PARTY	

#### Publisher:

Public Institution for the Management of Protected Natural Areas of Dubrovnik-Neretva County

#### For Publisher:

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Ana Bratoš Cetinić/ Andrija Carli/ Ankica Dražeta/ Archive of Ministry od Economy and sustainable development/ Archive of Public Institution for the Management of Protected Natural Areas of Dubrovnik-Neretva County/ Donat Petricioli/ Dražen Lišnjić/ Dušan Jelić/ Goran Šafarek/ Facebook page Malostonska kamenica/ Blue World Institute/ Ivica Lolić/ Miljenko Marukić/ Petra Lučić

#### Cover page photo:

Andrija Carli

#### Graphic design:

Rima d.o.o.

#### Print:

Printera grupa d.o.o.

#### Copies:

1000 copies

Dubrovnik, January 2021.

CIP record is available in the digital Union Catalogue of Croatian Libraries under the number 001089880.

ISBN 978-953-58381-2-8

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### **Foreword**

In these increasingly hectic times, we grow more aware of the crucial role that nature and the whole living world play in the regular functioning of the entire Earth's ecosystem, and how important these are to every human being.

This catalogue brings readers closer to the Mali Ston Bay, in the light of its importance in nature. Besides, the catalogue furthers the knowledge of this special marine reserve, whose marine area is protected at the level of the European Union as a part of European ecological network Natura 2000. A section of Mali Ston Bay was declared a special marine reserve back in 1983. In many ways, this is a specific ecosystem, most distinguished for its tradition of oyster farming that dates back to the time of the Roman Empire.

This catalogue was created within a programme of trans-border collaboration Interreg V-A Italy - Croatia 2014 - 2020 (ECOlogical observing System in the Adriatic 4 Sea: oceanographic observations for bi-

odiversity) - ECOSS. One part of Mali Ston Bay, namely the area encompassed within Natura 2000 HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev, is one of the pilot areas of the ECOSS project. The integrated system of ecological monitoring is one of the main results of the ECOSS project. This monitoring system will unite biological and oceanographic data within an internet platform to display ecological indicators in an easily comprehensible manner, adapted to the needs of institutions dealing with marine protection.

Besides Mali Ston Bay, the pilot areas of this project include *Natura 2000* areas in Adriatic Sea known as HR3000161 Cres-Lošini and HR3000469 Viški akvatorii on the Croatian side, together with 1T3270017 Delta Delta del Po: tratto terminale e delta veneto. IT3270023 Delta del Po. Teanué di Chioggia and 1T3330009 Trezze San Pietro e Bardelli on the Italian side.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this catalogue and discovering one of the most



The pilot areas of the ECOSS project

beautiful pearls of the Adriatic Sea, a part of natural heritage that deserves great admiration.

Public Institution for the Management of Protected Natural Areas of Dubrovník-Neretva County

### Introduction



Bistrina Cove



Submarine spring

#### **Geographic position**

Mali Ston Bay is situated in the southern part of the Adriatic Sea, between land and Pelješac Peninsula, continuing into the Neretva River channel. The bay stretches from northwest to southeast, its elongated shape broken by many indented coves. In accordance with the national Regulation on ecological networks and jurisdictions of public institutions for the management of the ecological network areas (Official Gazette of The Republic of Croatia, No. 80/19), a marine part of the special marine reserve Mali Ston Bay is protected as the area important for preservation of species and habitat types which is classified as Sites of Community Importance (SCI) HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev. A land part of the special marine reserve is protected as the area within the European ecological network Natura 2000 which is significant for bird conservation and classified as Special Protection Areas for Birds (SPA HR1000036 Srednjedalmatinski otoci i Pelješac and HR1000031 Delta Neretve). It is simultaneously encompassed by two other Natura 2000 areas that are significant for the preservation of species and the habitat types, classified as HR 2001364 JI dio Pelješca and HR5000031 Delta Neretve.

#### **Natural characteristics** of Mali Ston Bay

The coast of Mali Ston Bay is mildly inclined, built from Mesozoic carbonate lavers permeable to water, with the system of secondary underground cavities - enabling the almost entire underground water circulation - that were created by tectonic processes and erosion. The ecological conditions in Mali Ston Bay mainly depend on the influences coming from land, and less on those coming from the open sea. A special feature of the bay is its hydrology, which is characterized by a big influx of fresh water from the land - actually the hinterland basin - whereby precipitation enters underground courses, 5 Noble Pen Shell (Pinna nobilis)



Microzooplankton (Dadayiella ganymedes)



East Atlantic peacock wrasse (Symphodus tinca)

eventually flowing into the bay through submarine springs that are particularly abundant in Bistrina Cove and Kuti Cove. Besides, a large amount of fresh water comes into the bay from the Neretva River. After flowing into the sea, the fresh water swerves towards the Makarska Littoral. Water from Neretva River exerts relatively weak influence over the utmost section of Mali Ston Bay, However, the strong northwest winds can push the surface layer of fresh water all the way to the end of the bay. Annual sea temperatures in Mali Ston Bay vary a lot, with extreme values appearing in the surface layer. In the bay's outer part, the surface temperature rarely drops below 10°C. In cold winters, however, the surface temperature in the bay's shallow interior parts can drop down to 0°C. During the winter months. Mali Ston Bay has the estuarial-type movement of water masses, caused by the constant inflow from submarine springs, wherefrom fresh water rises to the surface and exits the bay, to be replaced by saltwater that enters

via deeper sea layers. Strong north and north-eastern winds cause the change in the direction of currents within the bay, with surface seawater entering, and bottom seawater exiting the bay. During the summer months, currents are mainly influenced by winds, due to the significantly decreased influx of fresh water. Besides the decrease in salinity, fresh water influx brings along the large amounts of organic matter and nutrient salts that favourably influence the primary plankton production. This richness of plankton enabled the habitat for around eighty species of bivalves, dozen of which are of economic interest. The area of Mali Ston Bay abounds in fish, with prevailing numbers of annular seabream, sand steenbras. common pandora, flathead grey mullet, gilt-headbream, and European bass.

Starfish (Echinaster Sepositus)



Evergreen Oak (Quercus ilex)

# Protected natural values of Mali Ston Bay

# Special marine nature reserve Mali Ston Bay

Mali Ston Bay has been protected as a special marine nature reserve since 1983. in accordance with *Nature Protection Act* (Official Gazette of The Republic of Croatia, No. 80/13, 15/18, 14/19 and 127/19). It encompasses the whole marine area southeast of the Sreser junction at Pelješac Peninsula to Duba Cove continuing into the Neretva River channel. The entire Mali Ston Bay is shallow, with an average depth of 15 meters, the biggest depth being 29 meters. The bay's length is 28 kilometres, with the widest section at Rat Horn - Rivine Horn junction (4.5 kilometres).

The total surface area of the special marine reserve is 14,898.97 km² (land section 9,181.09 km²; marine section 5,717.88 km²). The utmost part of the special marine nature reserve is very narrow, widening towards the northwest from Usko strait. The special marine nature reserve Mali

Ston Bay spreads through the areas of Ston, Dubrovačko Primorje, Janjina, and Slivno municipalities.

This special marine nature reserve encompasses a coastal basin which, due to being covered in vegetation, prevents sea pollution. The coast is low and not very accessible. The low submarine cliffs in Mali Ston Bay reach a depth of 10 meters, after which the seabed gradually slopes away to a depth of 30 meters in the bay's outer part, where the solid seabed is replaced by the muddy seabed.

Due to the negligible influence of waves, dense maquis spreads almost to the coast-line. Vegetable remnants of maquis and evergreen oak forests are deposited on the bay's shores, preventing soil erosion and enabling the influx of nutrients (phosphates, silicates, nitrates) from land into the sea.

This influences the development of phytoplankton populations that are important for the nutrition of European flat oyster.



Golden Anemon (Condylactis aurantiaca)



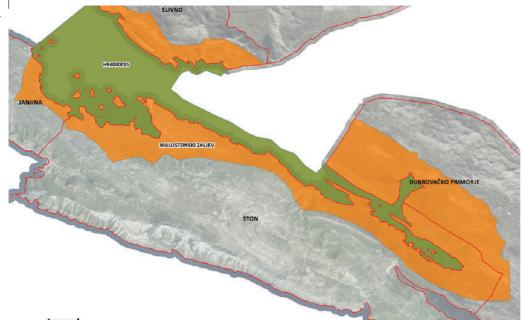
Neptune grass (Posidonia oceanica)

#### The area of European ecological network *Natura 2000 HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev*

European ecological network *Natura 2000* comprises a system of interconnected and spatially close areas, significant for their contribution towards the preservation of biodiversity and the achievement of balance in ecosystems. Such areas are declared with the aim of preservation and achieving the favourable life status of wild birds and their habitats, other wild species of animals, as well as plants, along with their habitats and types of habitat that are important at the level of the European Union.

The marine part of Mali Ston Bay southeast of Sreser-Duba line to Kuti Cove is an area of the European ecological network *Natura 2000 (HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev)* that is significant for the preservation of species and types of habitat. The total surface area of the ecological network in Mali Ston Bay is 5,717 km².

Here, the targeted types of habitat significant for preservation comprise large shallow coves and bays, and reefs. Large shallow coves and bays in Mali Ston Bay are deeply indented, with a limited influence of fresh water and widespread diverse habitats - from sedimentary to rocky seabeds - that are inhabited by various communities of organisms. These habitats are mostly protected from waves and are characterized by great biodiversity and the diversity of sediments. The large shallow coves and bays of Mali Ston Bay are spawning grounds and habitats for many species of fish, sites for resting, feeding, and nesting of migratory and native bird species, and the habitats of strictly protected marine flowering plants. The reefs in Mali Ston Bay comprise habitats on compact, solid substratum that ranges from the sea surface to the bay's seabed. These reefs are habitats for many species of organisms, including fish, cnidarians, crabs, bivalves, echinoderms, and many others.





Smew (Mergellus albellus)

Legend

Ecological network HR4000015 Malostonski zaljev
Special marine nature reserve

Boundaries of Municipalities



Reefs can be biogenic concretions (created by lignin or dead organisms) or of geogenic origin (recent living or dead organisms have no part in their creation). Biogenic concretions - that is corral reefs - are the largest structures built by living organisms and the most productive marine ecosystems that comprise plants (algae) and animals (bivalves, sponges, echinoderms, and cnidarians).



Short-toed snake eagle (Circaetus gallicus)



Little grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

# **Biodiversity of Mali Ston Bay**



Loggerhead sea turtle (Caretta caretta)



Bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops truncatus)

#### **Biodiversity of sea**

The coast of Mali Ston Bay is indented, with many islets and reefs. The bay's enclosure, specific sea currents, the influence of Neretva River, numerous submarine springs, the large amounts of nutrient salts, and minerals altogether result in high primary biological production, contributing to the development of the numerous species of organisms.

So far, a total of 16 strictly protected species have been recorded in Mali Ston Bay, in accord with national Regulation on strictly protected species (Official Gazette of The Republic of Croatia, No. 144/13 and 73/16). These include brown algae of Cystoseira genus (Cystoseira corniculata, Cystoseira crinitophylla, Cystoseira foeniculacea, Cystoseira spinosa, and Fucus virsoides), flowering marine plants (slender seagrass - Cymodocea nodosa, and Neptune grass - Posidonia oceanica), bivalves (date mussel - Lithophaga lithophaga, common piddock - Pholas dactylus

and noble pen shell - Pinna nobilis), false black corral (Savalia savaglia), sponges (encrusted sea sponge - Geodia cydonium, orange puffball sponge - Tethya aurantium and two sponges of Sarcotragus genus, dark stinging sponge - Sarcotragus foetidus and Sarcotragus spinosulus), as well as long-snouted seahorse (Hippocampus guttulatus). Large shallow coves and bays of Mali Ston Bay provide habitats for many species of fish and birds, but also for the strictly protected marine flowering plants - Neptune grass (*Posido*nia oceanica) and slender seagrass (Cymodocea nodosa). Flowering marine plants are among the most important oxygen producers on Earth, their spacious sea meadows in Mali Ston Bay providing a home to the biggest Croatian bivalve, noble pen shell (Pinna nobilis). The reefs of Mali Ston Bay are the habitat of numerous species of organisms including fish, sponges, cnidarians, crabs, bivalves, echinoderms, and many others. One species deserves special mention among the most





Black scorpionfish (Scorpaena porcus)

important inhabitants of these reefs, and that is the date mussel (Lithophaga lithophaga), a strictly protected species whose hunting is illegal. Hunting the date mussels not only destroys the marine coast and habitats for the remaining flora and fauna but also facilitates the overspreading of sea urchins that feed on algae and thus disturb the ecosystem's balance. Strictly protected species bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops truncatus) and strictly protected and sensitive species loggerhead sea turtle (Caretta caretta) can often be spotted in Mali Ston Bay, as they come here to feed.

False black corral (Savalia savaglia)



Strawberry tree (Arbutus unedo)



Sea lavender (Limonium anfractum)

#### **Biodiversity of land**

The relief of Mali Ston Bay is defined by deep and narrow indentation penetrating the shoreline. Forest ecosystems are an important constituent of the bay for several reasons. Their remains that end up flushed into the sea bestow the greater biodiversity. They are also important for the preservation of the specific microclimate of the bay's entire ecosystem and they prevent soil erosion. The coastal area of Mali Ston Bay is dominated by autochthonous forestial vegetation, the forest of evergreen oak and manna ash (association Fraxino orni - Quercetum ilicis) with subassociation typicum and myrtetosum. Within the bay, evergreen oak and manna ash forest appear in its degraded form as maguis, garrique, and scrubland. In some places, forest areas are interrupted by agricultural plots, mostly olive groves of vineyards. The vegetation of evergreen oak and manna ash comprises the following species: evergreen oak (Quercus

ilex), strawberry tree (Arbutus unedo), terebinth (Pistacia terebinthus), tree heath (Erica arborea), mastic tree (Pistacia lentiscus), mock privet (Phillyrea latifolia), true myrtle (Myrtus commnis) and others. Within the element of Mediterranean floras, a group of Illyrian-Adratic endemic plants deserves a special mention. This group includes broadleaf wild leek (Allium ampelprasum var. lusinense), mountain madwort (Alyssum montanum ssp. pagense), chimney bellflower (Campanula pyramdalis), golden chervil (Chaerophy*lum coloratum*), Mediterrnean spurge (*Eu*phorbia characias subsp. wulfenii), Southern Adriatic iris (Iris pseudopallida), sea laender (Limonium anfractum), Bertoloni's sage (Salvia bertolonii), viola adriatica Freyn (Viola adriatica), and dune fescue (Vulpia fasciculata), as well as strictly protected species yellow crucifer (Aurinia sinuata), woodruff (Asperula scutellaris), wall beliflower (Campanula portenschlagiana), cornflower (Cetaurea glaberrima), grassy bells (Edraianthus tenuifolius), DalOlive-tree warbler (Hippolais olivetorum)

matian broom (*Genista sylvestris* subsp. dalmatica), Croatian savory (Micromeria pseudocroatica), moltkia (Moltkia petraea), Moon root (Seseli tomentosum), savory (Satureja visianii), Dalmatian pellitory (Tanacetum cinerariifolium), and white swallow-wort (Vincetoxicum hirundinaria subsp. adriaticum). Mali Ston Bay is characterized by a rich animal world. Most common mammals include golden jackal (Canis aureus), edible dormouse (Myoxus glis), European hare (Lepus europaeus), wild boar (Sus scrofa), and beech marten (Martes foina). Characteristic amphibians in Mali Ston Bay are fire salamander (Salamandra salamandra), common toad (Bufo bufo), European green toad (Bufotes viridis). European common frog (Rana temporaria) along with strictly protected species European tree frog (Hyla arborea), and agile frog (Rana dalmatina). Local rocky habitats are characterized by strictly protected species of reptilians such as Hermann's tortoise (Testudo hermanni), sharp-snouted rock lizard (Lacerta oxycephala), Dalmatian wall li-

zard (Podarcis melisellenis), Balkan green lizard (Lacerta trilineata), Balkan whip snake (Hierophis gemonensis), Montpellier snake (Malpolon monspesulanus), sheltopusik (Pseudopus apodus), European cat snake (*Telescopus fallax*), horned viper (Vipera ammodytes), and four-lined snake (Elaphe quatuorlineata) that happens to be the biggest reptile in the area of Mali Ston Bay. The characteristic birds of Mali Ston Bay include common blackbird (Turdus merula), house sparrow (Passer domesticus), common pheasant (Phasianus colchicus), grey partridge (Perdix perdix), common quail (Coturnix coturnix). yellow-legged gull (Larus michahellis), great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), red-breasted merganser (Mergus serrator), great egret (Ardea alba), grey heron (Ardea cinerea) as well as strictly porteced speceis common kingfisher (Alcedo atthis), Audouin's gull (Larus audouinii), Eurasian eagle-owl (Bubo bubo), sombre tit (Parus lugubris), olive-tree warbler (Hippolais olivetorum), western rock nut-

hatch (Sitta neumayer), blue rock thrush (Monticola solitarius), great tit (Parus major), Sardinian warbler (Sylvia melanocephala), Eurasian scops owl (Otus scops), barn swallow (Hirundo rustica), peregrine falcon (Falco peregrinus), northern goshawk (Accipiter gentilis), shorttoed snake eagle (Circaetus gallicus), western marsh harrier (Circus aeruginosus), common buzzard (Buteo buteo), white wagtail (Motacilla alba), Eurasian sparrowhawk (Accipiter nisus), black-necked grebe(Podicepsnigricollis), pygmycormoran (Phalacrocorax pygmeus), and great crested grebe (Podiceps cristatus).



# Cultivation of bivalves in Mali Ston Bay

Mali Ston Bay is protected within a category of the special marine reserve due to the importance of the bay's ecosystem for the cultivation of bivalves - the European flat oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) and the Mediterranean mussel (*Mytilus galloprovincialis*). Mali Ston Bay is one of the last remaining locations in Europe with the stable population and reproductive cycle of the European flat oyster.

Mali Ston Bay has long retained the traditional manner of collecting the oyster spat with the help of sheaves made of evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*) and mastic tree (*Pistacia lentiscus*). These sheaves were laid on the bottom together with spat and pulled out after 3-5 years, together with adult-size oysters. In the attempt to prevent the loss of sheaves with oysters, farmers begun using the wooden installations to attach the sheaves, before laying them together on the bottom for 3 years, after which the oysters of consumable size were harvested. The modernization of production introduced oyster spat

collectors, used to transfer spat into hatcheries. Oyster hatcheries of European flat oysters used to be stationary and made of wood or iron, while these days floating hatcheries prevail. Historically, the cultivation of bivalves in Mali Ston Bay reaches back to antiquity. This is the site where the most sensitive and most-soughtafter autochthonous species of the European flat oyster is farmed, as the local ecological conditions favour the development of stable populations and the reproductive cycle of the European flat oyster.

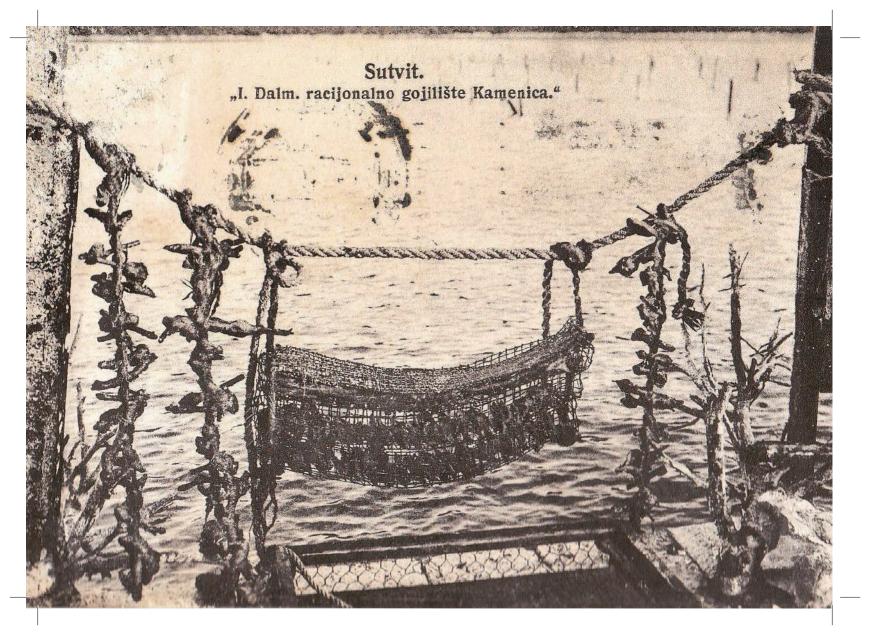
Presumably, Bistrina Cove was a well-known cultivation site back in the time of the Roman Empire, as corroborated by European flat oyster shells that have been found in excavated Roman remains. The first written accounts on trade with European flat oysters date from the 16th century. A document recording the oyster farm with wooden farming construction dates from 1667. In the beginning, this was the area dedicated only to the farming of the European flat oyster, the early



Ston ovster seller in 17 century



Oyster hatcheries of European flat oysters in Bistrina Cove in the ninetees



20th century marking the start of farming of the European mussel as well.

The Dubrovnik Republic was aware of the importance of this bay for the cultivation of bivalves. In 1333 it rented Bistrina Cove from Ban Stjepan Kotromanić. After Ban's death, The Dubrovnik Republic bought the bay by transferring the licence for fishing and cultivation in Mali Ston Bay to the Rector of Ston. The bay used to be divided into several lots, and Rector issued concessions for their use to those who obliged to produce bivalves and give a certain amount of the products in the disposal of the state - that is its representative in Ston.

The first available record of hunting oysters from their natural habitats and their further cultivation in Mali Ston Bay dates from 1573. After the fall of The Dubrovnik Republic and the arrival of the French, and later on the Austro-Hungarian rulers, all the farms in Mali Ston Bay became private properties. During WWII,

almost all the farms in Mali Ston Bay fell into ruin. After WWII, a state-owned farm for the cultivation of marine invertebrates, named *Kamenica*, was established in Bistrina Cove to cultivate European flat oysters and Mediterranean mussels.

The particularity of the European flat oyster from Mali Ston Bay is conditioned by the organoleptic characteristics of its flesh. In 2019 European flat oyster became the first seafood product to receive the protected designation of origin in Croatia. At the World's Fair held in London in 1936, the European flat oyster from Mali Ston Bay was awarded *Grand Prix* and the Gold Medal for quality.

Today, almost 86% of the total Croatian production of European flat oysters and Mediterranean mussels is taking place in Mali Ston Bay.

In 2019, farms in the Mali Ston Bay have produced more than one million European flat oysters and around 426,000 kg of Mediterranean mussels.



Fresh picked European flat oysters



Oyster hatcheries of European flat oysters in 20 century



# Code of Conduct in Mali Ston Bay

In order to preserve the natural values of Mali Ston Bay, the following actions are prohibited:

- navigating the vessels, anchoring and/ or mooring vessels outside the places defined by the regional plan or defined by the act of state entity that has jurisdiction over the navigation in Croatian territorial sea:
- washing vessels or vehicles with land surface waters, at the seashore or in the sea;
- mooring the vessels outside the places defined by the regional plan that have the status of moorings, anchorage, or port;
- taking away, or catching, or disturbing wild species that live in nature but are not strictly protected;
- feeding wild animals;
- engaging in illicit submarine activities;

- engaging in illicit fishing;
- damaging and/or destroying signs or information boards:
- lighting a fire outside of settlements and/or places that are specially marked and designated for that purpose;
- camping outside of places designated and marked as camping sites;
- flying paragliders and hang gliders outside the areas that are specially marked and designated for that purpose;
- unlicensed use of unmanned aerial vehicles;
- disposing the waste outside the designated and marked place for waste disposal;
- filling up the seashore;
- destroying or taking away the minerals and other cave adornments:
- destroying or damaging or taking away any objects from archaeological sites.

# ■ Natura 2000 areas involved in ECOSS project

Seven marine and coastal protected areas included in the *Natura 2000* network were used as case studies in the ECOSS project. Diverse oceanographic, ecological and anthropogenic features of these sites were used to investigate their conservation requirements and extrapolate the lessons learned to other *Natura 2000* sites in the Adriatic. *Natura 2000* case studies of ECOSS project are:

1. Po River delta Tratto Terminale Delta Veneto (IT3270017) and Po River delta (IT3270023):

with Po being the most significant river flowing into the Adriatic Sea, this river delta is an excellent case to study the links between the land and the sea 2. Tegnùe di Chioggia (IT3250047).

the isolated rocky substrates in predominantly muddy surroundings provide a natural support for sessile benthic organisms, making this site a real microhotspot for biodiversity.

3. Trezze San Pietro e Bardell. (1T3330009):

this unique site features coralligenous algae that provide a suitable habitat for numerous demersal and benthic fish species in an otherwise monotonous environment.

4. Cres-Lošínj (HR3000161)

this area is home to a resident sub-population of bottlenose dolphins, counting approximately 200 individuals. Studied since 1987, this sub-population is among the best-known ones in the Mediterranean.

5. Viški akvatorij (HR3000469):

waters around the island of Vis are among the most pristine habitats of bottlenose dolphins in the Adriatic and a biodiversitv hotspot.

6. Malostonski zaliev (HR4000015):

this area is under significant influence of freshwaters and the specific environmental conditions result in specific biodiversity dominated by bivalve cultivation, especially European Flat Oyster.























ECOlogical observing System in the Adriatic Sea: oceanographic observations for biodiversity - ECOSS

Ekološki promatrački sustav u Jadranskom moru: oceanografska opažanja za bioraznolikost The project was co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund through the program of cooperation across borders Interreg V-A Italy-Croatia 2014-2020.

**Duration:** 1 Jan 2019 - 30 Jun 2021 **ERDF funding:** € 2,881,968.38 **Total value:** € 3.390.551.05