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Introduction

1. The Meeting of the Regional Activity Centre for Environmental Remote Sensing (ERS/RAC) national Focal Points was held at the Hotel Sheraton, Catania, Italy, on 16 and 17 December 2004, thanks to the support of the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory, the Sicilian Region and the Sicilian Science and Technology Park.

Attendance

2. National Focal Points or their representatives from the following Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention attended the Meeting: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, European Commission, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Malta, Morocco, Slovenia, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Turkey.

3. The following United Nations Environment Programme Mediterranean Action Programme (UNEP/MAP) bodies and Secretariat units were represented: MEDU, MED POL Programme, ERS/RAC, Priority Action Programme Regional Activity Centre (PAP/RAC) and Blue Plan Regional Activity Centre (PB/RAC).

4. The following non-governmental and other organizations and experts were also present: Parco Scientifico e Tecnologico della Sicilia, IBM, ANSA, ARCE, COPEAM, EUMEDIS Project, EAMS, World Wildlife Fund, Legambiente, MareVivo, Amici per la Vita Onlus, Movimento Azzuro and Mr Yari Ginott, Expert.

5. The list of participants is attached as Annex 1 to this report

Opening of the Meeting

6. Mr Sergio Illuminato, Director, ERS/RAC, said that MAP's successes over the previous 30 years had been largely due to the sharing and exchange of experience and activities, to which ERS/RAC had contributed, initially through its environmental remote sensing activities. Its proposed expansion into the area of information and communication technology (ICT) was seen as a practical response to new global and regional developments and an opportunity to give fresh momentum and visibility to UNEP/MAP's work in protecting the Mediterranean environment and promoting sustainable development in the region. He expressed thanks to UNEP/MAP, the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory, the Sicilian Region and the Sicilian Science and Technology Park for the trust placed in him.

7. Ms Annalidia Pansini welcomed participants on behalf of the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory, stressing the importance of the Meeting in promoting concrete innovative approaches to the sustainable development of the Mediterranean region.

8. Since the adoption by the 13th Conference of the Parties of the Italian proposal to strengthen and refocus ERS/RAC with human and financial resources for coastal and sea-water monitoring and to provide UNEP/MAP with ICT assistance, the Host Country Agreement had been signed, the Centre had been established as a public law entity, its new Director appointed and over 2.5 million euros

made available by the Ministry for the Centre's activities during the coming biennium. As a follow up to the decisions of the COP 13, several activities had already been defined, namely the optimization of the UNEP/MAP website and the launching of the Campus-Ecomedia project. The purpose of those activities was to ensure wide stakeholder involvement in the activities and objectives of the Barcelona process, using innovative technological systems as the best vehicle for information and training.

9. Mr Paul Mifsud, MAP Coordinator, after acknowledging the support given by the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory to the MAP Secretariat and particularly to ERS/RAC, said that the Meeting provided an important opportunity to redefine and expand the role of ERS/RAC. He trusted that the discussions, and the ongoing evaluation of the Centre, which had unfortunately suffered from a lack of feedback from Contracting Parties, would culminate in recommendations to the Contracting Parties on the proposed new role of the Centre. The proposed focus on ICT would respond to MAP's need for a structural mechanism to promote its work, upgrade its database and conduct other public information activities, including the launching of the Mediterranean Environmental Award. MAP was indeed already drawing on the Centre's creative expertise in that area, for example in the creation of its new website.

10. Mr Arab Hoballah, MAP Deputy Coordinator, retracing the history of ERS/RAC, said that the Centre, largely for reasons of an unclear mandate from the outset and limited funding, was perceived as having under-performed and as being somewhat isolated within the overall MAP structure. For that reason, its activities needed to be redefined - globally, nationally, locally, and vis-à-vis MAP - in clear terms, with a regional strategy strengthening its technical capacity and means. A restructured ERS/RAC, with a strengthened ICT capacity, could greatly assist MAP in rising to the new challenges before it and meeting countries' needs.

11. It should be noted that the evaluation to be presented to the Meeting was a preliminary 'desk review', which could usefully be completed by input from the Meeting. He suggested that the discussions should focus on five issues: the achievements of the Centre and its added value; the constraints and shortcomings faced by Contracting Parties in their dealings with the Centre; needs and expectations; proposals for improvements in environmental remote sensing; and proposals or alternatives for expansion into ICT.

Expert evaluation of ERS/RAC

12. Mr Yari Ginott, evaluation Expert, described an evaluation that he had undertaken with Mr Luca Sabatini on the basis of official documents supplied by the ERS/RAC and MAP. Meetings had also been held with the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory and with MAP officials. Although a questionnaire had been circulated to Contracting Parties, there had been little response. The activities of the ERS/RAC had been found to consist of six coastal area management programmes (CAMPs), six forums, three workshops, six information activities, three activities for integrating the environment and development and four projects.

13. Several constraints had been identified. Firstly, the mandate and the structure of the Centre had not been clearly defined. Furthermore, there was a clear lack of financial resources. The contradictions

that arose from a private structure like the Centre working within MAP, which was a public organization, had given rise to a number of misunderstandings. Another constraint was the isolation experienced by a technological centre that had no common language with other, thematic centres or with countries. The fact that the Centre had had no memorandum of understanding with its host country (although that situation had since been rectified) had also created difficulties. Those five constraints had resulted in major management problems, as evidenced by the rapid turnover of directors. The final constraint that had been identified was the lack of a regional approach.

14. The added value of the Centre, which had been demonstrated in many projects, was that it provided a clearing-house for good practice. Thus, on the basis of inventories of information, it could suggest and apply the best available techniques in remote sensing to give specific results to a region, sub-region or country. The Centre integrated remote sensing with traditional techniques and brought together experts in remote sensing with decision-makers for exchanges of experience. Those activities represented a trend towards a regional approach.

15. Two proposals could be made on the basis of the evaluation. The first was to make new use of earth observations. Those uses would include addressing problems in larger areas rather than pilot projects, identifying geographical and temporal gaps in knowledge and combining data on coastal and offshore locations. That information could be made available on a geographical dynamic internet site.

16. The second proposal was to extend the activities of the Centre to include ICT. Public awareness could be raised only on the basis of valid, up-to-date, readily available information. Electronic training courses (e-learning) adapted to the context of the Mediterranean and MAP would ensure wider participation than on-site courses. ICT could also be used to inform the public about products that contained toxic materials. A central database would collect essential data from focal points and other centres.

17. In the ensuing discussion, many participants stressed the excellent scientific work that had been accomplished by ERS/RAC over the years, some representatives looking forward to continued cooperation on remote sensing projects in the future. It was considered that the constraints that had been identified by Mr Ginott would have to be addressed before any new functions were added, and the discussion should proceed on that premise.

18. There was wide agreement that ERS/RAC should relaunch the remote sensing tasks for which had been created and which responded to the objectives of the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols. Its core substantive function – environmental remote sensing – should be clearly redefined and expanded, on the basis of the principle that the best possible use should be made of existing resources and facilities.

19. Concern was expressed about the proposed expansion of ERS/RAC activities into ICT and the lack of a clear project design for the Centre. Up to now, its work and findings had not been maximized or adequately shared. ICT should be used as a tool for disseminating the information and sharing it with all interested parties, notably the Contracting Parties, the other RACs and MAP Secretariat units. Such information could be drawn not only from MAP sources but indeed also from relevant external sources, which were readily available, including national centres in Mediterranean countries. The

proposed reorientation of the activities of ERS/RAC should not overlap with those of the Information Office at MEDU. In that connection, one representative made the point that information management was one of MAP's weaknesses. That applied not only to the MAP website but also to publications, which were not sufficiently well targeted. A proper publications policy was needed; political decisions concerning publications, for example, should not be decentralized. The role of a remote sensing centre was to centralize the mine of information obtained by remote sensing in a data bank for use by governments, other centres and the public. Dissemination of the results of remote sensing could also generate interest in using that tool elsewhere.

20. One representative suggested that the funding for the Centre should be diversified, perhaps including input from the European Commission. He agreed that the projects should cover a larger number of countries, but at the same time it would be important to seek local advice, especially on sensitive issues such as education. The results of successful studies should be distributed to all the countries of the Mediterranean region, so that they could be used as a basis for training and for other, similar studies. In his experience, ICT was inherent to remote sensing centres; however, extension of the use of ICT to areas such as development and education would add another layer of responsibility to the functions of the ERS/RAC. In that connection, another representative said that it was unclear how training activities tied in with the objectives of the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols.

21. The representative of Spain introduced a proposal that he had circulated to the Meeting in writing for activities to be conducted within ERS/RAC. The proposal was for a plan for remote sensing observation and monitoring of the Mediterranean region by means of medium- and low-resolution satellites, providing standardized indicators, coupled with the creation of a geo-portal and a web nodes network with spatial databases to be used by the Contracting Parties. Spain proposed to collaborate with Italy on the plan and to provide technical and financial support for the activities. The guiding principle behind the proposal was the development of a participatory regional approach, creating a common vision and providing easy access by all Mediterranean countries to remote sensing data using standardized techniques.

22. The representative of Israel introduced a proposal concerning the monitoring of coastal waters in the Levantine basin: SISCAL, an Internet-based service for obtaining Earth observation data products on aquatic ecosystems. SISCAL has been developed in the framework of a European R&D project and is now searching for ways to operate as a self-sustainable facility. ERS/RAC might be interested in getting involved with the project.

23. The MAP Coordinator, responding to comments, assured participants that the intention was not to abolish the Centre's remote sensing function, which had been ascribed to it by the Contracting Parties, but to see whether it could not assume a complementary role, using available ICT facilities, for the benefit of MAP and hence all the Contracting Parties. There was a perceived need for a central structure to provide MAP with technical assistance for information management, and that role could readily be assumed by ERS/RAC. In terms of human resources and financing, the Information Office at MEDU was not amenable to expansion and should be regarded more as a public information facility. It should be remembered that ERS/RAC was an Italian-owned and -funded Centre, working under the umbrella of MAP, and Italy was to be commended for its generous support. ERS/RAC's new

consolidated status and resource base - which indeed removed several of the constraints identified in the consultant's evaluation – provided an ideal opportunity to conduct the necessary review of its achievements and shortcomings and redefine its role, as urged by several participants. He saw the Spanish proposal as a way of expanding the Centre's collaboration with all Contracting Parties and as adding a new, more broadly regional dimension to the Centre's activities, to be further developed in cooperation with the Italian authorities. In response to comments about information and communication problems, he agreed on the need for an improved information strategy and assured participants that the matter was being given careful attention.

24. Mr Francesco Saverio Civili, MED POL Coordinator, recalled that, although the mandate of the ERS/RAC had been clearly defined, its role had not. Initially, the management of the Centre had had difficulty in accepting the fact that it was not a thematic centre like the other MAP centers; rather, its role was to act as a tool or a service centre for MAP. As has been stated, ICT was embedded in remote sensing; therefore, the proposed reorientation required no justification.

25. The representative of Italy said that the administrative and funding problems of the Centre had been successfully addressed by the host country. The types of activities it should conduct and its mandate, however, could be defined only by concertation among the Centre, the Italian Government, MAP and the Contracting Parties, and the proposals from the present meeting would be useful in that respect.

26. Mr Illuminato, Director, ERS/RAC, thanked the Meeting for its positive comments. It was his intention to integrate the activities of the ERS/RAC with those of other centres in the Mediterranean region and to make the expertise of the ERS/RAC available to national centres. He was eager to demonstrate the usefulness of the remote sensing tool and ICT for supporting other programmes. The aim of the Centre was to create new ways of making the best possible use of data obtained by MAP components. The resources that could be attracted by remote sensing and the active involvement of civil society could engender the type of support that MAP deserved.

27. Management of the information overload is an international issue, and ICT could be used to simplify the use of multiple sources of data by all partners and to make information more readily available to the public. It is the intention of the Centre to use ICT to create data platforms that could be used by existing training centres.

28. He agreed that the overall design of the Centre must be clearly outlined, and the comments of the participants at the present Meeting would be of great assistance in drawing up a proposal for approval by all Contracting Parties.

29. Mr Hoballah, Deputy Coordinator, MAP, thanked the participants for their comments and said that all of them would be taken into consideration in formulating proposals for approval by the Contracting Parties. A report of the evaluation would be sent to participants within the coming two months. The comments indicated that the added value of the ERS/RAC in improving synergy among the MAP components should be better communicated. Several representatives had emphasized the importance of building on existing instruments. There appeared to be consensus that the ERS/RAC should strengthen its remote sensing activities and expand its activities as necessary.

30. The project to be discussed on the following day had already been approved by the Contracting Parties. The fact that it focused on ICT activities did not indicate that the ERS/RAC was moving its attention from remote sensing to ICT.

On-going activities

30. Mr Illuminato, Director, ERS/RAC, presenting ERS/RAC's on-going activities, said that they include essentially the upgrading of the UNEP/MAP website, as provided for in the guidelines adopted by the 13th Conference of the Parties, support for the dissemination of data and a forum activity involving e-learning and e-training activities.

31. A new version of the UNEP/MAP website and its existing data bank would be accessible as from January 2005. The idea was to use the new technologies to ease access to that wealth of online information by Mediterranean scientists, students and civil society in general. The new technological platform would serve as a tool for managing, monitoring and updating available information and in so doing would assist in managing the results of the RACs, making the most of MAP's activities, facilitating the exchange of information and hence improving cooperation among MAP components and access by Mediterranean citizens.

32. A further aim was to help improve the technological e-management structures of the partners involved so as to enhance environmental protection projects, reaching out to civil society, the media and the socio-cultural community. Once the technological support platform – the data bank – was established, the aim was to identify activities and offer technical support for specialist training in environmental protection, the results of which, together with MAP data, would be fed into an freely accessible online encyclopaedia. On the basis of pilot projects to be conducted in 2005, providing technical support to programmes on request, a coordinated programme for the coming years would be presented for transmission to the Contracting Parties. The Centre was open to further requests for support.

33. Mr Civili, MED POL Coordinator, said that the prospect of the expansion of ERS/RAC's functions and action into the ICT field was seen by MED POL as an opportunity to widen the spectrum of cooperation within MAP. For example, a new MED POL database had been developed but currently contained data from monitoring programmes, i.e. on levels of pollutants. With MED POL now entering the phase of pollution control through implementation of the Strategic Action Programme (SAP), data currently being collected on sources of pollution, as well as those on biological effects, could be combined with existing data in an integrated, regularly updated information system with the help of ERS/RAC, providing an overview of trends in the Mediterranean and representing a significant breakthrough for the whole region.

34. A meeting held in Athens the previous month with experts and ERS/RAC had demonstrated ERS/RAC's potential technological contribution to a much-needed integrated information system as an important management tool.

International organizations with similar activities

35. Mr Niall Sclater, EUMEDIS Project, made a presentation describing the Mediterranean Virtual University, which was a 25-month project financed by the European Commission. It offered online courses in computer science in collaboration with universities and institutes in the eastern Mediterranean. Learning laboratories had been equipped with computers for students who did not have their own. In answer to questions, he said that no training in environmental management or conservation was currently being conducted but that the scope of the Project could be expanded. The courses and materials were interoperable and could be used on different platforms. Courses were currently only in English. One representative emphasized the international reach of graphic representations such as maps, which knew no language barriers.

36. Mr Pietro Soddu and Mr Jamal Berrad, EAMS, presented the EuroArab Management School, a cooperative project of the European Union and the League of Arab States, which acted as a link between European and Arab business schools. PB/RAC had estimated that the Mediterranean Region would require more than 150 000 managers and technicians to work on environmental problems in the public and private sectors, and EAMS was planning develop a programme to fill that need. Some programmes already had e-learning components, so that a certain amount of experience had been gained in that training aspect.

37. Several representatives recalled that the function of MAP centres was to protect the Mediterranean Sea and coastal environment. ERS/RAC could be involved in training courses in the use of remote sensing as a tool for work on the environment.

38. Mr Illuminato, Director ERS/RAC, said that ERS/RAC could provide UNEP/MAP with the technical module of training courses developed in other centres. Mr Hoballah, MAP Deputy Coordinator, added that in its new capacity ERS/RAC would be acting as a platform for the transformation of information, to improve access. The substance of its work would, however, remain the issues described in the Barcelona Convention

39. The representative of Italy specified that all the activities presented at the Meeting were intended as technical support, for the wider benefit of MAP, as agreed by the 13th Conference of the Parties. It should be borne in mind that the 13th Meeting of the Contracting Parties had decided not only to strengthen the Centre's remote sensing activities, but also to test activities in the ICT field. The proposed activities would be presented to the 14th meeting of the Contracting Parties.

40. The representative of Spain gave further details of the Spanish proposal presented on the previous day, emphasizing several points. First, the project was intended to contribute to ERS/RAC's mandate. Second, it was proposed in the knowledge that the mandate was subject to funding and other resource limitations, whence the need to ascertain funding needs from the outset. Third, it was important to secure acceptance, participation and commitment by all and hence to clarify the expected needs and benefits in that regard. The information must be integrated into a global policy, which meant that the kind of indicators needed for MAP should be clearly defined from the outset. Outlining the Plan's two main pillars, namely, the observation and monitoring activities and the creation of a geo-portal and a web nodes network, he again stressed the regional approach developed through the

project, with active participation in and consensus on all stages of the plan, from methodology to end use, and its importance from the point of view of sustainability.

41. Mr Hoballah, MAP Deputy Coordinator, said that the clarifications given by the representative of Italy and the Spanish proposal explained the potential linkage between ICT and the functions of ERS/RAC. The latter proposal was most welcome, not only through the support offered but also in contributing to the overall regional strategy that had been missing in the Centre's work. Those comments were supported from the floor.

42. Mr Ruggiero Faggioni, Strategic Projects Manager, ANSA, presented ANSA Med, a network of all Mediterranean news agencies working together as equal partners to ensure the flow of certified and accredited information on the Mediterranean, both through its worldwide newscasts and through its Internet site. It also worked in partnership with other agencies, and would welcome partnership with UNEP/MAP to broaden the scope of the information available.

43. Ms Alessandra Paradisi, Secretary-General, COPEAM, presented the activities and aims of the Permanent Conference of Mediterranean Audiovisual Operators (COPEAM), which was an international interprofessional association operating as a permanent forum of dialogue and debate, a network of networks bringing together operators – now totalling 122 – from various audiovisual and cultural sectors in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Its activities ranged from co-productions and exchanges to training, cultural events and projects. Cooperation with UNEP/MAP could be mutually beneficial, offering opportunities for joint activities and exchanges of expertise, and enhancing the visibility of MAP's activities and environmental issues in the media and among the general public.

44. Mr Enrico Milone, ARCE, said that his organization brought together architects from all the main cities and towns of the European Union in order to exchange information on topics of mutual interest, such as standards and regulations applicable to buildings and landscapes. Another important activity was continuing education for architects and engineers. One of the most important instruments for such exchanges was the ARCE website. He hoped that collaboration with UNEP/MAP would provide input on ecological habitats and use of technological platform.

45. Mr Illuminato, Director, ERS/RAC, said that ICT could provide innovative systems for sharing of environmental data throughout the MAP system. The activities of other organizations described during the Meeting represented windows of opportunity for potential UNEP/MAP partnerships. He envisioned ERS/MAP as a basic reference point for environmental measurements, which could be used by professionals, the media, schools and universities. Civil society, which was the ultimate beneficiary of the activities of MAP, would enjoy facilitated access to the data through the use of an innovative technological platform.

46. The draft report of the Meeting would be sent to all participants within the next two months. In May 2005, all the MAP centres would meet to examine the conclusions and recommendations of the experts who had been asked to evaluate ERS/RAC. Meanwhile, the Centre would continue to execute the tasks that it had been given by the Contracting Parties at their 13th meeting.

47. Mr Hoballah, MAP Deputy Coordinator, added that proposals for the future direction of ERS/RAC would be considered by the Contracting Parties at their next meeting, in Slovenia in 2005.

Closure of the Meeting

48. After the customary exchange of courtesies, the Meeting was declared closed at 13:30 hours on 17 December 2004.