

Wetland Tourism: Colombia – Humedal La Conejera



Humedal La Conejera
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The wetland “Humedal La Conejera” is located in the village of Suba, to the northwest of the city of Bogotá. It is one of the few wetlands that has survived the massive destruction of this type of ecosystem caused by population growth and increasing economic activities in the region (DAMA, 2000). Currently, this wetland is one of the best conserved ecosystems in the Capital District.

Humedal La Conejera is a 58.9-hectare Natural Reserve that has been declared as a District

Ecological Park. Its main use is biodiversity conservation, and secondary uses include scientific research, environmental education and passive recreation, as provided in the Land Use Plan for the city (Decree 190/2004).

Formerly, up to 500 truckloads of debris and rubbish and 5 million litres of wastewater were dumped daily into Humedal La Conejera. Livestock from nearby farms grazed in the channel. Thus, it was necessary to develop gradual and precise ecological restoration processes oriented towards bathymetric rehabilitation and

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restoration of aquatic habitats for the conservation of endemic and migratory avifauna in the wetland.

In 1993 the Foundation Humedal La Conejera (FHLC) was established to start a participatory process of environmental management for the protection, restoration and wise use of the wetland. Since then, this wetland has become an

education centre for public awareness and participation for wetlands in the Capital District of Colombia, having a positive impact on other wetlands in the country.

For 19 years, FHLC has managed the wetland and led the process of ecological restoration and environmental education and public participation.



Gimnasio Santa Maria mensajes a la comunidad
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Each year this wetland receives 16,000 visitors who are attracted by the natural beauty of the place, its participative environmental management process and the associated biodiversity, especially birds. This wetland includes 2,200 m of ecological

interpretive trails, an ecological bus with informal lectures for visitors, and lavatories.

In neighbourhoods adjacent to the wetland, visitors can find restaurants and cafés, which is an activity that favours the owners of these premises,

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who benefit financially from selling snacks, food and communication services.

Humedal La Conejera has an Environmental Management Plan that was prepared in a participatory manner taking into account the provisions contained in the District Policy on Wetlands (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2006). This Environmental Management Plan established an ecological zoning for the wetland, which provides for strict conservation areas, ecological restoration areas, and areas for environmental education and passive recreation.

Similarly, FHLC developed together with the community and in a participatory manner, a set of regulations entitled "Manual de convivencia para la sostenibilidad del humedal" [Manual of coexistence for the sustainability of the wetland], which has been accepted and put into practice by visitors. The implementation of this manual has been reflected in the behaviour of visitors who do not leave rubbish inside the wetland, walk quietly so as not to affect wildlife, do not collect plants, and in general show a deep respect for the ecosystem.

Up to 2004, the Capital District was transforming wetlands into parks for active recreation. To that end, wetlands were dredged to build large lakes, removing wetland vegetation and encircling the wetlands with brick and concrete walkways. The Wetland Network filed several statements, including popular actions in courts of justice. This conflict lasted from 1998 to early 2004, and from that year a consultation process was started with the management of the Capital District, which led to the collective formulation of the new District Policy on Wetlands (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2006), oriented towards the ecological restoration of wetlands and the definition of biodiversity conservation as the main use of wetlands, with scientific research, environmental education and passive recreation as secondary uses, following the model established by FHLC in Humedal La Conejera since 1993.

Today there is a Wetland District Committee, which is a corporate body that includes a

representative of the community for each neighbourhood of the city where there are wetlands, and two members of the Wetlands Network of Bogotá and the Sabana. This network is a social organization created in 1997, which was coordinated by FHLC until 2005. Since that year the Network has operated independently. The Wetlands Network consists of environmental NGOs and individuals belonging to each one of the 15 wetlands which make up the different network nodes.

With the support of the District Department of Economic Development, FHLC prepared an Ecotourism Plan for Humedal La Conejera (Fundación Humedal La Conejera & Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico, 2009). The study contains: i) Diagnosis of the environment, products, services and current market; ii) Strategic management to implement the operational plan for nature tourism in the wetland; iii) Market projections; iv) Operational plan; v) Prospective scenarios for the financial plan; and vi) Monitoring indicators. Similarly, a study on ecotourism carrying capacity was conducted, which shows that currently the wetland can accommodate 80 visitors per day, a value that could double to 168 visitors without negative environmental impacts for the ecosystem provided that the infrastructure of the site is improved, mainly that related to the visitor reception area and trails.

With the purpose of improving wetland infrastructure, FHLC and the National University of Colombia (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) designed a Visitor Service Centre, to be located in an area adjacent to the wetland. This service centre will include a conference room, lavatories, a cafeteria and an eco-store for souvenirs.

Nowadays, access to the wetland is regulated following the recommendations contained in its Environmental Management Plan, so as not to exceed the carrying capacity established per day. FHLC organizes guided tours by trained personnel, who are usually students or professionals of natural sciences or environmental sciences. These guided tours include watching



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avifauna, flora and natural landscape and recognizing the successful process of participatory environmental management, which includes applied citizen participation mechanisms.

In the process of protection, recovery and wise use of Humedal La Conejera, 25 schools located in the river micro-basin of the wetland are involved through environmental school projects (PRAES) and/or social service. Also, there are eight Community Action Committees participating, which are the bodies for institutional community organization in each neighbourhood. This wetland is visited daily by students from schools and universities in the city and from different regions in the country, as well as social organizations related to these ecosystems.

At present, visits to the wetland are promoted by word of mouth by tourists. Also, the District Institute of Tourism of Bogotá (IDT) is promoting Humedal La Conejera as a destination for national and international tourists through its web site and the different tourist information points located in the city.

The wetland has never charged entrance fees to visitors, although there is a charge for participating in activities organized by FHLC. However, since 2006, these activities are carried out free of charge, thanks to the support provided

by the Capital District for a period of eight months each year. This situation has generated a culture of non-payment even when no state support is available. Nevertheless, FHLC has continued to manage the wetland in spite of the respective financial difficulties.

In order to solve this difficulty, an Ecotourism Plan was formulated following the Guidelines on Biological Diversity and Tourism Development adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity. Currently a series of adjustments are being performed in order to find alternatives to the necessary institutional arrangements for the implementation and financing of required infrastructure.

According to the study, once these investments are made and the new proposed activities are implemented, a break even point could be reached by the end of the third year of project operations.

Another positive aspect of this process is that several components of the process of participatory environmental management have been incorporated into the District Policy on Wetlands, as is the case of the joint wetland management with environmental social organizations, which applies to 70% of wetlands in the Capital District.

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