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How can the Kunming-Montreal agreement enhance the protection of Mediterranean wetlands?

Picture credit : Hellio Van Ingen

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The new global biodiversity framework for the post-2020 period was adopted on December 19 at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity¹. A roadmap for the international community between now and 2030, this agreement should make it possible to bring about the necessary changes in trajectory to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity. But in concrete terms, what can this agreement do for the protection of emblematic ecosystems, such as Mediterranean wetlands? While the 23 targets adopted in Montreal are relevant to varying degrees for these ecosystems, four deserve particular attention in that they both hold promise for change and illustrate the challenges raised

Wetlands have disappeared or been degraded **faster** than any other ecosystem in the world; in the Mediterranean basin, the situation is even more dramatic: half of them have been destroyed since 1970. Yet wetlands in good ecological condition provide many "services", particularly in the context of climate change, to which they offer a wide range of nature-based solutions (NBS): "climate buffer", for example by absorbing large volumes of water during massive rainfall and restoring this essential resource in times of drought; provision of food and quality water; recreational and cultural services and protection of property and people, especially on coastlines facing sea level rise; key role in the life cycle of one third of vertebrate species in the Mediterranean region.

In this context, can the adoption of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework make a decisive contribution to safeguarding Mediterranean wetlands? A review of 4 targets in particular.

Target 2: Restoration of degraded ecosystems²

Given the extremely rapid degradation of Mediterranean wetlands in recent decades, the **need for restoration** is urgent and enormous, estimated at 400,000 ha in the region, while only 373 ha are currently assessed as having been successfully restored, i.e. less than 1%. The challenge is therefore major. The new global framework brings from this point of view (i) even more attention, with an ambitious target explicitly mentioning inland waters, and (ii) probably even more funding, with the additional support of the dedicated Target 19.

However, it is doubtful that this new objective will make a decisive difference here. Firstly, because ecological restoration has already been the subject of strong international attention for several years now, associated with a momentum affecting all ecosystems, including wetlands. The driving forces behind this are the **United Nations Decade for Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030**, the **European Union Biodiversity Strategy 2030** and its restoration objectives, and the **proposed European law on nature restoration**. Secondly, because this political dynamic in favor of restoration is already reflected in the growing interest of many donors-not to mention that the increasingly complete application of the "avoid-reduce-compensate" sequence to development projects in various Mediterranean countries also opens up opportunities for ecological restoration. The financial resources that can be mobilized for wetland restoration operations are therefore already increasing.

However, in practice, the stakeholders involved report a recurrent double obstacle: on the one hand, the difficulty of mobilizing funding over the long term (several decades) that is the timeframe of ecological restoration, and on the other hand, the difficulty of identifying wetlands that are "ready to be restored", i.e., that meet all the conditions for a concrete restoration operation, if one assumes that funding is available. These conditions are numerous: reversibility of the wetland's disappearance (e.g., not yet urbanized), relevance from an ecological and conservation point of view (value for biodiversity, role as an ecological corridor, potential gains in ecosystem services, etc.), favorable land status in the local context (public or private, depending on the case), local or even national political support, existence of a stakeholder in charge of the initiative, support from the surrounding population, availability of scientific and technical expertise as well as capacity for work. In this context, it is not uncommon that funding potentially available for ecological restoration of wetlands is not allocated, due to the lack of a sufficiently well identified

candidate site.

In order for this new ambitious target on restoration to effectively contribute to changing the situation, it will therefore be essential to very quickly develop tools that will make it easier to match needs in the field with available funding in a more sustainable way.

Target 3: 30x30 goal3

The effectiveness of spatial protection for wetlands is well known. Moreover, protecting wetlands, which cover only 2-3% of the Mediterranean basin's surface area, improves the conservation status of more than 30% of vertebrate species, more than 40% of endemic species and 36% of threatened species in the Mediterranean hotspot, while promoting their resilience to climate change. It has also been noted that the Aichi target of protecting 10% of marine ecosystems and 17% of terrestrial ecosystems has generated a strong momentum for the creation of protected areas. Increasing this ambition to 30% for all ecosystems, and explicitly mentioning inland waters, should encourage Mediterranean states to designate more wetlands as protected areas.

It therefore remains to ensure (i) the quality of the management of these protected areas, so that they do not remain "paper parks": management plans, human and financial resources, scientific monitoring, etc., and (ii) the level of protection granted. In this respect, the IUCN categories of protected areas that are used as a reference at the international level are very broad, and have made it possible to include in protected areas zones where extractive, industrial or agricultural activities are incompatible with the maintenance of biodiversity. Although it is regrettable that the 10% target for strict protection has been dropped, the mention in Target 3 that uses within protected areas must be fully consistent with conservation objectives is a welcome safeguard.

Target 7: Pollution control4

Water quality is essential for human uses, but also for the functioning of wetland ecosystems and their biodiversity. It depends on the concentrations of numerous chemical components, largely dependent on human activity (agriculture, industry, domestic uses, etc.). In particular, nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), which are at the origin of wetland eutrophication, are the most commonly monitored parameters, as well as biological oxygen demand and heavy metals. But many other elements can affect water quality, such as pesticides, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), drug residues, nano-pollutants, etc.

Target 7 is therefore in principle important, very broad, and has the advantage of explicitly mentioning pesticide risk reduction, thus targeting the least known and most dangerous molecules such as neonicotinoids. This seems more strategic for Mediterranean wetlands than a purely quantitative approach whereby all pesticides would have been equivalent. It should also be noted that pesticides were not mentioned at all in the Strategic Plan for Biological Diversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Targets.

The fact remains that this target remains very qualitative and must therefore be based on robust indicators, that its monitoring in the Mediterranean will be very complicated due to the fragmented nature of the data, and that the low level of representation of the agro-industrial complex in the negotiations leading to its adoption may give rise to fears that it will feel little involvement in the decisions taken in Montreal.

Target 18: Remove subsidies that are harmful to biodiversity5

The [main threats to biodiversity in Mediterranean wetlands](#) are dams and water abstraction, which increase the fragmentation of rivers and aquatic ecosystems, preventing species from reaching otherwise accessible areas, limiting available downstream water sources, and altering sediment transport and hydrological cycles. Urban sprawl, transportation network development, and agricultural expansion are a close second, resulting in wetland conversion and water pollution.

These sectors and activities are heavily subsidized, so Target 18 is particularly welcome. It has been known and recognized for decades that the most biodiversity-damaging sectors and practices are heavily driven by public money, and that reforming harmful incentives, including subsidies, would have a major positive impact. It has the potential to relieve ecosystems of major pressures while freeing up hundreds of billions of euros of public money each year to ensure their protection, restoration and the well-being of the people who live in contact with them.

This underscores the importance of this target, even if more than 20 years of globally unsuccessful attempts to reform harmful subsidies, in frameworks as diverse as the WTO, the OECD and the European Union, in particular, after the failure of Aichi Target 3, which set an objective for 2020 similar to that of this new Target 18, may generate a certain skepticism about its potential success. The first step, that of identifying harmful incentives, will be technically complex but politically relatively painless: it will therefore be a test. It will be necessary to learn from previous experiences: in France, for example, the [Sainteny Report](#), published in 2012, was part of the dynamic instilled by the Aichi Targets, by a 2011 European Commission communication, by the commitments made during the Grenelle Environment Forum and in the 2011 National Strategy for Biodiversity. However, this momentum, despite an unprecedented collegial analysis at the national level, resulting from an explicit political mandate, is far from having been followed by the necessary reforms.

Turning the Kunming-Montreal agreement into real opportunities for Mediterranean wetlands

Under what conditions could the Kunming-Montreal agreement be transformed into operational opportunities for the protection and restoration of Mediterranean wetlands?

First of all, regional actors will have to seize the new global framework as soon as possible, and get into gear to support its implementation and contribute to its monitoring: the Barcelona Convention system, MedWet (the Mediterranean wetlands initiative under the aegis of the Ramsar Convention), IUCN Mediterranean and major NGOs, etc.

Secondly, the Mediterranean States, all parties to the CBD, and therefore all committed to-and accountable for-the decisions taken in Montreal, are the first to be concerned by their implementation. They must very quickly update their national biodiversity strategies, ensure that wetlands are central to them and increase the coherence of their sectoral public policies among themselves and with the global framework. Local authorities, not directly involved in the framework but essential to its implementation on the ground, must do the same.

An increased effort to acquire knowledge and synthesize available data will also be required, for example in the [emblematic case of water quality](#). This knowledge must be organized to allow, as far as possible, the monitoring of the achievement of the 23 new targets on the various ecosystems; a major challenge for the [Mediterranean Wetlands Observatory](#). Finally, Mediterranean civil society must seize this framework to maintain constant pressure on national and local governments, reminding them of their commitments when necessary, while benefiting from the increased legitimacy that this framework can provide, for example, in its struggles against development projects that are deleterious for sensitive ecosystems.

Picture credit : Hellio Van Ingen

1 <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/0bde/b7c0/00c058bbfd77574515f170bd/cop-15-l-25-fr.pdf>

2 "Ensure that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of areas of degraded terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine ecosystems are under effective restoration, in order to enhance biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, ecological integrity and connectivity."

3 "Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories."

4 "Reduce pollution risks and the negative impact of pollution from all sources, by 2030, to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, considering cumulative effects, including: reducing excess nutrients lost to the environment by at least half including through more efficient nutrient cycling and use; reducing the overall risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half including through integrated pest management, based on science, taking into account food security and livelihoods; and also preventing, reducing, and working towards eliminating plastic pollution."

5 "Identify by 2025, and eliminate, phase out or reform incentives, including subsidies, harmful for biodiversity, in a proportionate, just, fair, effective and equitable way, while substantially and progressively reducing them by at least 500 billion United States dollars per year by 2030, starting with the most harmful incentives, and scale up positive incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity."

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