

Wetland Tourism: Argentina - Iberá Marshes



Argentina - Iberá Marshes, credit: ©Beccaceci

Described as Argentina's biggest unsung attraction, Esteros del Iberá is a breathtaking wetland covering up to 13,000 square kilometers – about 14.6% of Corrientes Province in the northeast of Argentina. The marshlands are vitally important for the region's water resources and hydrology, and they support significant populations of rare or endangered species. These include the yacaré overo, or Broad-snouted caiman (*Caiman latirostris*), yacaré negro (*C. yacare*), anaconda amarilla or curiyú (*Eunectes notaeus*), the pato crestudo (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*), the Neotropical otter "lobito de río" (*Lontra longicaudis*), and ciervo de los pantanos, or Marsh deer (*Blastoceros dichotomus*), among others. The surrounding marshlands of Esteros

del Iberá support a sizable number of indigenous fish species and subspecies at key stages of their biological cycles, particularly *Salminus maxillosus*.

Recognising the value of the Ibera ecosystem and its fragility, in 1983 the Corrientes provincial government designated the marshlands – which include a mix of publicly-owned land and private ranches – as a conservation area. A small part of the marshlands centred on Laguna Iberá was also designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, "Lagunas y Esteros del Iberá", in 2002, an area that covers 24,500 hectares of the most characteristic features of the Iberá wetlands. The Ramsar Site includes a Core Area, where access is allowed only for management and



research, and an Extensive Public Use Area where tourism and recreational activities are permitted, provided they do not have adverse impacts on conservation of the site.

Tourism is a key sector for development of the economy in Corrientes Province. Although the Reserve was created in 1983, coordinated action to develop tourism in the region has only begun in the past few years. It is already playing a role in strengthening the economies and basic infrastructure of some towns around the marshlands. The provincial government has now created a Department of Parks and Reserves (DPR) within the Ministry of Production, Labour and Tourism (MPLT) to support the development of tourism in Corrientes Province in harmony with conservation, particularly in and around the Iberá wetlands.

The DPR is implementing a marketing strategy to promote the Iberá Reserve as a tourist destination. This includes developing branding for different regions of the Reserve that will help to attract tourists to visit the marshlands, promote behaviours to assist conservation, and guide tourists on trails and at key viewpoints, combined with promotions at regional, national and international tourism fairs.

On the ground, the DPR is setting up visitor centres and ranger posts, providing training for nature tourism guides, and working with the ten municipalities around the Reserve to help coordinate development and marketing of conservation-based tourism in the site. This includes implementation of a management plan and regulations for tourism, as well as a Municipal Natural Reserve Program, designed to assist municipalities to create and manage protected areas to develop ecotourism at the municipal level.

Environmental education and awareness raising for both residents and visitors are also priorities for the DPR, which has established the Centro de Interpretación Iberá staffed by specially trained rangers. Further centres are planned around the Reserve.

Tourism has so far mostly been developed around Laguna Iberá itself, and in the nearby town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, which has become the main location for Iberá's tourism. In 2010 the Laguna had a total of 17,105 visitors – many from Corrientes Province, but a growing number of visitors also come from elsewhere in Argentina and overseas. Activities include wildlife-watching, hiking on a gallery-forest nature trail, horseback riding, and launch tours on the lake and waterways that involve poling through floating islands, canoeing and kayaking. A small museum about the wetlands has also been set up in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini.

Many small and medium tourism businesses are now operating in the region, providing local employment and alternatives to migration out of the area. In Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, around 90% of local livelihoods are based on tourism, and there are also associated improvements in the town's basic services such as electricity, water supplies, and roads.

A management plan has been developed for the Reserve with funding from the GEF and UNEP and published in 2005. The plan was prepared by a team of around 55 specialists covering a broad range of conservation and management expertise, and representing organisations involved in conservation of the Iberá marshlands. These organisations included Fundación Naturaleza para el Futuro, Fundación Iberá, Fundación Ecos, Universidades Nacionales del Nordeste y de La Plata, and relevant departments in the provincial administration for Corrientes Province, along with UNDP. The plan sets out two main zones – a core zone with strict conservation management designated as the Parque Provincial de Ibera, which consists mostly of publicly-owned lands, and a public use zone, designated as the Reserve Natural Provincial del Iberá. The public use zone includes private ranches used for crop and livestock production, as well as areas where controlled hunting and fishing is permitted, as well as tourism activities.



Argentina - Iberá Marshes, credit: ©Beccaceci

Private properties, which make up nearly two-thirds of the Iberá marshlands, are extremely important for the development and conservation of the Reserve. Although the lakes, archaeological sites and key hydrological features of the marshlands are on public lands, many of the other important habitats in the Reserve are on private land. The management plan therefore promotes conservation on private lands through encouragement of conservation agriculture and through incentives and technical support for conservation.

The management plan also establishes a system of permits and concession fees for tourism businesses operating in the Reserve, and it sets limits on the types of development activities that

are permitted. Approval is needed for any significant works in the Reserve, such as construction of roads and canals, drainage schemes, development of infrastructure and buildings including those for tourism, utilisation of natural forests, and conversion of land to agriculture and forestry. These and similar proposals are also subject to environmental impact assessments (EIAs). Activities developed within the Parque Provincial Iberá are regulated and controlled by the Dirección de Parques y Reservas, while activities in the public use zone (Reserva Natural) are regulated by the Dirección de Turismo Municipal y Cámara de Turismo [Department of Municipal Tourism and Chamber of Tourism] of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini.



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General management costs for the Reserve are 1.5 million Argentine pesos (ca. USD 339,000 in May 2012) per year, and are provided from a) the provincial budget, b) a water service charge levied on water users in the province in consideration of the ecosystem services that the Iberá marshlands provide for the water supply, and c) the Yacyretá hydroelectric dam to compensate for the impacts of the dam on the marshlands. The Park also receives some funding from the Federal Ministries of Environment and Education, as well as from international development assistance funds.

There is also coordination between different Ministries on planning, budgeting, and management of the Reserve. For example, the Secretaria de Turismo assists with production of brochures and promotion of the Reserve, the Roads Department has developed tourist route maps and maintains access roads to the Reserve, the Instituto Corrientes del Agua y el Ambiente assists with evaluation of EIAs, the Department of

Natural Resources supports park rangers, and the Ministries of Education and Public Works also provide support. The National Parks Administration is providing technical assistance and training courses for the Park's rangers.

Various NGOs are also supporting conservation in the Iberá marshes. One NGO has purchased two ranches and is converting them to a mix of conservation and conservation agriculture. NGOs have also supported implementation of infrastructure for tourism in the Reserve, including installing signage and helping to build range stations and visitor facilities.

Because of the size and geography of the Reserve, it is not practical to levy entrance charges to all areas. However, at Laguna del Iberá, it is possible to make an entrance charge and this has been proposed by the local community and the Parks and Reserves Department for an experimental period. The charges would be Argentinian pesos 15 (international), 12 (Latin American) and 8 (Argentine citizens).

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The Ramsar Secretariat selected 14 case studies for a publication on wetlands and sustainable tourism, to be launched at the 11th Conference of Parties, July 2012. www.ramsar.org/tourism