

WETLANDS CONFERENCE IN THE CAMARGUE

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The progressive loss of marshes, bogs and others wetlands through drainage and "improvement" led the Executive Board and the Ecology Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature to undertake a special project—project MAR—on the conservation and management of temperate wetlands. As with their African Special Project, the work is divided into three stages. First came the collection of data on the status and importance of wetlands and the methods by which they might most profitably be conserved: also the compiling of an inventory of important wetland areas in Europe and north-west Africa.

The second stage was a conference, sponsored jointly by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the International Council for Bird Preservation and the International Wildfowl Research Bureau. The third stage, now in progress, is the elaboration of the results of the conference.

The co-ordinator of project MAR is Dr. Luc Hoffmann who directed the preparation of the conference from the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat in the Camargue area of southern France. It was held from 12th to 17th November, 1962, at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, a small seaside resort famous for the twice-yearly gypsy pilgrimages to the shrine of Sara, their patron saint.

The eighty-four participants came from twelve European countries, from the United States, Canada, Australia and Morocco. More than fifty papers were presented on the following themes: the reasons for the conservation of marshes and other wetlands including economic, scientific and moral considerations: basic criteria for defining reserve areas and surrounding protective buffer-zones: legal and administrative ways of achieving protection: management and utilization of wetlands: restoration of modified wetlands: wildlife utilization of man-made aquatic habitats (reservoirs, gravel-pits, artificial ponds, salt-pans).

Commercial interests do not invariably conflict with those of wild life: the salt-pans have enriched the Camargue biologically and provide some of the best places for nesting and wintering ducks. In Holland, with its problem of agricultural surpluses and with rents for fishing and shooting grounds doubling year after year, the government have decided to stop subsidizing the reclamation of the few remaining inland peat-fields and marshes. Those waste lands already acquired by the state in order to be transformed into dairyland will most likely be handed over to organizations for nature conservancy. It has been acknowledged too late that reedlands are frequently more profitable than agricultural land, the reeds being used widely for thatching and shielding.

The principle recommendations drawn up by the conference referred to the need to publicize the value of wetlands, for a guide to basic legal procedures and administrative methods in their protection, for guides on the technical management of wetland reserves and for a list with an internationally agreed classification of European and North African wetlands to

be available to conservationists and to those responsible for development schemes.

Excursions were made to the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat to see duck traps, to Bardouine for a demonstration on management techniques and to the Camargue Reserve. At La Tour du Valat the entire conference were guests of Dr. and Madame Hoffmann: to complete a most enjoyable occasion, a group of flamingoes passed overhead. At Bardouine the conference enjoyed the hospitality of a local landowner and saw herds of the Camargue bulls and horses.

The final excursion in the Camargue Reserve was made on horseback, in horse-drawn carts or by special jeep, since it involved crossing a lagoon to reach the Bois des Rièges, a ridge of old dunes crowned by Phœnician junipers (*Juniperus phœnicea*) and pistachio (*Pistacia lentiscus*). Nearby was one of the islets where flamingoes nest (approximately 4,000 pairs nest in the Camargue). Six young wild boar galloped past the party, a sudden burst of life in a bleak landscape.¹

An architectural excursion was also made, to Arles, where the curator of the Museum of Christian Art conducted a tour of the Crypto-Portiques, three double underground galleries dating from the time of Augustus.

Films were shown from the United States (Marshland is not Waste Land; the Whooping Cranes; Ducks Unlimited); from Chile (James's Flamingoes), and one about the Coto Doñana—an appetizer for those who followed the conference by an excursion to the *marismas* in Spain.

¹ Readers interested in the fauna and flora of the Camargue should refer to "An Ecological sketch of the Camargue" by L. Hoffmann, *British Birds*, vol. LI, pp. 321–349, 1958.