



ISLAND WETLANDS

An outline of the Conservation of Greece's island wetlands initiative

Wetlands are among the most important island ecosystems of Greece and the Mediterranean and at the same time the most threatened.



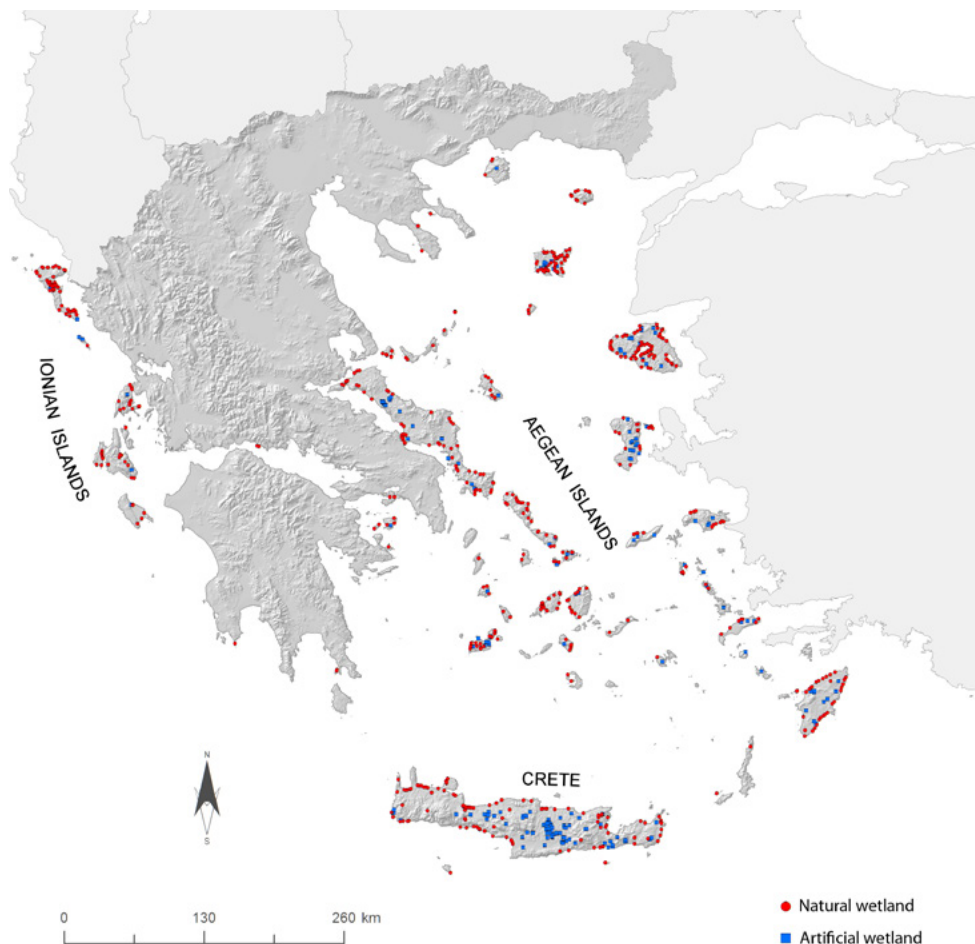
Alia marsh (Andros isl.) © Nicos Georgiadis / WWF Greece

HUNDREDS OF SMALL WETLANDS ARE SCATTERED ACROSS 75 ISLANDS OF GREECE SUPPORTING WILDLIFE, PROTECTING SOILS FROM SALINIZATION AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE MOSAIC OF THE LANDSCAPE

The ecological, social and cultural importance of island wetlands, these small, fragile ecosystems cannot be underestimated: unique biodiversity hotspots, important stop-overs for migrating birds, relics of ancient land-use patterns, important water reservoirs for modern island societies and a unique sustainable development asset.

Despite their immense importance, island wetlands are continuously degraded in terms of both ecological status and size. Wetlands are the most threatened ecosystems of Greek islands as most of them are undergoing rapid degradation (clearing, filling with debris, building and road construction, pollution, draining, etc). The obvious drivers of this degradation are development pressures, driven by tourism operations and rapidly increasing land values, as well as unsustainable water management, especially for agricultural uses.

Until recently, hundreds of wetlands on the islands of Greece were unknown and largely unprotected. Since 2004 following discussions with national and international experts and with encouragement and enthusiastic support of the MAVA Foundation, WWF Greece has been motivated to document the importance and conservation needs of the islands' wetlands of Greece, to raise awareness regarding their value and to promote their effective protection. Our initiative "Conservation of the Islands Wetlands of Greece" (2004-2013) initially focused on the Aegean Islands and later extended to Crete and Ionian Islands, involving, in essence, the whole of maritime Greece.



© Kaloust Paragamian / WWF Greece

Omalos wetland
(1,325m a.s.l., Lasithi, Crete island)



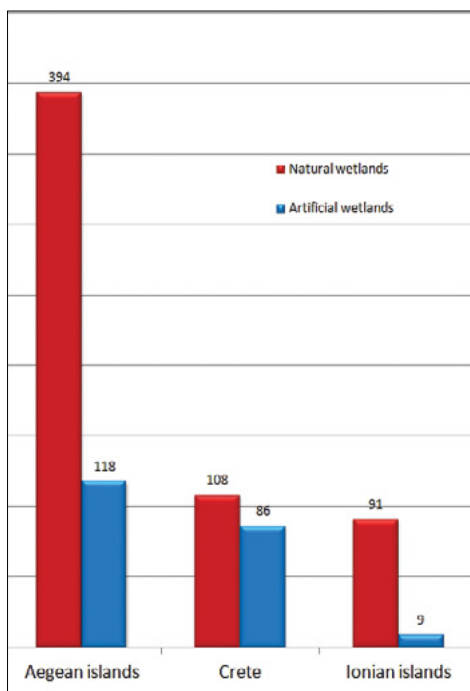
© Kaloust Paragamian / WWF Greece

Karoumes wetland
(Lasithi, Crete island)

We located and visited more than 1,000 possible wetland sites across 78 islands. Eventually the inventory included 806 wetlands larger than 0.1ha on 75 islands covering a total area of 105 km².

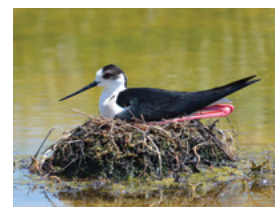
Our efforts concentrated on the protection of the island wetlands and the need to counter the underlying ignorance of their importance which led to their degradation. Our activities included:

- raising awareness and informing all stakeholders on the value of island wetlands and the need to protect and manage them,
- setting-up volunteer based red alert networks and using legal instruments for countering degrading practices,
- intervening to include wetlands under existing protection statuses and management plans or designate conservation projects, and
- mobilizing central policy makers, promoting the designation of a national scheme for the protection of island wetlands.



© Thanos Giannakakis / WWF Greece

Vromolimni (Kerkyra island)



© Kaloust Paragamian / WWF Greece

Black-winged stilt
(*Himantopus himantopus*)

Notable progress has been achieved. We have:

- gained valuable knowledge on their status,
- brought the issue into the public discourse,
- managed to promote specific conservation measures and avert site-specific threats in a number of cases and
- efficiently promoted their legal protection at a national and local scale.

The main results of the project's activities can be outlined in accordance to its objectives:

Establishment of necessary scientific knowledge base required for the protection of island wetlands

Prior to the project "Conservation of the islands wetlands of Greece", the information about the number and the condition of the island wetlands was limited. Today, all island wetlands larger than 0.1ha are sufficiently documented:

- 806 natural and artificial wetlands (>0.1 ha) in 75 islands of Greece have been inventoried and their status has been assessed.
- The inventorial data for all the island wetlands and most of the projects deliverables are available for anyone interested through "Ygrotopio", the first bilingual web portal about Greek Island Wetlands <http://www.oikoskopio.gr/ygrotopio>
- An inventory book has been published as a result of the first phase of the project (2004-2007) containing data for 348 wetlands in 52 islands of the Aegean Sea.
- The results of the project have been communicated to the scientific community through 30 contributions to 19 scientific congresses.
- Three papers have been published in peer reviewed scientific journals/proceedings.
- Our data have been used in the compilation of 5 master and graduated theses in 3 universities of Greece.



Cretan Frog (*Pelophylax cretensis*)
Crete Island endemic

© Kaloust Paragamian
WWF Greece



Gizani (*Ladigesocypris ghigii*)
Rodos Island endemic

© Andrea Bonetti
WWF Greece

Promotion and guarantee of adequate protection frameworks at the national and local level

Intensive policy work and advocacy resulted in a significant increase of protected island wetlands. Out of 593 natural wetlands, 482 (80%) are now protected under a strict legal framework:

- The new Greek Biodiversity Law (3937/2011), among other things, acknowledged the importance of small island and mainland wetlands and included provisions for their protection.
- A Presidential Decree "Approval of a list of small island wetlands, and provision of terms and conditions for the protection and conservation of small coastal wetlands included therein" was adopted in June 2012 (Government Gazette AAP 229/19.06.2012), bringing 380 natural wetlands across 59 islands under a strict protection status.
- 74 wetlands were included as "Protected Areas" in approved Local Spatial Plans on 6 islands
- 5 wetlands were included in a new established Wildlife Refuge at Lesvos Island, in 2009.



Mute swan (*Cygnus olor*)

© Kaloust Paragamian
WWF Greece

Diffusion of knowledge towards the mobilisation of public and civil society for the protection of island wetlands

A large number of citizens and local NGOs were mobilized in the framework of a volunteer network, to produce and distribute information and communication material, to engage primary and secondary schools and to organize public events.

More than 1,000,000 citizens from various fields were informed about the objectives and goals of the initiative, its results, achievements and outcomes:

- more or less 10,000 people attended presentations, seminars, action days etc.
- 6.000-10.000 unique visitors per month (since 11/2009) through our blog <http://wwfaction.wordpress.com>
- more than 100,000 people that are connected to WWF Greece's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/WWFGreece>
- more than 23,000 people through the distribution of informative leaflets
- 35,000 WWF Greece's supporters that receive the quarterly magazine "Living Planet"
- an uncountable number of people followed our interviews in TV/radios and the reproductions of our blog posts
- public services, primary and secondary schools, environmental education centers etc, received 7,500 copies of our book and booklets



Tsiknias estuary (Lesvos island)

© Maria Noidou
WWF Greece

Handle and avert site-specific threats

More than 100 citizens and several local NGOs participated in a volunteer early warning system established on 6 islands for the detection of wetland degradation activities. Public authorities were mobilised through complaints' submissions and several wetlands were literally saved from distraction:

- More than 140 degradation cases in 67 wetlands across 13 islands were stopped.
- Considerable fines have been imposed for island wetland degradation and 5 cases (4 on Crete and 1 on the island of Evvoia) have been brought to court.
- Field actions for the protection of specific wetlands such as the Almyros wetland and the Malia marsh in Irakleion, Crete have been implemented.
- At least 12, 000m³ of rubble removed from the Moronis river estuary in Souda, Crete, restoring an area larger than 1 ha.
- Technical reports and proposals for the restoration and management of 13 wetlands have been compiled and submitted to the relevant authorities, implemented in 2 cases so far.
- Lighter conservation activities took place for more than 30 wetlands, involving citizens, public authorities and NGOs.



© Thanos Giannakakis
WWF Greece

Citizens protesting against wetland degradation

The Punta del Este opportunity

WWF Greece invested 9 years of hard work at the field identifying the “anonymous” and undervalued island wetlands of Greece. The national and local recognition and protection of Greek island wetlands constitutes an important milestone. However, to ensure the effective and long lasting protection of these ecological treasures additional effort is needed to complete implementation and ensure enforcement of these provisions.

Greek island wetlands are not the exception. Island wetlands across the Mediterranean have similar ecological, social and cultural values. They offer important services to the islanders and form an integral part of the natural environment of the islands. At the same time, they face more or less the same, increasingly serious, pressures, such as the spread of urban and coastal developments.

The Balearic Islands and Malta have inventories that are sufficiently complete. In Cyprus a wetland registry project is implemented currently.

It is time to ensure that the conservation of island wetlands across the Mediterranean Basin is attained. Now, is the time to build on the ongoing momentum and proceed with renewed interest to strengthen national and regional efforts.

The 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands constitutes a unique opportunity to step up these efforts. The adoption of Draft Resolution (XII.14) on the Conservation of Mediterranean Basin island wetlands proposed by Greece will constitute an important milestone to ensure the sustainable future of island wetlands in the Mediterranean.



© Thanos Giannakakis
WWF Greece

For more information:

<http://www.oikoskopio.gr/ygrotopio>

Please feel free to contact:

Thanos Giannakakis,
Project leader, t.giannakakis@wwf.gr

Kaloust Paragamian,
Scientific coordinator, k.paragamian@wwf.gr



Why we are here.

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

www.wwf.gr