

## February 2<sup>nd</sup> – World Wetlands Day 2016

“Wetlands for our future – sustainable livelihoods”

### The values of wetlands and the work of the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (Med-INA)

The theme for World Wetlands Day 2016, which is celebrated every year on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February, is "Wetlands for our future – sustainable livelihoods". The intimate and timeless relationship between people –the way they live and the culture they create– and wetlands has been central to the work of the [Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos](#) (Med-INA) since its founding in 2003.

A sustainable, integrated management of nature cannot be achieved without understanding the cultures that shaped it. The exploration of the intricate relation between natural and cultural heritage, along with the promotion and implementation of sustainable management plans are crucial for the conservation and wise use of natural resources.

The cultural values of wetlands, sacred natural sites and landscapes have, so far, been the main priority areas in Med-INA’s work. Ultimately, its goal is the harmonious relationship between people and nature, focusing mainly on the Mediterranean region, through research, action and awareness raising for experts and the general public.

### Med-INA and the cultural values of wetlands

Mediterranean wetlands, in spite of their natural and cultural significance, continue to be degraded and destroyed. The valuation of their cultural capital and an understanding of the relationship between their natural and cultural values are of great importance in the effort to conserve and manage them wisely. More often than not, it is this exact relationship that has shaped and continues to shape the character of wetlands and the identity of local communities. Hence, the integrated management of natural and cultural heritage has the potential to re-connect people with wetlands and thus contribute substantially to their conservation. Understanding, documenting and as a result, strengthening the links between people and wetlands is central to Med-INA’s work.

In collaboration with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), as well as with other organisations, Med-INA has supported the integration of cultural values in wetland management through a multitude of projects and activities.

The founder and director of Med-INA Thymio Papayannis was among the warmest supporters of the adoption of wetland cultural values in the framework of the Ramsar Convention as from 2000 and one of the initiators for the establishment of the Ramsar Culture Working Group since 2005. The Ramsar Guidance Document [“Culture and Wetlands”](#) published in 2008 was one of the initial results of this working group and remains to this day a reference point on the matter internationally. After many years of collaborations and work in this field, in 2015 the Ramsar Convention recognised the importance of cultural values in wetland management and incorporated them in its strategic planning.

[“Action for Culture in Mediterranean Wetlands”](#) is Med-INA’s first book on the subject of the cultural heritage of Mediterranean wetlands. It was published in 2008 and contains a preliminary documentation and evaluation of the cultural capital of twenty one Mediterranean wetlands. In 2009, after the successful completion of a pan-Mediterranean workshop held in the Greek side of the Prespa Lakes, Med-INA published the book [“Culture and Wetlands in the Mediterranean: an Evolving Story”](#) which includes the texts of the presentations made during the workshop. This was part of the MAVA funded project “Cultural values of Mediterranean wetlands” (2007-2011) which aimed at researching, documenting and strengthening the links of residents and visitors with Mediterranean wetlands.

From 2011 to 2014, Med-INA managed the project “Culture and wetlands in the Mediterranean: Using cultural values for wetland restoration” which was co-funded by the MAVA Foundation. It focused on three Mediterranean wetlands, Lake Karla in Greece, Larnaka Salt Lakes in Cyprus and Lake Tunis in Tunisia. Tourism and the active involvement of local communities were viewed as a safeguard for the sustainable management of wetlands. In the framework of the project, a bilingual [Walking Guide on Lake Karla](#) was produced, permanent and periodic informational exhibitions were organised in the Larnaka airport, port and an environmental information centre in order to raise public awareness on the natural and cultural values of the salt lakes, while in Tunisia an in-depth study was carried out on the tourism carrying capacity of Lake Tunis which led to the organisation of an international workshop on [“Tourism, Culture and Wetlands”](#).

Throughout the implementation of these projects, Med-INA managed to facilitate the collaboration of experts from many disciplines and organisations (Ramsar, IUCN, MedWet, World Heritage Centre, SPP, WWF Hellas, etc.), to increase existing knowledge on the subject, to raise awareness to the public, scientists and wetland managers on the importance of cultural values in wetland management and conservation and to assist in the implementation of relevant Ramsar Resolutions, especially [VIII.19 \(2002\)](#) and [IX.21 \(2005\)](#).

On an international level, Med-INA actively participated in all Conferences of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar COP) over the last 11

years, organising events which aimed to highlight the contribution of cultural values in wetland conservation, wise use and overall management to conference attendees, wetland experts and relevant officials. Indicatively, at the most recent Ramsar COP12, in Punta del Este, Uruguay in 2015, Med-INA assisted the Ramsar Secretariat in the organisation of a presentation of good management practices and wetland cultural values.

In 2015, Med-INA began developing an integrated approach for the management of environmentally sensitive areas in the Mediterranean which will be implemented in a pilot site in Greece and then, building on the initial research results, in two other such areas in the Mediterranean. The project is entitled 'Towards an integrated approach for the sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage in the Mediterranean' and is expected to be completed in 2017.

From 2005 to 2015, Med-INA provided secretarial support to the Ramsar Culture Working Group, while from the beginning of 2015, in collaboration with MedWet, it has embarked upon the development and management of the MedWet Culture Network.

From its foundation until this day through its diverse activities, Med-INA has gone a long way in asserting the inextricable links between people and wetlands as well as their interdependence through time. Living sustainably around wetlands has a positive impact on their ecological state and at the same time contributes to the well-being of local populations in the long term.