

Greenpeace urges Greece to scrap offshore gas drilling project because of impact on whales, dolphins

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Greenpeace on Thursday urged Greece to abandon a deep-sea gas exploration project in the Mediterranean, citing newly published research to argue that its impact on endangered whales and dolphins would be greater than previously believed.

The [environmental group](#) said a survey last year in waters off southwestern Greece and Crete that are earmarked for [exploratory drilling](#) found sea mammals were present there in the winter, as well as the summer, as had been already established.

The area being explored for gas largely overlaps the Hellenic Trench, which includes the Mediterranean's deepest waters, at 5,267 meters (17,300 feet). It is a vital habitat for the sea's few hundred sperm whales, and for other marine mammals already threatened by fishing, collisions with ships and plastic pollution.

Current environmental safeguards in place for the project limit prospection to the winter, to less impact whale and dolphin, or cetacean, breeding periods.

But the survey [published Thursday](#) in the *Endangered Species Research* journal found that at least four species of cetaceans—including sperm whales and Cuvier's beaked whales—were present in the area all year round.

Kostis Grimanis from Greenpeace Greece said that part of the Mediterranean is of "huge" ecological importance.

"And yet, the government and oil companies are obsessively pursuing hydrocarbon exploration in these waters," he said. "This is an absurd crime against nature. It will not only be detrimental to these iconic marine fauna species, but to our fight against the climate crisis," by seeking to exploit undersea fossil fuels.

Greenpeace called on the government to cancel all offshore drilling permits.

In 2019, Greece granted exploration rights for two blocks of seabed

south and southwest of the island of Crete to an international energy consortium, and smaller projects are under way farther north. This year, ExxonMobil and Greece's Helleniq Energy completed a three-month [seismic survey](#) of the seabed in the two big blocks, and the Greek government says initial exploratory drilling could start there in 2025.

Officials say [the strictest environmental standards](#) are being followed.

The seismic [survey](#) bounces sonic blasts off the seabed to identify potential gas deposits, a process that would be deafening to sound-sensitive cetaceans. Sonar used by warships has been shown to have deadly effects on whales, and experts say seismic surveys can do the same. Drilling and extracting gas would also cause significant undersea noise, according to environmentalists.

The new report, by Greenpeace Greece, the University of Exeter and the Athens-based Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute, detected at least five species of cetaceans in 166 encounters—including 14 [sperm whales](#)—in winter 2022. It followed similar research during summer months.

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