

# Urban wetlands – how to implement Resolution X.27

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Since prehistoric times most human settlements have been established close to wetlands, foremost for the water resources the wetland ecosystems provide, but also because of other wetland services, such as the provision of different products, of trade routes by boat, and of natural obstacles for defence strategies. Nowadays, the world becomes increasingly urbanized, over 50% of the global population lives in urban environments, encroaching more and more on wetlands lying now within spreading cities or adjacent in their suburbs. This development at global scale creates both opportunities and threats for wetlands – one of the reasons why the most recent meeting of the Ramsar Conference of the Parties (COP10) started to focus on the issues by adopting a Resolution on *Wetlands and urbanization* (Resolution X.27).

How best to implement this Resolution is ably demonstrated in northern Spain. Ahead of time, the Municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of the autonomous region Basque Country, designated on 24 October 2002, via the Ministry of the Environment (the Ramsar Administrative Authority in Spain), the Salburua wetlands for the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance (site no. 1263). The area of 174 hectares forms part of the “green ring” around the city of 230,000 inhabitants. Earlier in the 20th century, the marshes at this site were drained for agricultural purposes, but restored in the 1990s to create two shallow lakes, initially as water retention areas to prevent flooding of the nearby parts of town. In the meantime, the Ramsar site contains the most extensive *Carex riparia* reedbed of the Iberian peninsula and other priority habitats listed by the European Union. Most notable is its population of the globally endangered European mink *Mustela lutreola*, a wetland-dependent mammal pushed aside in large parts of its former distribution area in Europe by the introduced, and highly invasive, American counterpart. The observation of many different species of waterbirds and of red deer *Cervus elaphus*, introduced for controlled grazing of the emergent aquatic vegetation, is an attraction for the many urban visitors. Four walking and cycling trails educate the public about the flora, amphibians and reptiles, insects, and birds of the Ramsar wetland.

And on 13 July 2009, the Municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz proudly added an important contribution to its urban environmental plan through the opening of “Ataria”, the new state-of-the art visitor and education centre. After three years in the making, and nearly 7 million euros spent, the modern building guides its visitors through a 36-meter-long horizontal corridor to a suspended look-out place over the wetland panorama. It was proudly opened by Mayor Patzi Lazcoz and Ms Pilar Unzalu, the Environmental Councillor of the Basque Government. The airy building provides an interactive exhibit on the functioning of the wetland ecosystem, where visitors can use all their senses, as well as joysticks to fly with satellite-tracked birds (on a computer screen) on their migration between Africa and Siberia, with a stop-over at Sulburua. Further space is dedicated to an auditorium, a hall for temporary exhibits, a café, field laboratories and classrooms for visiting schools, and offices for staff of the municipal Centre for Environmental Studies (CEA), who monitor the ecological character of the Ramsar site and take care of its visitors and interpretation centre. Spain is one of the few Ramsar Parties who have elaborated a national CEPA Action Plan. And this urban wetland centre will become an important tool to facilitate the delivery of many of its activities. How better to communicate in an urban context the motto of Ramsar’s COP10 “Healthy wetlands – healthy people”?

-- Tobias Salathé, Ramsar



Fernando de Juana, of the Centre for Environmental Studies of Vitoria-Gasteiz, looks through the openings of an observation hide to the Sulburua wetlands.





Modern information panels and trails facilitate access to the wetland to its urban neighbours.





Views from inside “Ataria” the impressive visitor and education centre: oral explanations on the exhibit on ecological links during the opening visit.



Architect José María García from Madrid (bearded) explains his vision to Mayor Patzi Lazcoz of Vitoria-Gasteiz while they stand on the look-out post of the bridge “finger” pointing to the wetland ecosystem.

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