

Manifest for the Conservation and Restoration of the Mediterranean Wetlands of the Iberian Peninsula

The 111 lakes and wetlands, represented by 140 organizations, that make up the Living Lakes World Network, express their deepest concerns about the serious state of deterioration and destruction of some of the most important Mediterranean wetlands of the South of Europe. The global network is meeting in May 2019 in the city of Valencia, Spain, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary.

The most relevant humid areas of Spain represent habitats of great importance for the conservation of biodiversity at a global level, either as breeding or wintering areas for many species, or as a corridor in the migratory routes of birds between Europe and Africa. In a country such as Spain, with limited and irregular water resources, wetlands also provide other impressive benefits such as embodying recharge and discharge areas for aquifers, helping in flood control, improving local microclimates, furnishing pasture areas in the summertime and constituting recreational areas.

We are aware of the efforts made by administrations and NGOs during the past decades for the restoration of water cycles in certain wetlands, as well as for the treatment and purification of the waters that flow into them. In the last 25 years (1992-2017), 685 restoration projects have been verified, representing the recovery of more than the 13% of the whole Spanish wetlands surface.

However, large problems remain such as the overuse of water as well as caused by irrigation or pollution by agricultural effluents, with devastating effects on many vitally important Iberian wetlands, such as La Albufera de Valencia, Mar Menor, Delta del Ebro or the National Parks of Las Tablas de Daimiel and Doñana. We consider it as urgently important that Spanish and European Administrations have to invest more efforts and resources in the feasible restoration of the great interior Iberian lakes and lagoons dried up in the mid-20th century, such as the Antela Lagoon, Mar de Campos and Laguna de La Janda:

- Antela Lagoon (province of Orense), dried since 1958, was once one of the largest wetlands of the Iberian Peninsula, 7 km long and 6 km wide.
- Mar de Campos (province of Palencia) used to stretch over an area of 2,500 ha depending on rainfall. Now dried up (since 1968). Since 1990, only 300 hectares have been recovered in Fuentes de Nava, as well as the areas of La Güera (30 ha) and El Hoyo (30 ha).
- La Janda Lagoon (province of Cádiz) reached some 4,000 hectares, until it was dried up in the 1960s. It was the most important inland wetland in southern Europe. Its strategic location, a short distance from Africa and next to Los Alcornocales Natural Park, was an obligatory resting place for migratory birds before crossing the Strait of Gibraltar.

Therefore, we urgently request an effective implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Spain and the implementations the Basin Plans. The European Commission has published an evaluation of the hydrological demarcation plans for the period 2016-2021. The results of this evaluation indicate that since the previous study period (2009-2015), the state of European rivers, wetlands and aquifers has not significantly improved. The European Commission has established 25 recommendations for Spain. Of those 25, the following are considered as a high priority:

- To ensure that the third hydrological basin plans are approved on time, respecting the requirements of public participation process.
- To extend the use of the flow meters, to ensure that all catchments are measured and recorded, and to ensure that permits are adapted to the actually available resources.
- To ensure that the third hydrological plans correctly apply Article 9 regarding the recovery of water services costs, which includes the calculation and internalization of all environmental costs and the resources costs.
- To ensure that water needs are specified, in quantity and quality terms, for the habitats and species protected in Spain, and that these are translated into specific objectives for each protected area, and to identify the monitoring mechanisms and the pertinent measures.

Furthermore, in the frame of the new Common Agrarian Policy program, it is required to enable specific measures within the National Rural Development Program aiming at protecting buffer zones around wetlands, making it possible to combine agricultural production with the reduction of the consumption of water and effluents with high loads of fertilizers or phytosanitary products.

In addition, the three main Iberian wetlands that have dried during the 20th century, Antela, Mar de Campos and La Janda, have to be restored. Appropriate technical restoration projects are drafted but not implemented yet solely for the lack of political will (given that there are sufficient private and public funds, whether national or European, to achieve them).

Within the framework of the 15th International Living Lakes Conference, Living Lakes' members have had the opportunity to learn in detail about the situation of La Albufera Lake, a wetland member of the Living Lakes network and host of this Conference. The members of Living Lakes express their great concerns about the degradation of this ecosystem and request the competent authorities to implement the following effective measures to recover and protect these wetlands of international importance:

- A significant reduction of diffuse agricultural contamination caused by nutrients and phytosanitary products;
- Environmental recovery of farm ditches;

- Transformation of surrounding old rice fields into natural humid zones;
- Efficient agreements with farmers to allocate natural river flows to La Albufera; using treated wastewaters for irrigation.
- Increase the water flow to La Albufera through allocation of the treated waters to the wetland during no-irrigation periods.
- Revegetation and afforestation of those river - and their banks – that flow to La Albufera;
- Sustainable drainages to direct runoffs to La Albufera.
- Provide La Albufera with water contributions from the Júcar river so that pollution levels can be reduced and thus have a "normalized" sanitation situation.

Faced with the enormous challenges caused by climate change and the loss of biodiversity, we call on politicians and policy makers to ensure the implementation of the existing legislation and to agree on a global political pact towards a new water management model. This model should be based on a new culture that understands the need to preserve Iberian wetlands, not only because of their services to society, but also because they represent a unique heritage and, most especially, because our dignity as citizens depends on their protection.

Valencia, Spain, May 10th, 2019

Signing parties: