

06. Doñana National Park – Marismas de Doñana, Spain



The Marismas de Doñana is a key wetland on a global scale, because of its strategic location amid Europe, Africa, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. In spite of the transformations it has been subjected to, mainly during the last 80 years, a large part of the area has been kept in good ecological condition whereas its rich biodiversity has also been preserved. Within Andalusia, Doñana occupies a large part of the estuary of the Guadalquivir River or Rio Grande, which articulates the whole region. However, it is subjected to tourist pressure from the adjoining mass tourism developments. The area is threatened with desertification caused by a depletion of aquifers from excessive extraction for the irrigation of the surrounding intensive cultivations. The threat of pollution is also apparent.

This wetland has been inhabited since antiquity, and was known as Lago Ligur during the Hispano-Roman period. Due to its opening to the Gulf of Cañiz, Doñana was colonised by people from far-off lands, such as Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs and Vikings, while in the 20th century foreign companies –mostly English– were established there, and they all contributed to the rich cultural traditions of the area. The area is commonly known to the locals as the Marismas del Guadalquivir, and by the names of various sub-areas (such as Isla Mayor, Marisma Gallega, Marisma de Hinojos, Isla Menor, La Madre, Las Nuevas, Rincón del Pescador, Los Caracoles), which are an integral part of local traditions.

The exploitation of the areas sandy beaches, marshes and the surrounding terrestrial zones gave rise to various traditional activities, such as collection of local materials (i.e. reeds), grazing of animals, fishing, hunting, extensive agriculture, etc. It is characteristic that people in the area tended not to specialise, but to carry out complementary activities. The habitation pattern includes permanent small villages at a safe distance from the marshes (to avoid flooding) and temporary constructions on the beaches.

In El Rocèão, a village situated among beaches and marshes, the Virgin Mary of El Rocèão is celebrated. In the past, the site was a popular tourist destination for many inhabitants of the broader region, but more recently, thousands of people from all over the country come to participate in the pilgrimage and the festivities. Part of the celebrations is the procession through the Doñana National Park, towards the village of El Rocèão. A number of key issues are evident in this important site. Perhaps, the most important is the role of a living religious and social tradition, centred on El Rocèão, in the conservation and management of a wetland with high biodiversity. Efforts to establish a harmonious relationship between the two in the case of Doñana may provide useful lessons for other Mediterranean sites.