

The RELIONMED EU-LIFE project: public and stakeholder awareness of invasive lionfish in Europe

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The recent invasive spread of *Pterois miles* (Bennett, 1828) has raised concerns due to its potential ecological and socioeconomic impacts. The species is now established in several eastern parts of the basin and is expanding rapidly. The coastal ecosystems of Cyprus, near the Suez Canal, are amongst the first Mediterranean waters to be affected by the lionfish invasion. Sightings from scientists, fishermen and divers confirm that the lionfish are becoming abundant around the island of Cyprus.

The RELIONMED project (Preventing a LIONfish invasion in the MEDiterranean through early response and targeted REmoval) aims to tackle the invasion and mitigate its impacts in biodiversity hotspots and priority habitats off Cyprus. The project aims to make Cyprus the first line of defence against the invasion of lionfish in the Mediterranean. RELIONMED's main objectives are a) to develop the capacity to ensure that Cyprus can tackle the lionfish invasion, b) to assess the effectiveness of a range of lionfish invasion prevention measures such as the development and implementation of an early detection and removal system driven by motivated citizens and c) to develop tools that can be transferred and replicated in other countries of the region.

An Atlantic lionfish invasion has shown that management is most effective when the public and stakeholders are engaged. Therefore, the RELIONMED project aims involve citizens in tackling the invasive lionfish off the coasts of Cyprus. In October and November 2017, surveys were conducted to assess baseline knowledge and perceptions of the general public and primary stakeholders of lionfish in Cyprus. A telephone survey was used to assess the perceptions and knowledge of a representative cross section of adults while questionnaire surveys with marine stakeholders (members of the public who make use of the marine environment as a resource, e.g. anglers, divers, and decision-makers) were conducted alongside meetings held in five districts across the country.

The results revealed differences between public and marine stakeholders' knowledge and perceptions; with the latter being significantly more informed. There was a divergence in opinion regarding the consumption of lionfish and the purchase of products made from lionfish (e.g. jewellery). The public was more opposed to such statements than the stakeholders. However, both the public and stakeholders agreed that it is necessary to undertake research to understand the potential effects of lionfish on the local environment, economy and human-health as well as to develop a management strategy to limit the spread of lionfish.

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