

# Culture and Nature in the Mediterranean: Towards an Integrated Approach

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The shores of the Mediterranean Sea have been inhabited for millennia and today are attracting dramatically increasing population, both permanent and transient. These shores - shaped by the sea according to ancient geographers- have seen the rise of great civilisations, powerful empires and the three major monotheistic religions. They have been connected in all directions by trade and conquest. They are currently being subjected to a wave of rapid urbanisation to satisfy real or perceived needs, often in response to short-term development pressures.

The Mediterranean Basin still maintains a very rich biodiversity. It includes unique marine, terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems that provide refuge to a large number of threatened and vulnerable, as well as endemic, flora and fauna species, including large mammals (such as bear, wolf, otter and the golden jackal), cetaceans and sea turtles. Scientists have argued that, to a considerable extent, this natural richness is due to traditional human activities which through the ages have resulted in a variety of landscapes, often of great beauty.

That is why, perhaps, the relation of humankind with nature and the quest for a harmonious co-existence to the benefit of both have been considered as crucial issues in this particular region.

In 2002, the 138 state members of the Convention on Wetlands decided officially<sup>[1]</sup> to take cultural values into account in the management of these sites. One year later, some of the people involved in the preparation of this decision founded Med-INA -the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos- a non-profit organisation based in Athens, Greece.

Its mission<sup>[2]</sup> is to promote, mainly in the Mediterranean region, a harmonious relation between Anthropos (humankind) and Nature through the application of the principles of sustainability and, in particular, the wise use of natural resources. Water and wetlands, in all their aspects -including their cultural values- constitute key focal areas for the organisation.

From the beginning, the multidisciplinary board of Med-INA has established certain guidelines for the new organisation. They include:

- an integrated approach to the cultural and natural heritage, focusing on their interrelation;
- parallel and well co-ordinated work both on the theoretical level and in specific sites, combining a scientific approach with local actions;
- selection of landscapes as the most appropriate scale of intervention; and
- close collaboration with local societies and Indigenous peoples, learning from their experience in maintaining their traditions and identity;

while remaining positively open to dialogue and criticism.

At a theoretical level, and according to these guidelines, Med-INA has completed an initial position paper, to be validated through local actions. It is currently preparing a study on the wetland landscapes of the Mediterranean. It is working in the trans-border Prespa Park<sup>[3]</sup>, assisting the Society for the Protection of Prespa to establish a documentation centre for the study and conservation of the rich natural and cultural heritage of the area, and in launching its first projects. It is planning similar activities in relation to the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa River<sup>[4]</sup>.

A major pilot project in development is the incorporation of Ramsar Resolution VIII.19 in Greece, and especially in its ten wetlands of international importance. The project includes research in these sites, extraction of methodological guidelines and the publication of two books (by the end of 2004 and 2005, respectively).

In the framework of the IUCN Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, Med-INA co-ordinates activity on sacred natural sites in developed countries, focusing on their contemporary meaning and pertinence.

It also maintains close contacts with the Convention on Wetlands, assisting in the implementation of its Resolution VIII.19. In particular, as a member of the MedWet<sup>[5]</sup> Working Group on Culture, Med-INA has the responsibility of analysing case studies in the Mediterranean in order to gather useful inputs for developing guidance on the incorporation of cultural values in nature conservation and management work.

On another level, it is developing a project on the traditional boats of the Mediterranean lakes and the potential maintenance of their cultural values under new construction methods.

Through such activities, Med-INA intends to investigate the ever-changing relation of humankind with nature, to promote increased collaboration between the natural and human sciences, and to convince others that the natural and cultural heritage is inextricably linked and must be approached in an integrated manner.

## Notes

1. Through Resolution VIII.19, 'Guiding principles for taking into account cultural values in the management of sites', approved by the 8th Conference of the Contracting Parties (Valencia, Spain, November 2002).
2. See Web site [www.med-ina.org](http://www.med-ina.org)
3. Shared by Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia.
4. Which forms part of the border between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.
5. MedWet -The Mediterranean Wetland Initiative- is a regional organ of the Convention on Wetlands, bringing together 25 states, three international conventions, the European Commission and UNDP, as well as seven international NGOs and wetland centres.