

ENTREVISTA / INTERVIEW

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for the people living in and around them*

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– ***What exactly is the initiative for Mediterranean wetlands?***

In February 1991, at the end of the IWRB Symposium on Mediterranean wetlands and their birds in Grado (North Italy), a number of persons - representing both governments and non- governmental organisations - started organising a long-term, concerted action in favour of these threatened ecosystems. From the very beginning, this initiative (baptised MedWet) was encouraged by the Convention on Wetlands, and by the European Commission, which funded to a large extent the first two MedWet projects. One concerned mainly the members of the European Union in the region (1993-1996), and the second (1996-1998) Albania, Algeria, Croatia, Tunisia and Morocco.

At present, MedWet is a regional action of the Convention on Wetlands, guided by the Mediterranean Wetland Committee of the Convention (MedCom). Its main task is to co-ordinate the implementation of the Mediterranean Wetland Strategy, approved at the Venice Conference in June 1996, which was the culminating event of the MedWet1 project.

– ***The goal of the Mediterranean Wetland Strategy is to stop and reverse the loss and degradation of wetlands, as a contribution to the conservation of biodiversity and to sustainable development in the region. Can you explain this?***

This goal recognises our present attitude concerning wetlands in this particular region. Wetlands are not only extremely important for safeguarding the biological diversity of the Mediterranean, but they incorporate functions of considerable value for the people living in and around them. Thus the Strategy aims at stopping wetland degradation and destruction by promoting the wise use of their invaluable resources. Through integrated management, which takes equitably into account both ecological and socio-economic considerations, wetland functions and values can be conserved, and can contribute to the sustainable development of the Mediterranean. This is an important factor in a region of great economic disparities, where large parts of the population depend on the exploitation of natural resources.

The Mediterranean Wetland Strategy, which has the support of governments, of inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, is a pragmatic, operational document, which provides guidelines for concrete actions on the international, the national and the local level. It also provides for a co-operation mechanism under the Convention on Wetlands for its implementation.

– ***How do you see the future of the international strategies and projects about Mediterranean wetlands? Is it possible for this type of co-operation to mobilise international technical and financial assistance?***

The experience gained during seven years of MedWet work is that funds are not difficult to find, once serious and realistic projects are developed. Under the first two MedWet projects about 7.5 million ECU were spent on conservation actions for Mediterranean wetlands, mainly provided by the European Commission, but also from the Ramsar Bureau, governments and NGOs. The third MedWet project, funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and the corresponding French institution (FFEM), will start in late 1998 and has a budget of more than 12 million ECU. (The project concerns Albania, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority.) Smaller projects are also feasible. To achieve such results, the MedWet Team includes a Project Development Unit (at the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat), which prepares and develops actions for the implementation of the Strategy, with the guidance of the MedWet Coordinator, appointed by the Secretary General of the Convention on Wetlands.

On the technical assistance level, there has been a great willingness to contribute knowledge and human resources from a number of international and national organisations having wetland expertise, such as BirdLife, Wetlands International, WWF International, Tour du Valat, the Greek Biotope / Wetland Centre, and recently SEHUMED. Under the MedWet initiative, the technical transfers aim at developing the local scientific and technical potential, and institution strengthening, mainly through training and through joint actions in wetland management. In addition, expertise in the socio-economic aspects of wetlands is being developed by scientists in the East and South of the Mediterranean, of significance for the whole region.

– *How do you see the future of Mediterranean wetlands?*

During the Grado Symposium, the dramatic loss of Mediterranean wetlands was documented with detailed reports from many countries. Although analytical figures are not available for the whole region, a general estimate of 60% loss during this century seems probable. In addition, most of the remaining wetlands are either heavily degraded or artificialised to a large extent.

These negative trends have not stopped yet. Both in Grado (1991) and in Venice (1996), there was a clear understanding that to stop and reverse these losses would be a long-term, difficult process, with perhaps a 30-year horizon. There are, however, positive aspects. Public awareness of wetland values for humanity is growing. The crucial role of wetlands in regulating the water cycle - in mitigating the impacts both of floods and of drought - is being recognised. The contribution of coastal wetlands to fisheries is now understood.

Their potential to attract visitors and to contribute to local income is being demonstrated in many sites. As a result, the European Commission has been promoting wetland conservation and wise use through its Communication on Wetlands and through other measures (especially the Natura 2000 network), while a number of governments have developed comprehensive wetland policies. The Ramsar Mediterranean Wetland Committee, which groups almost all of the countries around the Basin, as well as the international and transnational organisations concerned, will strengthen the network of collaboration and become an effective positive force.

In view of the critical importance of wetlands, both for nature and for people, and the seriousness of the threats against them, we have no other choice but to work even harder for their conservation and sustainable use and to remain optimistic for the future.