

# Wetlands – a cultural landscape for learning and leisure

Since antiquity, wetlands have been favoured sites for recreation and leisure. Their abundant and unique fauna, above all birds, attracted monarchs, noblemen and priests who enjoyed hunting. In tombs at Thebes, Egypt, there are paintings of hunting scenes, such as the capturing of birds with nets and the hunting of waterfowl, and the delta and wetlands of the Nile are known to have attracted noble Egyptians who hunted birds using wooden boomerangs and trained cats.

In the twelfth century, Prince Don Juan Manuel, in his *Libro de la Caza* (The Book of Hunting) praised the Laguna de Villena and the Albufera d'Elx, Spain, as rich hunting areas. The d'Este family constructed the Castillo y Delizia de Mesola in the sixteenth century in the Po River Delta, Italy, as a hunting lodge, and this magnificent site is now a tourist attraction and environmental centre. The Keoladeo National Park in India was created 150 years ago as a wetland hunting reserve by the Maharajah of Bharatpur and is now a National Park and Ramsar site with well-developed tourist facilities.

Of course, such leisure activities in the past were only available to the wealthier members of society,

ordinary people having neither the time nor the money for such indulgences. While this is still the case today for the majority of people in some countries, leisure time for many, especially in wealthier societies, has dramatically increased during the past century and tourists today are so numerous that satisfying their needs and wishes has become a global industry. Wetlands in this context, with their varied tourist and recreational opportunities, have a great deal

to offer. Indeed, many wetlands now welcome large numbers of people for the more traditional visitor activities such as birdwatching, walking, fishing and boating, providing a significant income at the local



WWF HONG KONG LEW YOUNG

Part of the Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve, a Ramsar site in Hong Kong, China, is maintained as a working example of shrimp ponds, *gei wai*, a management technique practiced in coastal areas of Asia for many hundreds of years.

and national level, though sometimes contributing to increased pressure on the wetlands themselves. In any event, there are ample opportunities in some wetlands for broadening this scope by making better use of their rich cultural heritage in developing more specialized tourist and recreational attractions.

Some wetlands attract visitors by virtue of the therapeutic properties of their water and mud. The Dead Sea, on the Jordan-Israel border, is eight times richer in minerals than any other sea in the world and has been renowned since biblical times for its medicinal properties. Medicinal mud, used in traditional Chinese medicine and recommended by the Greek physician Hippocrates, one of the fathers of Western medicine, has become a basic resource for tourist health resorts. This is the case, for example, for Lake Ixpaco in Guatemala and Mar Menor in Spain.

Interpretive tourism is proving to be very effective in promoting sustainable development. Ethnographic museums, site museums, ecomuseums and

**“There are ample opportunities in some wetlands for making better use of their rich cultural heritage in developing tourist and recreational attractions.”**

other interpretation centres make it possible to inform visitors about the rich cultural tradition of wetlands and at the same time make wetlands more valuable to the cultural heritage of local inhabitants.

For example, there are salt pans in existence in many parts of Europe that are still exploited in a traditional manner. Managed much as they were 1,000 years ago, they also satisfy a growing interest in preserving this cultural heritage in many countries in the Mediterranean. Maintaining these management practices not only preserves the cultural heritage of the area, it also offers the opportunity to develop these sites for tourists as “living museums”, raising awareness of this traditional activity and providing much needed supplementary income. There are also salt pans that have been converted into site museums in several countries including France, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, and Spain. An extraordinary case is the Salinas de Añana in Spain where the terraced, wooden salt pans, constructed in the tenth century, extend over a 120-hectare hillside and are now a national monument attracting many visitors.

At the Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve and Ramsar site in Hong Kong, China, part of the wetland area is maintained as a working example of shrimp ponds, *gei wai*, using a management technique practiced in coastal areas of Asia for many hundreds of years. Not only does this maintain the cultural tradition itself, it also supports the high diversity of wildlife associated with the ponds.

Archaeologists have recorded the early history of human activities through their excavations all over the world, and there are quite a few examples of imaginative reconstructions of boats, walkways, houses, and general living conditions for visitors at open-air wetland museums in, for instance, England, France, Greece, Japan, Scotland, Switzerland, and the USA. In some centres visitors can virtually experience the lives of



HUALIMAR DAHM & THEODORA PETANIDOU

**At this working salt pan in the town of Pomorie, an important tourist resort on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria, there are plans to establish a salt museum and to train young salters so that this traditional activity, and the wetlands, can be maintained.**

their ancestors, sleeping in reconstructed houses and paddling in reconstructed canoes. In Comacchio near the Po River Delta, Italy, tourists can follow a trail that is based on the cultural heritage of the area, passing clear evidence of the original coastline as well as archaeological remains of human activity in the area and a complete Roman ship that has been excavated.

It must be acknowledged that wetlands are often fragile ecosystems, and the unplanned growth of recreational and tourist exploitation has the potential for doing more harm than good. The recreational “carrying capacity” of particular wetlands must be understood, and methodologies for determining “physical”, “actual”, and “permissible” carrying capacities are under development, notably by SEHUMED at the University of Valencia in Spain. But wetlands offer a uniquely pleasing harmony between natural and cultural elements that, if carefully exploited, can increase our knowledge and our appreciation of these remarkable areas and at the same time maintain their cultural heritage for the benefit of local residents and visitors alike.

#### **The Ramsar Bureau**

Rue Mauverney 28  
CH-1196 Gland  
Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 22 999 0170  
Fax: +41 22 999 0169  
E-mail: [ramsar@ramsar.org](mailto:ramsar@ramsar.org)  
Web site: <http://ramsar.org>



CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)