

Balkan-Mediterranean Wetland Living Lab

Improving the conservation effectiveness of wetlands – WetMainAreas

***Preamble:** The ecosystems' continuity and integration is recognized by EU Regional Policy as one of the main challenges for the safeguard of biodiversity of the Balkan Mediterranean territory, in support of sustainable development and improvement of citizens' quality of life. The Transnational Cooperation Programme Balkan-Mediterranean 2014-2020 financed the project WetMainAreas with the goal to contribute to the protection and conservation effectiveness of the territory's wetland ecosystems. The project was inspired from the methodological approaches of the HORIZON 2020 research project "Satellite based Wetland Observation Service" and followed the MedWet inventory data standards.*

KEY MESSAGES

The Balkan Mediterranean territory shares a rich natural heritage, with **numerous inland and coastal wetlands of high biodiversity value, which occupy only 2% of the territory area**. Many of these wetlands are part of important archaeological and cultural heritage, as being inhabited by millennia.

Some 8,500 natural and artificial wetlands, with a minimum size of 0.05 ha, have been mapped (excluding rivers and streams). They cover more than 530,000 ha, 1/3 of which is designated as internationally important according to the Ramsar Convention, and is included in the Natura 2000 and Emerald networks as well as in nationally designated sites.

About 3/4 of wetland sites are small (below 8 ha); they occupy only 3% of total wetland area. These numerous small wetlands create a valuable network of corridors and stepping stones, essential for species movement, migration and dispersal. When they are found in heavily urbanized and agricultural areas they form islands of biodiversity and natural green infrastructures offering multiple services (water storage, recreation, adaptation to climate change).

Almost 1/3 of wetland area is located in unprotected land with very high value for biodiversity. These wetlands should be integrated in conservation action plans for protected habitats and species of Natura 2000 sites, Emerald sites, and National Parks.

Policy makers and representatives of authorities responsible for land use planning, conservation and protection of natural resources, **are encouraged to use the** knowledge generated by **the Balkan Mediterranean Wetland Inventory & Assessment**. This could be used in: (i) strategic and

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operational plans relevant to nature conservation; (ii) management plans of protected areas and of river basins; (iii) new regulatory acts for improved management of unprotected wetlands in compliance with existing national and European legislation; (iv) national reports to EU and to Ramsar Convention or other initiatives; (v) joint actions at transnational level.

Further, they are encouraged to get familiar and use the developed services to support scientific documented decisions for wetland protection, conservation, management and restoration:

\The Balkan Mediterranean Wetland Geoportal (<https://wetmainareas.com/>) which provides access in the **national inventory geodatabases and more than 45 geospatial layers** for wetlands, protected areas, Natura 2000 sites, Emerald sites, and for the connected areas favourable for biodiversity.

\The Satellite based monitoring service of monitoring the surface water dynamics (<https://extrema.space/WetMainAreas/dashboard.html>) which provides access in a **3-year time series of satellite-derived water indices** used to map the wetlands' water regime. It currently includes 450,800 cloud-free matches of Sentinel-2 images i.e. an average of 52 images per wetland site.

The wide dissemination of the **Balkan Mediterranean Wetland mapping and connectivity assessment results and services** is encouraged in order to foster scientific research, environmental education, awareness raising and communication, targeting various users i.e. policy makers, national and local authorities, transboundary initiatives, NGOs, citizen science groups, journalists, etc.