

MedWet/Com4.

Sesimbra, Portugal

The 4th meeting of the Committee of the Mediterranean Wetland Initiative (MedWet) has taken place in Sesimbra, Portugal, 21-23 May 2001. The meeting, attended by over 60 members of the Committee and observers from throughout the Mediterranean Basin, was splendidly organised and hosted by the Instituto da Conservação da Natureza (ICN), Portugal, at the Hotel do Mar, Sesimbra, a fishing village south of Lisbon.

The Mediterranean Wetlands Committee (MedWet/Com) consisting of officially designated representatives from the following 20 countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Syria, The FYR of Macedonia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yugoslavia; the Palestinian Authority; the European Commission; the United Nations Environment Programme - Coordinating Unit for the Mediterranean Action Plan (Barcelona Convention, RAC-SPA); the Ramsar Convention Bureau; and the following seven organizations working on wetland-related issues in the Mediterranean: BirdLife International, Greek Biotope / Wetland Centre, IUCN - The World Conservation Union, the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat (France), the Sede para el Estudio de los Humedales Mediterráneos of the University of Valencia - SEHUMED (Spain), Wetlands International, and the World Wide Fund for Nature - WWF.

SUMMARY REPORT

Reported by Nick Davidson, Deputy Secretary General, 25 May 2001

Main themes covered

During the meeting the Committee reviewed the progress of the MedWet Initiative since its 3rd meeting in Djerba, Tunisia, in 2000, notably the preparations for the establishment of a

MedWet Coordination Unit in Athens, Greece, under the support of the Greek government. Other key topics discussed included how to ensure the long-term future of the MedWet Initiative, the developing links with the Barcelona Convention and the Global Water Partnership - Mediterranean (GWP-Med), the development of the MedWet Regions network and North African

Biotope/Wetland Centre (EKBY) of a major upgrade of the MedWet Inventory Database - the key tool for those undertaking national wetland inventory in the Mediterranean for their handling and analysis of inventory data and information. To facilitate this work the IWG has established a MedWet Database Technical Unit (MWD-TU) at EKBY in Thessaloniki, who are leading on devel-



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technical network, the inclusion of Mediterranean specificities in the 2nd Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003-2008 and priorities for the MedWet Workplan 2001-2002, and plans for the Mediterranean presence at Ramsar's COP8 in Valencia, November 2002. This will include, as a follow-up to the MedWet/Com3 Technical Session on the cultural values of Mediterranean wetlands, a Resolution on the management of cultural heritage of wetlands and a contribution to the COP8 focus on cultural wetland issues, being prepared by the Spanish MedWet Centre (SEHUMED).

MedWet Inventory

Immediately before the full MedWet/Com4 meeting, the re-established MedWet Inventory Working Group (IWG) met to review progress on the further development of the MedWet Inventory System, and in particular the development by the Greek

Biotope/Wetland Centre (EKBY) of a major upgrade of the MedWet Inventory Database - the key tool for those undertaking national wetland inventory in the Mediterranean for their handling and analysis of inventory data and information. To facilitate this work the IWG has established a MedWet Database Technical Unit (MWD-TU) at EKBY in Thessaloniki, who are leading on development of the database for MedWet. The upgraded database, scheduled for release in late 2001, will feature full compatibility with the existing MWD2000 inventory database, but also with added flexibility for its use on a wide range of computer systems and with additional functionality, notably with the addition of monitoring and mapping (linked to GIS) modules and data entry in different local languages.

Mediterranean salinas

A technical session of MedWet/Com4 pondered "Mediterranean salinas: tradition and sustainable use". The session reviewed the cultural, historical and biological importance of salinas (salt pans) as Mediterranean wetlands and discussed the major pressures these vital wetlands face from the changing global market for salt produced in different ways. This is leading to the abandonment of many traditional salinas, their conversion increasingly to mechanised

production techniques, and to other uses such as aquaculture and rice production that diminish or destroy their cultural landscape and biodiversity importance. The technical session developed recommendations for the future management of Mediterranean salinas and the establishment of a multi-sectoral MedWet Salinas Working Group to promote sustainable management of salinas.

Related events

A study tour on the day before the MedWet/Com4 meeting visited the nearby Sado Estuary Ramsar site and nature reserve, with a tour of the estuary on the last remaining traditional salt boats and visits to traditional salinas, rice fields and colonial waterbird breeding colonies.

During the Medwet/Com4 meeting, Medwet Senior Advisor (and former MedWet Coordinator) Thymio Papayannis was presented with a unique award as a "Ramsar Wetland Person of International Importance" in recognition of his great efforts in developing the MedWet Initiative during its first 10 years.

Conclusions of MedWet/Com4 and its technical session on Mediterranean salinas will be posted shortly on the Ramsar Web site.

ANNEX 1. CONCLUSIONS OF A TECHNICAL SESSION ON: "MEDITERRANEAN SALINAS: TRADITION AND SUSTAINABLE USE"

Introduction

1. Salinas (salines, salt-pans) are shallow, usually coastal, lagoons in which saline water is allowed to evaporate under the heat of the sun and the resulting salt crystals are gathered for domestic and industrial use. The Mediterranean Basin has for many centuries been a major source of this vital commodity, and people have built many systems that cover from 10 to over 12,000 hectares. The 170 salinas of the region, largely created from areas of natural saltmarsh, have themselves developed major importance for their specially adapted fauna and flora, while producing around 7 million tonnes of salt per year.

2. Yet Mediterranean salinas are today

facing many pressures in the face of changing social values and economic stresses, notably their conversion from low intensity to mechanized production, or their abandonment or conversion to other uses such as urbanization, rice production, or aquaculture. All of these affect their role as a cultural landscape and the coexistence of sustainable salt production and natural biodiversity.

3. Major challenges exist in finding ways of managing these vital features of the Mediterranean coastal landscape and their wetlands to maintain their cultural and natural importance. This MedWet/Com4 Technical Workshop has reviewed the current state of Mediterranean salinas, learnt from case



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studies of actions being taken to manage salinas, and identified the priority actions for the MedWet Initiative to contribute to ensuring the future sustainable management of this resource.

Values and functions of Mediterranean salinas

4. Salt is a vital commodity that has played a key role throughout history, providing political power to those who controlled its production, as well as influencing the landscape of the region. Salinas are part of the cultural heritage of salt producing communities in the Mediterranean where salt production has been undertaken for many centuries and by many civilizations.

5. Salinas generally form parts of a mosaic with natural wetlands in estuaries and other coastal systems and con-

tain areas of high biodiversity value. Today, the biological value of salinas is of particular importance along the Mediterranean coastline, which has been severely altered by expanding economic activities. Salinas provide refuges for a number of flora and fauna species specially adapted to high and variable salinities. They are a safe haven for large numbers of waterbirds, which use them for breeding (often in large colonies) or as wintering and refueling sites during stop-over on their transcontinental migrations between Europe and Africa.

6. Salinas are biologically rich despite being artificial habitats. This is partly because they are wetlands, and because

human interventions ensure the circulation of water. In addition, salinas contain a number of relatively undisturbed aquatic and terrestrial habitats that make them vital for the conservation of waterbirds.

7. World-wide, salt production reaches around 200 million tonnes per year, and the overall contribution from the Mediterranean accounts for around 12% of salt sold within Europe. Some 40% is used in industry, 35% for treating roads to avoid icing in winter, and 10% for human consumption.

Pressures and threats

8. The fragile socio-economic balance is linked to a market which is subject to competition from cheaper terrestrially-produced salt and world trade. Faced with the need to be economically viable,



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Mediterranean salinas are faced with the choice of closing, industrializing their production, or finding a niche market for quality salt that gives higher market returns. Where salinas close, this leads to an immediate loss of their biodiversity as continual circulation of water is essential to maintain these values.

9. The closing down of salinas is also due to competition from more economically attractive activities to use this prime coastal space, transforming salinas into ports, airports, aquaculture farms, industrial, urban or tourist zones.

10. The current trend to cease, or consolidate, salt production in many parts of the Mediterranean has created many inactive and intermittently exploited salinas with buildings and hydrological infrastructures falling into ruin. This is exacerbated by competition for space along the Mediterranean coastline for urbanization, industry, and tourism. Although salt production occurs throughout the Mediterranean basin, it is on the northern edge that, paradoxically, the main production is found, together with the largest number of inactive salinas.

Current issues and opportunities

The workshop heard from speakers from Egypt, France, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Lebanon and Yugoslavia who drew out the following common themes in salinas management in the region:

11. Limited information exists on the present economic situation in salinas

and the traditional knowledge of salt production. There is a need to improve the awareness of these important issues.

12. While some financial incentives exist to maintain traditional harvesting approaches, through specific short-term projects, there is a need to look closely at how added value can be gained, through ecotourism, targeted products or improved markets, to maintain the financial viability of the smaller systems in the long term. The ecotourism potential and educational values of traditional salinas, in the context of sustainable management of Mediterranean coastlines, has yet to be fully developed but holds the potential to provide diversified income for salinas managers while also promoting their eco-friendly products to niche consumers.

13. Networks of salinas managers are emerging through the local initiatives of governments, NGOs and cooperatives (several of whom are MedWetCom members or associates), and these are proving useful in supporting communities who wish to benefit from experience elsewhere.

14. When salinas close due to financial problems, the costs of continuing water circulation and maintenance for biodiversity alone remain significant, yet there is no revenue from the sale of salt. An approach that assists salinas to maintain their social and financial viability may prove more sustainable in the medium term. It therefore appears essential to seek innovative local partnerships and financial mechanisms,

rather than to adopt a legal/regulatory approach, to ensure that the salt remains an economically viable end product.

15. A number of models and experimental approaches exist that seek to maintain or reestablish the cultural and/or biodiversity values of individual salinas (e.g., ALAS project, France, Slovenia, Lebanon) and they have so far proved encouraging in meeting cultural, financial and biodiversity objectives. The workshop heard about salt museums, marketing initiatives, ecotourism approaches, guided tours, and training of salt producers as some examples of current initiatives in the region.

Future action for the wise use of salinas

16. The MedWet/Com4 Technical Session CONCLUDES that:

17. For traditionally managed salinas there exist opportunities to maintain this traditional management, working with salters and local communities, in recognition that such management maintains both their cultural and historic values and landscapes and their wetlands and biodiversity importance. It is recognized that under current economic conditions maintenance of such management on a large scale may not be economically viable. Traditional management of at least part of each salina maintains the cultural, educational and touristic values and their potential for local income generation.

18. Large-scale salinas under intensive mechanized production can, when appropriately managed, maintain significant biodiversity importance, notably in supporting breeding and non-breeding waterbirds, although such salinas may have lost their cultural and historical significance. Working with salina owners and managers, management regimes can be developed that maximize the maintenance of biodiversity without jeopardizing salt production capacity, and that capitalize on the tourism potential of such systems.

19. Where salinas, whether under traditional or mechanized production methods, fall into disuse, there exist opportunities for their restoration to natural

habitats such as saltmarshes and/or the maintenance of their hydrology, whilst recognizing that this may not always be financially viable owing to the high cost of such hydrological maintenance and high value of coastal land for other land uses;

20. ENCOURAGES MedWet/Com members to support existing networks and programmes seeking to maintain the cultural and natural values of salinas in their countries and the Mediterranean region;

21. RECOMMENDS that the MedWet Coordinator (as resources allow) establish a multi-sectoral MedWet Salinas Working Group, drawn from participants in the Technical Session, representatives of industry and cooperatives, and other relevant experts, with responsibility for, inter alia,

a) compiling a summary of the status and trends of Mediterranean salinas, drawing on existing sources and information provided by MedWet/Com members and others, for inclusion in MedWet reporting to Ramsar COP8;

b) ensuring that the design of a MedWet project for assessment of Mediterranean ecosystems as a contribution to the sub-global component of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) includes salinas;

c) promoting a multi-sectoral "wise use of salinas" network that encourages a partnership approach involving the salinas industry, cultural and historical, wetland and biodiversity interests, building upon existing site and project networks such as ALAS; and

d) enhancing exchange of experience in and increased awareness of sustainable salinas management, including guidelines for the wise use of Mediterranean salinas; and

23. URGES that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment include salt as a wetland product in its global analysis of ecosystem goods and services, scenarios and response options;

24. REQUESTS the MedWet Coordinator to report on the progress of the MedWet Salinas Working Group to the next MedWet/Com meeting;

25. RECOMMENDS that the Ramsar



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Convention include the theme "Salinas" in the technical workshops of COP8.

ANNEX 2. FUTURE COORDINATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEDWET INVENTORY SYSTEM: ESTABLISHMENT OF MEDWET INVENTORY WORKING GROUP (IWG) & ITS MEDWET DATABASE TECHNICAL UNIT (MWD-TU)

Background

1. The MedWet-I project (1993-96) developed a standard methodology for wetland inventory in the Mediterranean region, as a joint work between Instituto da Conservação da Natureza (ICN) and Wetlands International. The Greek Biotope / Wetland Centre (EKBY) participated in this project by developing mapping procedures. Since then, this methodology has been used in a number of MedWet projects and in other wetland inventory projects (Portugal, Greece, France, Slovenia, etc.). It is currently being considered by the Ramsar Convention as a standard framework for wetland inventory worldwide.

2. ICN was designated by the MedWet/Com2 as the focal point of the MedWet Initiative for all issues related to wetland inventory.

3. A set of MedWet inventory tools has been produced, including a reference

manual with the theoretical approach, standard datasheets, a habitat classification system, a mapping procedure and a database (MedWet Database) for storing the inventory data.

4. The success of the MedWet Inventory System has increasingly led to its being adopted, and adapted, for use in different countries both in the Mediterranean Basin and elsewhere. These include notably the further development of the inventory database by EKBY to include monitoring and mapping facilities, and other countries adapting the MWD2000 database for their specific needs and purposes.

5. The MedWet Team, meeting in Thessaloniki on 10-12 December 2000, reviewed the developments of the MedWet Inventory System and particularly the database developments, and agreed:

i) the creation of an Inventory Working Group (IWG) with the following general objectives:

a) to guarantee standardization and compatibility in the use of the MedWet Inventory tools,

b) to establish a consistent framework for continuously reviewing, updating and disseminating the MedWet Inventory tools.

ii) the creation of a Technical Unit (within the IWG) for the development of the MedWet Database (MWD/TU) in order to provide technical assistance regarding installation, operation, sup-

port and upgrading of the database and implementing the decisions of the IWG regarding the database.

Operating structure and partnerships

6. The IWG consists of representatives from ICN, EKBY, Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat, Sede para el Estudio de los Humedales Mediterráneos (SEHUMED), Wetlands International, and the MedWet Coordination Unit and operates under the chairing of ICN. Each organization represented on the IWG will identify a focal point for IWG work.

7. Experts and representatives of other relevant organizations can be invited to participate as observers. These could include particularly those agencies using the MedWet Inventory tools in the Mediterranean region or other end-users. The Ramsar Convention Bureau will participate ex officio.

8. The MedWet Database Technical Unit (MWD-TU) will provide technical support to the IWG by undertaking the development and upgrading of the MedWet Database software and training

and available resources. The meetings will be convened by ICN, based on an agenda previously circulated to the IWG members. Decisions will be taken by consensus.

10. Between meetings the IWG will communicate by electronic means for any strategic or technical matter, as necessary. Decisions for urgent matters may be subject to approval through distant electronic communication.

11. Progress reports and achievements by the IWG and the MWD-TU are reported to the MedWet Coordination Unit, the MedWet/Com, and the Ramsar Bureau.

Main functions and tasks

12. The IWG will:

- a) keep under review the overall aims and objectives of the MedWet Inventory System, and recommend changes as appropriate;
- b) elaborate and approve any revisions, improvements and changes to all MedWet Inventory tools as necessary;
- c) discuss and approve the requirements for upgrading and updating these MedWet Inventory tools, according to the development of the new technolo-

- g) assist Ramsar's Scientific & Technical Review Panel in the development, review and implementation of the 'Ramsar Inventory System' and guidelines on wetland inventory; and seek to ensure that the MedWet Inventory tools are compatible with this guidance;
- h) provide technical assistance and training to countries, agencies, projects and others that wish use the MedWet Inventory tools.;
- i) develop and approve the working plan for implementing future developments of the MedWet Inventory System;
- j) assist the MedWet Coordination Unit to identify and seek sources of funding for the projects and tasks for implementing the IWG Work Plan.

3. The MWD-TU will, under the guidance of the IWG:

- a) further improve the MWD software by implementing the decisions of the IWG;
- b) develop, upgrade and provide training and support to the installation and operation of the MWD;
- c) further develop the MWD in order to service monitoring and mapping purposes, and other functionality as identified;
- d) promote and disseminate the MWD and its use in different countries through the MedWet Web site and other methods as appropriate;
- e) investigate options and develop mechanisms for linking the different users of the MWD, e.g. through an Intranet, with a view to establishing a pan-Mediterranean Wetlands Database.

IWG Work Plan

14. An annual IWG Work Plan will be developed with timetable and outputs, according to roles and tasks assigned to the partners. The work plan will be drafted by the leader of the IWG and distributed to all IWG members well in advance in order to be finalized at each IWG annual meeting for incorporation into the overall MedWet Work Plan.

Ramsar Convention Bureau



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in its use. The MWD-TU is based in EKBY and operates under its responsibility, with the guidance of the MedWet IWG.

9. The IWG will meet annually, preferably immediately before the MedWet/Com meetings. Extra meetings may be organised according to need,

- g) test, validate and accept any changes made to these MedWet Inventory tools;
- e) promote and disseminate these MedWet Inventory tools, including through the MedWet Web site and other methods as appropriate;
- f) follow activities related to projects using these MedWet Inventory tools;