

Integrating nature and culture in wetland management

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Abstract

Integrating attention to the natural and cultural aspects of wetlands has been officially promoted by the Ramsar Convention since the end of the 1990s. Such an approach can reconnect people to wetlands and give rise to important benefits for wetland conservation and wise use. Until there are management bodies with unified responsibility for both sectors, cooperation must be built gradually and systematically between the managers of wetland sites and culture specialists, so that common targets can be established. In this process, the academic and NGO communities can play a significant role. Ongoing activities in the Mediterranean can strengthen such an integrated approach.

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As already underlined in the Introduction, human beings and their societies have since ancient times been inextricably connected to Mediterranean wetlands. In the past, this related mainly to the use of wetland services and resources and was reinforced by cultural and spiritual links. Such use of services and resources has left a rich cultural heritage which, evident still in material remains (archaeological sites, historic structures, artefacts) is in danger of disappearing in respect of intangible aspects (traditional knowledge, customs and practices, spiritual beliefs).

At the same time, the nature of these direct and indirect uses of wetland services and resources has changed in recent times. Many of the day-to-day links at a local level are weaker, although the importance of wetlands for protein, salt, reeds and navigation is still crucial in some of the less affluent Mediterranean countries. Throughout the region, the role of these systems in water supply, coast protection, flood control, biodiversity conservation and other services is more significant than ever. The conservation of wetlands clearly hinges on human attitudes and activities.

This has led to an understanding that the human aspects of wetlands must be integrated in wetland management processes. Many benefits can result from such a holistic approach, perhaps the most important of which is an enriched view of wetlands as areas of human involvement through the ages as well as hotspots of biodiversity. Such an integrated view may increase the perceived value of wet-

lands and contribute decisively to their conservation. Presenting information about wetlands in a way that more fully reflects their linked natural and cultural values could create a stronger attraction for visitors, increasing local income (for example from tourism) and thus (if managed correctly) strengthening conservation initiatives. In addition, the coexistence of historical cultural relics and contemporary human activities within sensitive ecosystems makes it necessary to take a unified approach to resolving or preventing conflict, and to maintain the cultural and natural heritage in tandem.

Mandate

Incorporating cultural aspects in wetland management has been officially mandated by decisions of the Conference of the Parties of the Ramsar Convention. Resolution VIII.19 (paragraph 19a) encourages Contracting Parties:

‘to include relevant aspects of cultural heritage in both the design and implementation of wetland management plans’,

while Resolution IX.21, in paragraph 13:

‘FURTHER ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to incorporate cultural values in wetland policies and strategies, as well as in wetland management plans, and to communicate the results, thus contributing to the development of comprehensive and integrated approaches’.

These decisions were expanded in the advice provided by the Ramsar guidance document on Culture and Wetlands, under Conservation and Management Objective C+MO.1 (Papayannis and Pritchard, 2008: 34), which states:

‘To incorporate the cultural aspects of wetlands in management planning’.

Suggested implementation actions:

- a) carry out research and undertake inventories of all relevant cultural aspects related to the site in question and select those that will be the subject of defined management objectives, with the active participation of relevant communities, groups, institutions and individuals, taking into account the guidance provided in the present document; and
- b) incorporate in the management plan specific activities addressing the cultural aspects of the site.’

It should be added here that similar approaches to broadening the scope of wetland management have been promoted by other international multilateral or non-governmental organisations, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature International (WWF) (Bridgewater, 2007).

Dialogue towards common goals

The above mandate can only be effectively implemented if certain prerequisites are met. Up to now, albeit with notable exceptions, there has been limited technical interaction between the social and physical sciences. This needs to be corrected, and the initiative must come from the conservation scientists, as in most wetland sites they are responsible for management planning and related processes. Thus, intellectual exchanges among the disciplines involved will first allow a mutual understanding of the language, methods and concerns used by each discipline. Then the nature of the interfaces between disciplines will become evident, leading to the recognition of potential areas of conflict, but also of synergy. The next step should be an agreement on common goals, an essential task, though perhaps a difficult one. The difficulty is compounded by the need to take into account the views of a broader circle of concerned stakeholders as well as scientific and technical considerations.

Once contacts have been established and strengthened and goals agreed, common –or fully co-ordinated– activities can be launched relating to both the natural and cultural heritage. Research into the interface between human beings and nature should be encouraged and investigate causal relationships between the two as well as obtaining correlated data. Once joint knowledge resources are established, it will be possible to relate human and natural ‘events’ by means of spatial and temporal parameters which will help identify cause and effect relationships. The Centre for Man and Nature has started working along these lines in the Prespa Lakes region, and the first results appear highly promising (Malacou, 2010).



Fig 1.8 Fieldwork related to bird ringing, Evros Delta.

Governance options

On the governance side, there are various options that can be applied to bring about an integrated approach.

One option would entail co-ordination between those responsible for culture and nature conservation respectively. While the former are usually based in government services, either centralised in a ministry of culture or decentralised at the level of regions, prefectures or municipalities, the latter may be specific management bodies for major wetlands or –often– services related to ministries of the Environment or Agriculture. Collaboration among them can be difficult, as they belong to different administrations, have diverse backgrounds and are often located in different places. Often the modicum of collaboration that does exist is not systematic, being sought only after the emergence of a serious problem. In spite of such difficulties, efforts must be made on both sides to inform the other of their respective objectives and concerns, and to involve them in implementation activities.

Another approach would be to keep the wetland management process focused on clear ecosystem conservation issues, but to provide for the project team to be supported by cultural advisors from the public or private sectors. Such support could inform the project team and broaden its considerations to include at least a basic level of attention to cultural matters. On the other hand, such advisory contributions may remain academic with the cultural advisors marginalised and disappointed. It should be the responsibility of the management co ordinator to ensure that the culture advisors are fully integrated into the team and to undertake any further action required to ensure that their contribution is taken into account.

A very promising third option would be to enlarge the mandate of the management body so that it covers both natural and cultural heritage. This would entail developing fully integrated management objectives, establishing a multidisciplinary management team and including culture specialists in the management body on a permanent basis. Although such an option would maximise the scope for genuine integration, it has generally not been applied since it tends to go against the philosophy of the public administration establishment in most Mediterranean countries (with the possible exception of Slovenia [Debeveć, 2010]). Some progress, however, can be detected in sites where powerful NGOs play an active role, as in the case of WWF and the Italian Oasi, or Prespa and the Society for the Protection of Prespa.

Management planning

Wetland management planning in the Mediterranean varies considerably according to the different types of scientific approach used, and the social and administrative considerations that apply (Bonnet et al., 2005). Integrated planning, however, consists of a number of steps which should be generally applicable.

Consistency with adopted Ramsar guidance on management planning (Ramsar Convention, 2002) and community participation (Ramsar Convention, 1999) should be a guiding principle from the outset.

Collecting data is the first step and must be done in an informed and intelligent manner. Considerable time and funds are often spent on extensively and intensively collecting data that have little pertinence to the management process. Thus, deciding what data to collect is a key question that needs to be addressed from the very beginning. Naturally, the data should cover both the ecological and human aspects of each site. In addition, the validity of the data is a critical issue that must be addressed using clear standards, sampling protocols and validation processes. This becomes even more difficult –and necessary– in trans-boundary sites, where each side may have its own data collection system. A characteristic example of the difficulties to be faced is the Evros/Maritsa/Meriç River shared by three very different countries: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

Such pertinent and credible data can provide a good basis for analysing relationships and positive or negative interactions between natural and cultural aspects. If done objectively and equitably, this can facilitate the setting of mutually acceptable targets. At this stage, the views of other stakeholders must be sought and taken into account, which complicates the process but ensures a deeper understanding of the issues.



Fig 1.9 Monitoring the pelican colonies in Greek Lesser Prespa Lake.

However, this in itself is not sufficient: the management planning targets provisionally agreed upon must be presented to the public –and local inhabitants, in particular– in a clear and understandable manner. Consultation meetings are a good method for explaining the options and proposed targets and for building consensus through well-structured dialogue, although they require social matu-

ity, which is not always easy to ensure. It should be stressed here that the implementation of the management plan ultimately depends to a large extent on establishing social consensus through such procedures.

Once targets have been agreed, planning activities must be developed for their implementation. If cultural aspects have been included among the targets, some of these activities will concern the cultural heritage of the site (such as the restoration and re-use of historic buildings), while others will concern both culture and nature (such as sustainable fisheries planning).

In the same spirit, regulatory measures must be developed in a comprehensive manner concerning key aspects such as land use, the regulation of productive and leisure activities and visitor management.

Finally, a system for monitoring the implementation of management measures must be put in place, as well as provisions for enforcing these measures, if required. This is a particularly delicate issue: if measures are applied in an unduly strict way without prior consultation, it can provoke local confrontations, while if they are applied too flexibly, the whole management plan may unravel with dire repercussions for wetland conservation. In many countries, archaeological and forestry services have managed to gain the requisite authority and public respect: there are lessons to be learned from their experiences.

The academic and NGO sectors

There is a distinct and important role for the academic and non-governmental (NGO) communities in such an integrated management process, as they can provide an independent analysis of issues. This is particularly helpful in cases of disagreement between the management planning team and key stakeholders or local inhabitants. However, the academic and NGO sectors can only be effective in this role if they manage to establish a reputation for competence and impartiality.

Unbound as they are by administrative rigour, these two sectors are also the most apt to be converted to an integrated view of the cultural and natural heritage, and to promote it among responsible authorities at the central, regional and local level. They can also convert visitors to this viewpoint through the operation of integrated visitor centres and the provision of suitable material. It should be pointed out here that visitor centres are operated by NGOs in a number of wetlands (including Sečovlje Soline in Slovenia, Amvrakikos Gulf in Greece and Sidi Boughaba in Morocco), where they provide the public with integrated information on nature and culture.

A third task the voluntary sector can undertake is encouraging, facilitating –and, if required, organising– the participation of local inhabitants in wetland management. If they handle this task sensitively, they could assume an advocacy role in favour of local communities, while maintaining their impartiality.

Future perspectives

There are a number of activities which, if carried out in the immediate short term, would be extremely helpful in encouraging integrated management practices in the Mediterranean. Continuing work that has been done in the region since the early 2000s, these activities could be carried out in the context of the MedWet Culture Network with the assistance of the Spanish Centre for Wetlands (CE-HUM), the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (Med-INA) and other partners.

Thus, a list of Mediterranean wetland sites exemplifying multiple values should be compiled which attempts to achieve an equitable balance of wetland type and situation, geographic distribution and management structure. Once such a list is established, the conservation status of the sites in relation both to their natural and cultural heritage should be assessed and correlated with the management practices being applied to each. Finally, improvement measures should be proposed which take into account the Ramsar Guidance on Culture and Wetlands and are adapted to the specifics of each site.

In addition, the use of cultural values in promoting wetland conservation efforts should be considered. As of late 2010, Med-INA is developing a project to study and promote such an approach in the cases of Karla Lake (Greece), which was drained in the 1960s; Larnaca Lagoon (Cyprus), which was degraded by the construction of an international airport; and the Bay of Tunis (Tunisia), which has been gradually backfilled to provide space for urban expansion. If successful, such a project would be an ideal demonstration of the importance of cultural values in wetland management and conservation.



Fig 1.10 Sampling in Akamas stream, Cyprus.

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