

Emily Young's vast sculptures have been showcased in the world's most prestigious art venues and exhibitions, from London's Victoria and Albert Museum to the Venice Biennale. Five years ago, however, one of her works was unveiled in a location where few would be able to see it.

A monumental, partly finished head – half sparkly polished, half untreated and raw – *The Weeping Guardian* is exactly the kind of work that usually fetches £500,000 at auctions or art fairs. But no gavel will be lowered on this 12-ton sculpture, because it lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.

"There was something poetic about sacrificing these statues to the water," Britain's pre-eminent living sculptor tells i. "I loved that they were being left on the sea floor for eternity, rather than in some rich person's living room."

Young's sculpture is not alone. With its totems, architectural statues and anthropomorphic monoliths, La Casa dei Pesci ("House of Fish") looks like an ancient civilisation reclaimed by the sea. In fact, it is an underwater museum that can be visited by scuba divers, and is part of an ingenious strategy to prevent the annihilation of local marine life.

Before the museum was created, illegal fishing trawlers routinely ploughed through the waters above, their heavily weighted dragnets ripping up the seagrass that underpins marine ecosystems, and indiscriminately sweeping up all sea life in their path.

A group of artists and a fisherman united to stop them, depositing cement blocks and sculptures along a 14 nautical mile subaqueous tract near the Tuscan village of Talamone. The sculptures are designed to snag illegal nets that cost tens of thousands of euros, Young explains. "The trick is to create a great big block; it can't be too delicate," says the artist, three of whose sculptures have already been submerged. "That way you can do some serious damage."

Six years after the first sculptures were deposited, marine populations are springing back to life. A pod of dolphins has relocated to the coast, while sea bream, mullet, shellfish, lobsters and turtles are also prospering.

Talamone's triumph is timely. With the world's fish stocks dramatically low, many marine species have been pushed to the brink of extinction. Pollution, rising sea temperatures and rampant trawlers – often described as bulldozers of the sea – are wreaking havoc. The situation is most alarming



WORLD FOCUS

Guardians of the sea

James Imam reports on an ingenious underwater 'city' that is helping to stop trawlers from overfishing the Mediterranean



in the Mediterranean, where two-thirds of commercial species are overfished, compared with the global average of a third, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. Total Mediterranean fish populations – including tuna, swordfish, anchovies and sardines – have declined by a third in the past 50 years, the EU's Joint Research Centre claims.

Talamone fisherman Paolo Fanciulli had watched his catch dwindle as industrial fishing boats ignored Italian laws banning trawling within three nautical miles of the coast. Frustrated by political inaction, Fanciulli, locally known as "Paolo the Fisherman", took matters into his own hands.

First, he slashed trawlers' nets with barbed wire, blocked a commercial port with Greenpeace activists, and disguised himself as a coastguard to scare off illegal trawlers. Then, in 2006, Fanciulli and the council began depositing hundreds of cement blocks in the sea, mainly at the fisherman's own expense. "I was extremely pissed off," Fanciulli says. "The authorities were not doing enough to stop illegal fishing. It was time to enter the battlefield."

The concrete blocks failed to stop the trawlers. So Fanciulli decided to seal off access with a collection of sculpted "sentinels", positioned at a depth of 20m, and a separate museum at 8m.

A quarry owner in Carrara donated 100 blocks of defective marble, while Fanciulli and his associates raised funds from private donors and through crowdfunding, helping to cover the

€1,000 bill for transporting blocks of marble and the €30,000 two-day rental fee for a crane. Artists offered their services for free, carrying out "exhausting, very heavy work under the sun and rain for weeks and months", Massimo Catalani, an architect who is one of the project's artists says.

Catalani has created an "underwater city" that includes an obelisk, a ziggurat and a Roman triumphal arch. The sculptures will gradually become covered with algae and inhabited by marine animals, as the metropolis is slowly repossessed by the sea.

With 39 sculptures in place – and a further 12 to 15 sculptures planned for the next three years – there are now fresh problems to resolve. Emboldened dolphins are pilfering fish from traditional nets, causing expensive damage as they gnaw through the rope. In a new collaboration with the University of Siena, Fanciulli is helping to devise a sonar system that will keep the animals at bay.

Meanwhile, Talamone has set an international trend: last year, Greenpeace installed a boulder barrier to block trawlers near eastern Scotland, while a new UK bylaw has banned trawlers in East Sussex to protect kelp.

For Young, the Talamone project demonstrates how everyone can help reverse environmental damage. "We should be looking at the world as a temple and humans as its devotees, cleaning it, caring for it, changing the flowers. Every small gesture does something to contribute."

La Casa dei Pesci (above), dreamt up by Paolo Fanciulli (left) currently has 39 sculptures (below) in place



The trick is to create a great big block. That way you can do some serious damage

News in brief

ITALY

Anti-Mafia powers used on migrants

Italy has been reportedly using anti-Mafia laws to target migrants driving boats of asylum-seekers across the Mediterranean.

A report by rights groups Alarm Phone, Borderline Sicilia and Arci Porco Rosso found that the country had spent decades using criminal law, undercover police operations and emergency anti-Mafia powers to target refugee boat drivers.

Of nearly 1,000 cases reviewed, the report found 24 people with prison sentences of more than 10 years and six people with life sentences.

Many boat drivers are refugees themselves, with more than a third of those arrested from North Africa, 20 per cent from Eastern Europe and 20 per cent from West Africa.

Many of the African citizens imprisoned in Italy were forced to drive boats from Libya.

UNITED STATES

Clinton 'on the mend' in hospital



Former US president Bill Clinton remained in a California hospital yesterday, where he was recovering from a non-coronavirus infection three days after he was admitted.

The 75-year-old (inset), who left office in 2001, was admitted to the University of California Irvine Medical Centre on Tuesday evening, according to his spokesman, Angel Ureña.

Mr Clinton is "on the mend", Mr Ureña said. "He's up and about, joking and charming the hospital staff."

Mr Clinton went to the hospital after suffering from fatigue and has received IV antibiotics and fluids.

He has had heart problems in the past, including a 2004 quadruple bypass surgery and a 2010 procedure to open a blocked artery. REUTERS

RUSSIA

Axe attack victim marries culprit

A Siberian pensioner who attacked a man with an axe has been given a suspended sentence after the victim married her, allowing him to plead with a local court that she should not be imprisoned.

The Tomsk regional prosecutor's office in Siberia said that the woman, 67, constantly argued with the victim, also described as her "roommate", over their unclean home. She attacked the unnamed man in September 2019, striking him "with an axe multiple times in the head, ribs and neck", according to officials.

After she was arrested, the man proposed to the defendant during her trial and they married. As her spouse, he implored the court not to send her to prison.