

## Ramsar Advisory Mission to Doñana in Spain, 2002

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### First of two Ramsar Advisory Missions to Doñana, October 2002

On 1-4 October 2002, the first part of a Ramsar Advisory Mission to Doñana (Spain) took place. The "Marismas del Guadalquivir", the marshes along the estuary of the Guadalquivir



river on the Atlantic in SW Andalusia, are among the most famous wetland sites in Europe. At the far corner of Europe, close to Africa, a unique mosaic of live dunes, pine forests, extensive matoral shrubs and temporary freshwater marshes survived the pressures of modern times, intermingling with tidal areas, grasslands and dehesas (open landscape with trees) and surrounded by agricultural land, pastures, rice fields, salt pans and fish ponds. The area used to be a famous hunting ground and still is a stronghold of extremely rare animals, such as the Iberian lynx and imperial eagle. Species of European

conservation concern, such as the marbled teal, white-headed duck and others can be found here, and tens of thousands of waterbirds use the area for breeding, resting and wintering.

The white village of El Rocío at the marshes' edge attracts each spring during the "Romería" up to a million pilgrims. To gather organized in many brotherhoods in the small village, they peregrinate on horseback, with oxen and carts, dressed up in those colourful costumes known to all of us from "Flamenco" dancers, through Doñana National Park and its marshes to venerate the "Virgen del Rocío". The former private hunting estate Doñana was the place where WWF (the then World Wildlife Fund) came into being, through the urgent need to purchase some of the most threatened wetland habitats to safeguard them for future generations by creating one of Europe's most prestigious modern nature reserve. Only naturally, Doñana National Park became Spain's first Wetland of International Importance, designated in 1982 when the country joined the Convention. Since then, the core area is also listed under Unesco's World Heritage Convention and Man and Biosphere Programme and as an EU Special Protection Area, and was awarded the Council of Europe Diploma.

However, human pressures continued to increase. In 1990, Doñana was included on the Montreux Record of Ramsar sites requiring priority attention because of fears that excessive water abstractions, mainly for intensive tourist developments along the coast and irrigated cultures in the immediate vicinity of the National Park, would irrevocably degrade the ecological character of the site. The Spanish and Andalusian governments have since undertaken many efforts to relieve pressure from the site. Unfortunately, in 1998 a great setback occurred when the wall of a waste holding pool of the Boliden Apirsa pyrite mine, some 60 km upstream, broke and released some 5 million m<sup>3</sup> of toxic sludge and acid waters along the Guadiamar river basin, downstream to the very edge of the National Park, and into the core zone of the wetland area.



(Photo: Luis Costa and Begnino Bayán, right)

This ecological disaster provoked eventually a mental turning point. Finally, after many efforts and committees established over the years, the long awaited and clearly focused programme of priority actions in favour of Doñana came into being. The Andalusian authorities worked tirelessly to remove the large amounts of toxic sludge and restore the Guadiamar river basin. A strategy "Corredor verde del Guadiamar", aimed at restoring the natural riverbed and its riverine forests, was got under way in 1999 and has progressed substantially since. In parallel, the central government in Madrid began an ambitious restoration strategy, "Doñana 2005", to restore the damaged ecosystems and to solve the remaining management problems.

During their first of two visits, Ramsar Bureau experts Francesc Giró from Barcelona and Luis Costa from Lisbon, together with Tobias Salathé, focused on the concrete results of the two programmes "Corredor verde del Guadiamar" and "Doñana 2005" in the field.



Guided by Félix Manuel Pérez Miyares, the special coordinator of the programme "Doñana 2005" in the Ministry of the Environment in Madrid, Benigno Bayán of the Hydrological Confederation of the Guadalquivir basin, and Fernando Molina of the Environmental Agency of Andalusia, accompanied and supported by several of their colleagues, many different restoration sites were visited along the edges of the National Park, in its buffer zone (the Regional

Nature Park), and further upstream in the catchment basin.

The two concurrent programmes aim to restore the main water inflows to the Guadalquivir marshes in terms of quantity and quality, to re-establish the necessary water exchanges between the freshwater marshes and the Guadalquivir estuary, to create more than 4000 ha of natural landscapes on formerly drained and cultivated areas, and to establish a programme of monitoring of ecological health and for the prevention of further accidents. Progress with this huge programme of actions and investments is indeed very substantial and impressive already, as witnessed by the Ramsar Advisory Mission during its first field visit, at the end of the dry summer period. A preliminary report will be sent to the Spanish Ministry of Environment before COP8 and subsequently made available on this Web site.

Due to the extent and complexity of the issues at stake, a second mission is planned for the wet season, in early spring 2003. At this occasion, it is hoped that experts of IUCN (the World Conservation Union), Unesco, and the Council of Europe could join the Ramsar experts. Together they should encounter different stakeholders beyond the protected areas and water managers, including local people, farmers, and NGOs to address Doñana's problems in a wider context, and to make recommendations for its safe future.

-- reported by Tobias Salathé, Ramsar Regional Coordinator for Europe