

# Sicily Environment Foundation

*Part of the Conservation Collective*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Sicily Environment Foundation (SEF) is being set up to protect and restore nature across coastal, terrestrial, and marine ecosystems.**

**SEF will raise funds from people and businesses, locally and internationally, with strong Sicilian connections, and distribute that funding towards the most effective grassroots environmental initiatives, campaigns, and projects.**

### *Introduction*

The Sicily Environment Foundation (SEF) aims to promote conservation of nature and environmental protection as the basis for the sustainable development of Sicily. SEF will be part of the Conservation Collective, a global network of local foundations facilitating funding for the most effective grassroots environmental actions and projects.

SEF will have a key role in sustaining conservation by securing new channels of funding for initiatives developed to protect and restore threatened and vulnerable species and ecosystems, to engage and empower communities in sustainably managing natural resources, to increase consumer awareness, ultimately, to connect people to nature and increase resilience to climate change.

The foundation will make essential contributions to the Sicilian environment and society, choosing approaches that are sustainable and inclusive, ensuring the needs of communities are considered. Localised pragmatic actions will be co-created through collaboration with local partners and engagement of communities to achieve conservation targets and ensure benefits for both nature and people.

This is the executive summary of the full scoping report, commissioned by the Conservation Collective and undertaken by Gaia Agnello (May 2022), conservation scientists based in Sicily, with recommendations from Ambra Messina, former Executive Director of the Aeolian Islands Preservation Foundation. Click [here](#) to request a copy.



## *The Sicilian Region and Environment*

Sicily is the most extended region in Italy and the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. It includes several archipelagos, altogether 14 inhabited small islands, three active volcanoes (Etna, Stromboli and Vulcano), and numerous submerged volcanoes. Mount Etna, which rises 3,350 meters over the sea, is the highest volcano in Europe and the most active stratovolcano in the world.

Sicily and its small islands, represent a biodiversity hotspot offering a great variety of habitats and ecosystems - including marine, coastal, inland, and high-mountainous – and hosting important biodiversity values. Notably the region with the most marine protected areas in Italy, Sicily is one of the major reservoirs of coastal and marine biodiversity. Sicilian waters are home to a rich diversity of iconic and often endangered species such as loggerhead turtle, sperm whale, blue fin tuna, sharks, rays, and corals. Urgent actions are needed to protect marine life, mitigate climate change impact, damage from pollution, overfishing, marine litter, and marine traffic.

Sicily is one of the most significant biodiversity hotspots in the Mediterranean basin, with approximately 3,252 species of vascular plants (recorded so far), of which 500 are endemic, 16% of the overall vascular flora. At least the 12.4% of the Sicilian flora is subject to a concrete risk of extinction, while another 6.8% are potentially close to be. It also hosts 207 terrestrial vertebrate species, of which 43 mammals, 155 nesting bird's species, 22 reptile's species, 6 amphibians. Important bird migration routes pass through the mainland and the small islands.

The landscape is dominated by agriculture, about 63% of the territory; while 31% is characterised by semi-natural and natural vegetation; and about 5% is occupied by human settlements. High biodiversity values are localised in correspondence of mountainous areas (Madonie and Palermo mountains, Nebrodi, Sicani, Iblei, Etna and Peloritani) and in the plains of South-Eastern Sicily. Low biodiversity occurs in intensive farming areas, especially in western Sicily (predominance of vineyards), in Agrigento (vineyards and olive groves), in Catania (citrus fruits) and in the whole coastline (greenhouse and urban areas). The main industries are agriculture, wine industry and fisheries.

In terms of protected areas, there are 1 National Park, 4 Regional Parks, 7 Marine Protected Areas, 245 Natura 2000 sites, for a total of 270.724 ha of protected land and 79.304 ha of protected sea. With the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the expansion of the Natura 2000 Network is expected to reach 30% of the regional territory.

Sicily is in a strategic position to contribute towards conservation targets in the Mediterranean basin. SEF will establish close collaborations within the Conservation Collective network, particularly at the national level with the Tuscany Environment Foundation, as well as with the other foundations in the Mediterranean region to strengthen the Conservation Collective network and increase impacts of initiatives at the global and regional level.

The Conservation Collective has built a network of 17 local foundations, most of them with a significant potential focus for the Mediterranean (Cyclades Islands, Ionian Islands, Argolic Gulf – Greece; Ibiza, Menorca, Mallorca – Spain; Tuscany – Italy; Turquoise Coast - Turkey; Cyprus) (see map Figure 1). SEF envisions a strategy built around the idea that biodiversity conservation and

environmental protection should be led by local people and that communities who are effectively engaged and trained by specialists, have a vital role in taking action. Such collaboration between scientists and communities, also known as citizen science or community-science, will be crucial for co-creating projects responding to the local needs and ensuring that the public (or citizen scientists) can participate and make an invaluable contribution to conservation. Yet, very little opportunities are offered to local communities in Sicily to actively help protecting the environment and biodiversity. SEF will be in the position to help by increasing the potential for public engagement in environmental actions and will play a key role in leveraging local projects and grassroots organisations, providing funding for long-term sustainability of initiatives and support for the development of cutting-edge projects.

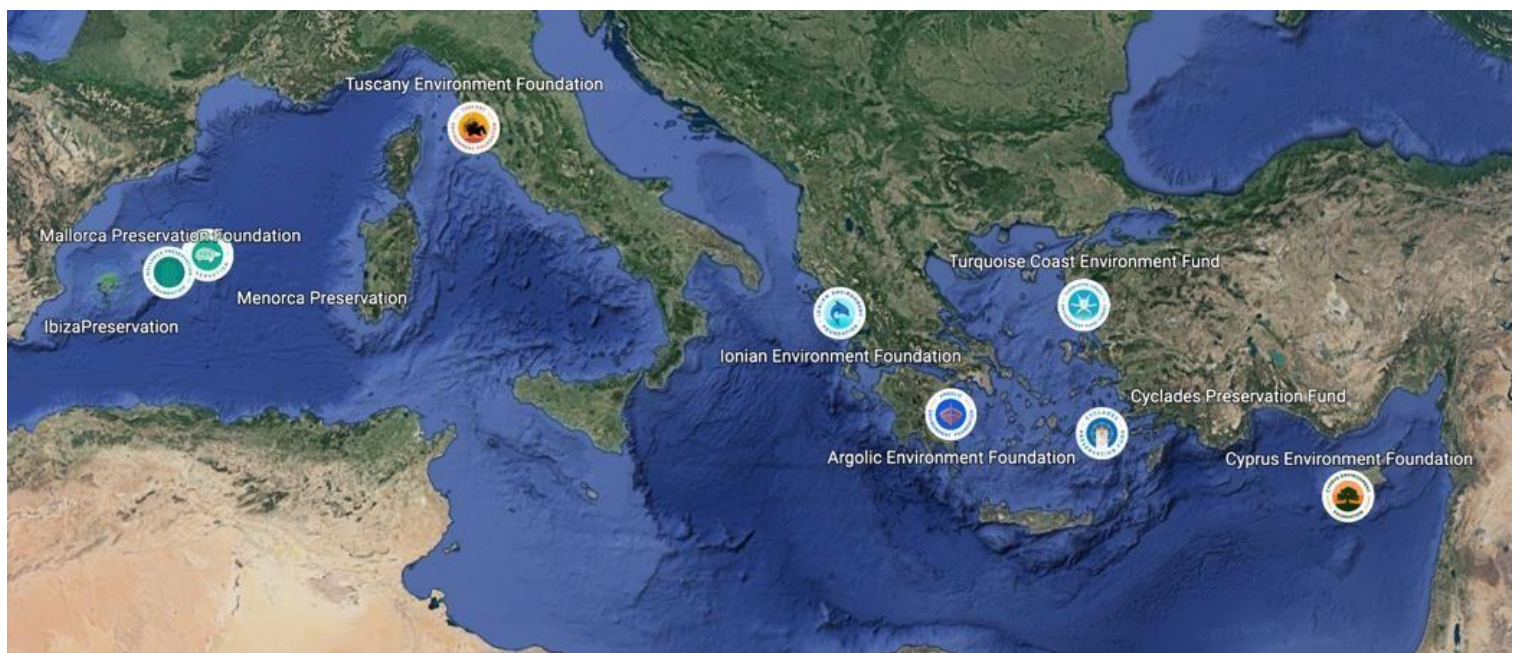


Figure 1: Map of Conservation Collective's Mediterranean foundations



### Threats and Challenges

There are a number of challenges that have continued to hamper the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation in Sicily. It is always about a collective responsibility to protect and preserve biodiversity, nonetheless, one of the major challenges that face conservation in Sicily is the **lack of awareness and public engagement**, despite a growing and increasingly motivated movement of citizens are willing to contribute their time and effort. **Lack of sustainability of conservation projects** and **collaboration between key stakeholders** limits the potential of ongoing effort and successful projects, minimizing the possibility of achieving long lasting impacts. Many organisations struggle with **excessive bureaucracy**, a risk that can slow project development and implementations, which the Sicily Environment Foundation aims to overcome through stakeholder facilitation and channelling funding to the most effective grassroots projects.

Despite conservation efforts, biodiversity in Sicily faces many threats. Some are localised and caused directly by human activities, other occur at a global level but must be also addressed locally. Key issues for Sicily and its future sustainable development are related to biodiversity loss, climate change, intensification of natural disasters, lack of effectiveness of protected areas, lack of law enforcement and compliance with environmental legislations. The most pressing **threats for marine biodiversity and ecosystems** include the unsustainable exploitation caused by industrialised fishing and illegal fishing, the rapid geographical expansion of invasive alien species, pollution and marine litter, and the lack of marine protected areas. While unsustainable agriculture, wildfires, poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking, invasive alien species, pollution, unauthorized building, petrochemical poles, fossil fuel power plants, mismanagement of waste, and eco-mafias are **threats for the terrestrials**.

**Tourism** can be considered a threat but also part of the solution. The impact of mass tourism on coastal areas and small islands in the summer is significant; however, it is vital for the local economy of the region. A code of conduct should be made available to visitors of protected areas providing simple rules on how to be considerate to nature and local traditions, while park fees could go towards the maintenance and protection of the area and the creation of green jobs. Unfortunately, the **lack of management plans and management bodies for protected areas** makes it difficult to regulate tourism and ensure benefits for both local economy and nature.



## Strategy

The guiding principle is to work with and alongside local partners to support their conservation effort and sustain collaborative practices. Local partners will include a wide range of stakeholder from NGOs, community groups, universities, government departments, botanic gardens, museums, industry, and private sector. The Sicily Environment Foundation aims to establish a network of like-minded people working for conservation across Sicily and sustain communities to build a powerful collective voice for local conservation. SEF will provide essential support by building capacity for conservation through proper training, equipment and facilitation, leveraging local specialists and developing projects that promote public engagement in actions tackling several environmental challenges. As a result, a community of local conservationists and citizen scientists will make an invaluable contribution for the protection of the Sicilian environment.

As part of the Conservation Collective, SEF will foster cross-border cooperation for conservation through close collaboration with other foundations of the Conservation Collective. Such collaboration will facilitate the sharing of best practices and effective methods, which will be key to implement successful projects in Sicily while at the same time contributing to global targets.

### SEF - aims and objectives:

- Awarding grants to the most effective local projects and grassroots organisations.
- Assess replicability of project frameworks adopted by other local foundations within the CC network.
- Develop new cutting-edge projects to be implemented in collaboration with local partners in response to local needs.
- Engaging communities adopting strategies that are specific for the different sociocultural contexts, ensuring inclusiveness and equity.
- Build capacity supporting local partners with expert trainings, equipment, facilitating funding and grant proposal writing.
- Sustain projects that are effective in developing actionable knowledge that is grounded in evidence and able to guide decision making processes.
- Generate press interest through forms of recognition of outstanding examples, such as “Sicily awards” for successful conservation projects.
- Generate optimism by communicating stories and results achieved through innovative approaches such as storytelling.
- Drive long lasting impacts and sustainable behaviour change.

## Areas of Work

### Biodiversity Conservation and Protected Areas

- Protecting and restoring natural habitats and native species
- Increase the effective management of protected areas
- Support the effective monitoring of species population and habitats to fill data gaps.

### Agroecology for Sustainable Food Systems

- Working with communities adopting approaches that improve environmental sustainability and promote participation in climate-smart agriculture.
- Advocating for the adoption of agroecology in traditional farming as an integrated and holistic approach.
- Restoring degraded ecosystems with indigenous species.

### Eco-tourism and nature-based activities

- Promote eco-tourism activities that provide visitors with educational opportunities to gain understanding of habitats and conservation issues.
- Promote the diversity of nature-based activities that Sicily offers, like surfing or skiing on top of Etna volcano.
- Support interventions that enhance visitors experience in natural and/or protected areas.

### Crosscutting themes and activities

- SEF will identify practical measures of mitigation, adaptation, research and awareness-raising of climate change.
- Capacity building and empowerment of stakeholders through assessment of stakeholder's needs, expert training, networking opportunities to share best practices and exchange experience and support for proposal writing.
- Environmental education and awareness through educational campaigns addressing key environmental challenges and active engagement in conservation actions “learning by doing it”.
- Citizen Science to aid with data collection, awareness-raising, educational purposes and community engagement.

## Structure of the Sicily Environment Foundation

One full-time local Executive Director leading the organization, overseeing grant-making and fund-raising.

A Steering Committee, comprising 5-10 founding donors, will review and decide on grant recommendations and contribute to the fund-raising effort.

Steering committee members pledge to donate €10,000 per year, for a minimum of three years.

An Advisory Board supports the ED in sourcing and assessing grant proposals with technical expertise.

### *Join us!*

We're aiming to raise a minimum of €100,000 per year and are about half-way there, with Ben Goldsmith (the founder of Conservation Collective), and a further group of five who have committed funds so far.

We're looking for donors, projects, and Sicily-lovers to devote all our efforts to conserve, protect and restore Sicily's unique environment.

You can help us achieve this by contributing to and supporting SEF with an annual donation and/or making introductions to those in a position to do so.

**For more information contact:** [Jade Brudenell](#) (Executive Director, Conservation Collective)

**Visit the Conservation Collective website** <https://conservation-collective.org/>

