

Italy’s marble sculptures bring the sea back to life

Project to stop illegal trawlers off the Tuscan coast has had immensely positive ecological impact

By Nick Squires in Rome

SITTING on the seabed, they look like the ancient totems of some long-forgotten civilisation; an Atlantis of the Mediterranean.

But an unusual initiative in which 39 huge stone sculptures were positioned on the sea floor off the coast of Tuscany is reaping rewards.

The idea was that the huge sculptures would snag the nets of the many illegal trawlers that were targeting the area, deterring them from poaching.

Conservationists and local fishermen now say that six years after the start of the project, it is working, with populations of fish and crustaceans recovering after years of decline.

A pod of dolphins has even established itself in the large bay off the coastal town of Talamone, and lobsters have returned after decades of being absent.

It has been such a success that there are now plans to position more sculptures on the seabed further north along the Tuscan coast.

“It’s great, very gratifying. There are now fish and jellyfish and 15-inch-long anemones. It shows that if you give the sea a chance, it will recover,” said Emily Young, a British sculptor who contributed two 20-tonne sculptures to the project, the first of which was lowered from a barge in 2015.

“The problem was that vast dredging trawlers were operating illegally along the coast, tearing up the seabed and sea-grass meadows, destroying everything.

“The idea of the sculptures is that they snag the trawlers’ nets, which are very expensive to replace,” Ms Young, who has been hailed as Britain’s greatest living stone sculptor, told *The Daily Telegraph*.

Born in London but now living near Grosseto in Tuscany, her grandmother, also a sculptor, was a colleague of Auguste Rodin and the widow of the explorer Captain

Robert Falcon Scott of Antarctic fame. The idea of deterring illegal fishing with sculptures was conceived by Paolo Fanciulli, a 60-year-old local fisherman whom Ms Young describes as “a visionary”. Populations of snapper, bream, red mullet and other species have all bounced back since the sculptures were placed along a 10-mile stretch of the seabed.

“Even the lobsters are back – we hadn’t seen them for 35 years,” he said.

The sculptures are made of huge chunks of marble, which were donated for free by the owner of a marble quarry at Carrara in Tuscany, in the mountains where Michelangelo sourced his marble.

“The marble is veined with grey rather than pure white, which makes it hard to sell. It was going to waste, just sitting there,” said Ms Young, one of a

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dozen international and Italian sculptors who contributed her time and work for free.

“We’ve managed to totally stop the illegal fishing in the area,” said Ippolito Turco, the president of an association that looks after the sculptures. Now we’re looking at extending the project along the coast to the north. We want to put more sculptures on the seafloor. It has proved to be very effective.”

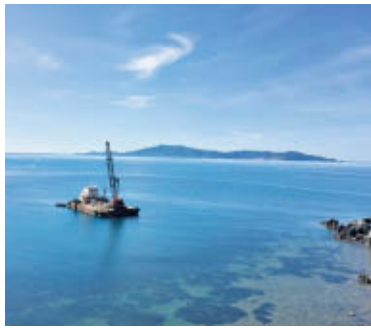
The carved blocks of stone are not just a way of tackling illegal dredging – they also form an underwater sculpture park. At a depth of eight metres, they are too deep for most snorkellers but they can easily be explored by scuba divers.

“What you want to happen is that in time, you won’t know they are sculptures. They will be so covered in seaweed and algae that they will look like a coral reef or the remains of a wreck,” said Ms Young.

“I like to think of the archaeologists of the future, a thousand years from now, coming across the sculptures and thinking perhaps that they are the remains of an ancient civilisation.”



The underwater sculpture park, top, was the vision of fisherman Paolo Fanciulli, above; the project is located in a bay near Talamone, right; British sculptor Emily Young with one of her creations for the project, left



NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX/REYNE GUARDIAN/REYNE

French take to hiking as they rediscover the countryside

By Rebecca Rosman in Paris

IT IS one of the few success stories of the pandemic: for the second year in a row, hiking in France is on the up, becoming one of the country’s favourite pastimes.

“It feels weird saying it, but the health crisis has hardly been a crisis for us,” said Séverine Ikkawi, director of FFRandonnée, the French hiking federation.

According to the federation, visits to its website have increased by nearly 70 per cent since the end of 2019. Sales of GR maps – long distance trails throughout Europe – have increased by more than 40 per cent in the same period.

“The French want to rediscover France, explore the different kinds of landscapes the country has to offer and just get some fresh air,” said Ms Ikkawi. “When you put all these elements together – you get hiking.”

A recent survey conducted by FFRandonnée found that nearly 18 million French people said they regularly participated in the sport, nearly a quarter of the population.

18 million

The number of French people – almost one in four – who said in a survey that they regularly participate in hiking

“Almost anyone can do it ... it’s an extremely accessible activity,” said Clément Lhommeau, the founder of Helloways, a website that shares hundreds of hikes across France as well as Brussels.

Mr Lhommeau says traffic to the website increased by more than 1,500 per cent in the days after France’s first lockdown in May 2020. This summer, he says he’s seen traffic continue to grow as more people opt for holidays within the country.

“I think Covid-19 has really had an impact on how people look at the world now,” Mr Lhommeau said. “More and more people are looking to slow down, spend more time with family and friends and get closer to nature ... of course hiking is a great way to do all that at once.”

While the Cevennes, Brittany and Corsica were amongst the most popular regions for hikers to explore, Mr Lhommeau says there has also been an explosion of people looking for smaller trails in major cities, including Paris.

“Especially during the lockdowns when there were limits on how far people could travel, we saw a lot of people looking at maps around big cities, which was really cool,” he said.

The website lists more than 100 hikes in the Paris region alone.

Vigilante groups stand alone in fight against Mexican drug lords

By Simeon Tegel in Lima

MEXICO’S drug cartels are increasingly feeling the heat from vigilante groups that have stepped into the gap left by the state in the fight against drug cartels as they seek to protect their villages.

The rise of the informal civil defence groups, known as autodefensas, was recently highlighted after a drug kingpin last week threatened to kill Azucena Uresti, a TV station anchor, for airing an interview with a vigilante leader.

The attempt to silence Uresti, inset, has once again shone a spotlight on the Mexican government’s inability – or unwillingness – to halt the drug wars which have claimed more than 100,000 lives.

Barricaded in the market town of Tepalcatepec and surrounded by dozens of heavily-armed men from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (JNGC), a member of an autodefensa who did not wish to be named, told Ms Uresti that the narcos would turn it into a “ghost town” if they broke through the heavily-fortified perimeter. “The people are scared. We are going to do what we

have to,” adding that his militia would “bury” the JNGC rather than let them kill everyone.

Such autodefensas groups are controversial in Mexico. Alejandro Hope, a security expert, said they are made up of people who genuinely seek to defend their communities to others “immersed in crime” and aligned to some of the cartels.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said it is the job of the police to maintain public security.

But he has failed to acknowledge the authorities’ failure to protect Mexicans from the drug traffickers’ savagery.

“He doesn’t appear to have a strategy,” said Mr Hope. “His handling of this has been erratic. He refuses to outright condemn the cartels and he also doesn’t propose alternatives.”

The unnamed member of the autodefensa also criticised Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, the leader of the JNGC, who has become a multi-millionaire by trafficking cocaine, cannabis and heroin to the United States.

“We don’t know what he is after, because he doesn’t care about Michoacán,” the man told Ms Uresti.

Perhaps it was this that irked Oseguera Cer-

vantes, given his cartel likes to portray itself as a Robin Hood organisation giving a helping hand to the poor whenever it can.

Or possibly it was the suggestion that he had turned his back on his roots in the central Mexican state of Michoacán.

Whatever the trigger, the Aug 4 interview on Mexican station Radio Formula prompted the high-profile drug lord, nicknamed “El Mencho”, to issue an unprecedented death threat last week against journalist Ms Uresti.

Just days later, an anonymous Twitter account, which has subsequently been taken down, published a video featuring a man claiming to be El Mencho.

Flanked by several men sporting AK-47 machine guns and balaclavas, the man accuses the journalist, who is widely respected in Mexico, of “unbalanced” reporting.

“I assure you that wherever you are, I will find you and I will make you eat your words even if they accuse me of femicide,” he concludes.

Uresti responded to El Mencho by returning to the air and standing her ground, but the threat is anything but idle.

Based in Jalisco, a central state neighbouring Michoacán, Mr Oseguera Cervantes is one of Mexico’s most wanted men, suspected of ordering hundreds of murders. The US has put a \$10 million (£7.2million) bounty on his head.

High art on show at New York gallery

By David Millward
US CORRESPONDENT

A NEW YORK City pop-up gallery dedicated to Vincent Van Gogh is inviting people to enjoy his work after raising their consciousness by smoking marijuana.

Tickets for the two events will cost \$125 to \$200 (£90 to £144) – rather more than the normal cost of admission of \$40 to \$70. The price tag does not include anything to smoke but is BYOC – bring your own cannabis.

This is because while recreational consumption of pot is legal in New York, selling it is not.

Smoking is not allowed inside the exhibition itself, so attendees will have to enjoy their joint outside as part of a “waterfront consumption lounge experience”.



ROMINA AMATORIO/RED BULL VIA GETTY IMAGES

Head for heights Manuel Halbisch of Germany dives from a 27m (88ft) platform on the final competition day of the Red Bull Cliff Diving Exhibition at Oslo Opera House, Norway.

The Telegraph

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