

Additionally, **two workshops were organized**, one in Msida (Malta) and one in Ragusa (Sicily) along with an **intermediate event** in Malta. This events not only disseminated results but also provided an opportunity to train numerous stakeholders and university students from both Malta and Sicily.

Special attention was given to schools of all levels, hosting several hundred students (e.g., organizing Biodiversity Week) during project-related events, and conducting training for science teachers (e. g. seminars for the National Association of Natural Science Teachers).

The partnership structure (University of Catania; Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries, Food and Animal Rights; University of Malta; Metropolitan City of Catania; Free Municipal Consortium of Ragusa) with the participation of Malta's Environment & Resources Authority (ERA) enabled effective oversight of the quality and efficacy of the solutions developed, both in terms of scientific methodologies and engagement interventions for disseminating information to stakeholders and the population.

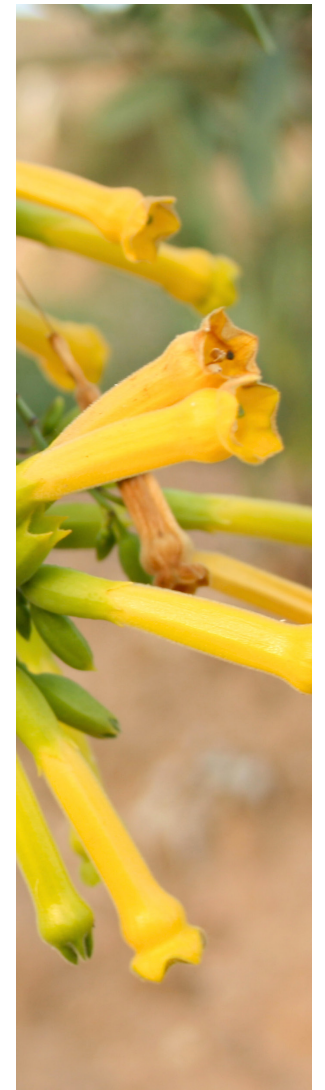
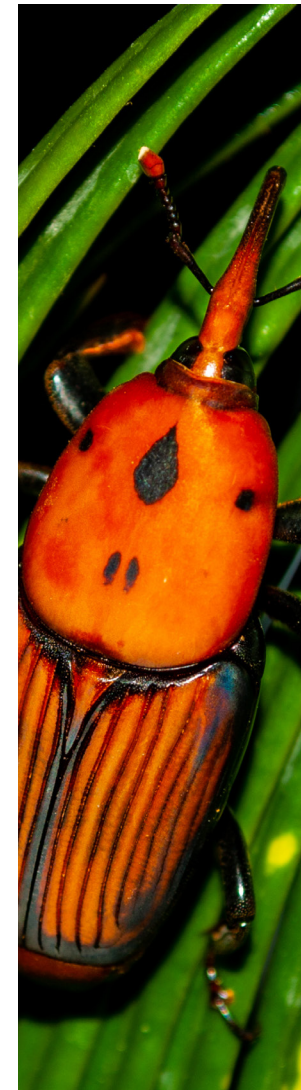
The project's outputs will benefit: Maltese and Italian environmental authorities, border control officers, managers of protected areas, research institutions, and all sectors that could be negatively impacted by the introduction of invasive species (e.g., farmers). Also, secondary and university-level students and teachers, environmental associations, and the general public will benefit from the project's outcomes.

The FAST project aims to counteract the introduction, naturalization, and spread of Invasive Alien Species that cause damage to the natural and semi-natural environments of the Sicilian and Maltese Archipelago.



FAST PROJECT

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The FAST project is funded by the Interreg Italy-Malta 2014-2020 program, call 2/2019 - Priority Axis III - Protecting the Environment and Risk Management. Objective 3.1: To contribute towards the arrest of the loss of terrestrial and marine biodiversity in the area, maintain and reactivate the ecosystem and the protected area.



According to the EU, **biological invasions are the second most important threat to biodiversity, and one of the objectives of the biodiversity protection strategy is to counteract the introduction and naturalization of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) and harmful plant pathogens for native plant species.** The impact of IAS on

biodiversity is difficult to quantify,

but it is a priority to address their management based on their environmental and economic impacts. **The issue of IAS needs to be addressed on a large scale and with common methodologies, and cross-border areas assume particular relevance due to their higher ease of exchange and require urgent actions.**

In full coherence with the European Union Biodiversity Strategy for 2020 and 2030, the project has significantly contributed to counteract the intro-

duction, naturalization, and spread of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) that cause damage to the natural and semi-natural environments of the Sicilian and Maltese archipelago through the following actions: **a) development of a checklist of alien species present in Sicily and the Maltese archipelago**, listing over 800 plant species, more than 500 animal species, and 25 phytopathogenic microorganisms; **b) Creation of in-depth profiles for the main IAS present in the two geographical areas**, encompassing 93 plant species, 130 animal species, and 13 phytopathogenic microorganisms; **c) compilation of 31 profiles for IAS at risk of potential introduction in Sicily and the Maltese archipelago**, including 7 plant species, 17 animal species, and 7 phytopathogenic microorganisms; **d) identification of pathways and vehicles for the introduction and spread of alien species**, along with proposals for management regulations; **e) containment and/or eradication interventions** covering a total area of over 0,5 km², to protect more than 15 target species in need of conservation, on 12 plant species of IAS within 7 Protected Areas of the Natura 2000 network (SAC and/or SPA) (1. "Oasis of the Simeto" Nature Reserve; 2. "Fiume Fiumefreddo" Nature Reserve; 3. "Macchia Foresta del Fiume Irmínio" Special Biological Reserve; 4. "Pineta di Vittoria" Nature Reserve; 5. "L-Inħawi tal-Buskett u tal-Girgenti"; 6. "L-Inħawi tax-Xlendi u tà Wied Kantra"; 7. "Il-Magħluq ta' Marsaskala"); **f) renaturation of intervention sites using native species**; **g) documentation of the aforementioned interventions through the creation of a photo and video archive captured using drones, both before and after the operations**; **h) develop-**

ment of guidelines and adoption of best practices derived from experiences gained in eradication/containment efforts.

From this perspective, a significant innovative aspect of the project has involved **the development of new methodologies exportable to the Mediterranean region**, complemented by Citizen Science and environmental education actions.

Many preliminary results of the project have already been subject to scientific publications and numerous presentations at international conferences and national congresses.

The project has placed significant emphasis on communication and result dissemination, which has been promoted through the creation of a multilingual website and numerous posts on project-dedicated social media profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and the YouTube channel. Numerous environmental education initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the issue of invasive alien species and disseminating project results have been directed toward the public. In Sicily, these initiatives have included participation in events such as "Sharper Night," "Giornate FAI d'autunno" and "Settimana dell'Ambiente", while in Malta, participation occurred in events like "Science in the City," "Meet the Aliens" event, "BioBlitz - Alien are among us" and the "Malta Agri Fair".

