

No place to hide: shift from natural to artificial habitats (marine litter) for *Benthocometes robustus* (Ophiidiidae) in the Mediterranean Sea.

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Increased anthropogenic pressures caused by unsustainable fishing activities and marine litter (ML), including Abandoned, Lost, or otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG) and other anthropogenic discard, are leading to many changes in the functioning of marine ecosystems, threatening sensitive habitats such as Cold Water Coral (CWCs) reefs and forests. CWCs are considered biodiversity hotspots providing shelter, nursery and feeding areas for many organisms. *Benthocometes robustus* (family Ophiidiidae) is a shy and elusive deep-sea fish strictly associated with CWCs. However, during some studies aimed at assessing potential environmental impacts on marine biodiversity in areas selected for the establishment of offshore wind-farms, we observed unusual behaviour in this fish as a consequence of habitat loss. In three out of eight deep-sea areas, investigated through Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) surveys (1375 hours of footage, 556 km), the presence of *B. robustus* was documented. Overall, 307 individuals were recorded, and their behaviour was described, reporting depth, habitat, associated CWC, fish spatial position and locomotion. Most specimens were associated with *Leiopathes glaberrima*, *Madrepora oculata* and *Desmophyllum pertusum*, whereas 119 were found on wrecks or ML (mainly ALDFG). Indeed, *B. robustus* used ML to hide when CWC colonies were absent, very damaged or uprooted by fishing activities. Curiously, on sandy bottoms previously colonised by Keratoisididae, few fish were found hiding near crinoids and sea stars. The opportunity for this fish to hide between coral branches seems to be affected by the increase in bottom trawling and consequent decrease in its natural habitat.