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A solid base with future perspective

WWF Spain has been working for the conservation of wetlands since its creation, in the 60's, with the protection of Doñana wetlands, now Ramsar site, in Southwestern Spain. This working line continues.

In 2016 WWF launched an inventory in the Balearic Islands following the methodology of WWF Greece, to contribute to the implementation of Ramsar Resolution XII.14 "Conservation Mediterranean basin island wetlands".

Over two years, WWF has developed intensive field work, together with scientific references analysis, and participation of local experts, naturalists, local NGOs and public administrations. The results have been included in a database that will soon be accessible online.

The aim of the inventory, apart from increasing knowledge, is to enrich the current wetland inventory of the region, and ensure the protection of the most outstanding wetlands of the islands. For this purpose, WWF has maintained contact with the environmental and water authorities of the Balearic Islands, sharing with them the content of the inventory for its inclusion in the new River Basin Plan and in their wetlands inventory.

The in situ visits have allowed to denounce several direct impacts on wetlands, and to identify potential areas for restoration for future intervention.

A diverse system of wetlands

In total, WWF has identified 358 wetlands of more than 0.10 hectares. Most are artificial (197, 83%) - golf course ponds, 'safareigs' (pools for irrigation), water treatment ponds, quarries or areas of clay extractions- which are an important attraction for fauna especially if its shores have become naturalized and aquatic vegetation appears, and because they are mostly located in the interior, where natural alternatives are scarce. The rest (39, 17%) are natural, the majority concentrates in the coast and correspond to small ponds of river mouths which are small safe ports of passage for many migratory birds, and breeding areas for amphibians and insects such as dragonflies.

In 60% of the natural wetlands original habitats and geomorphology predominate, in more than 50% of its surface area. 24 of these wetlands can in fact be said to be intact, without signs of human disturbance, most of them are karstic water bodies in caves, along with five less frequented areas.

The other 40% of the natural wetlands of the Balearic Islands have more than 50% of their original habitats altered, including 5 places that are totally transformed, and they mostly correspond -except in two cases- to areas that are not protected and in danger. These areas should be the priority for their protection and restoration.

This inventory has included, for the first time, a network of small humid areas that have until now gone unnoticed, but that are still important in the Mediterranean environment in which the Balearic Islands are located.

236 of the sites have less than 2 has, which means that 66% of the areas included in the inventory are small wetlands on which traditionally no action has been taken. For this reason, there is little information about them, many do not have specific figures of protection and are easily destroyed without the knowledge of competent authorities.

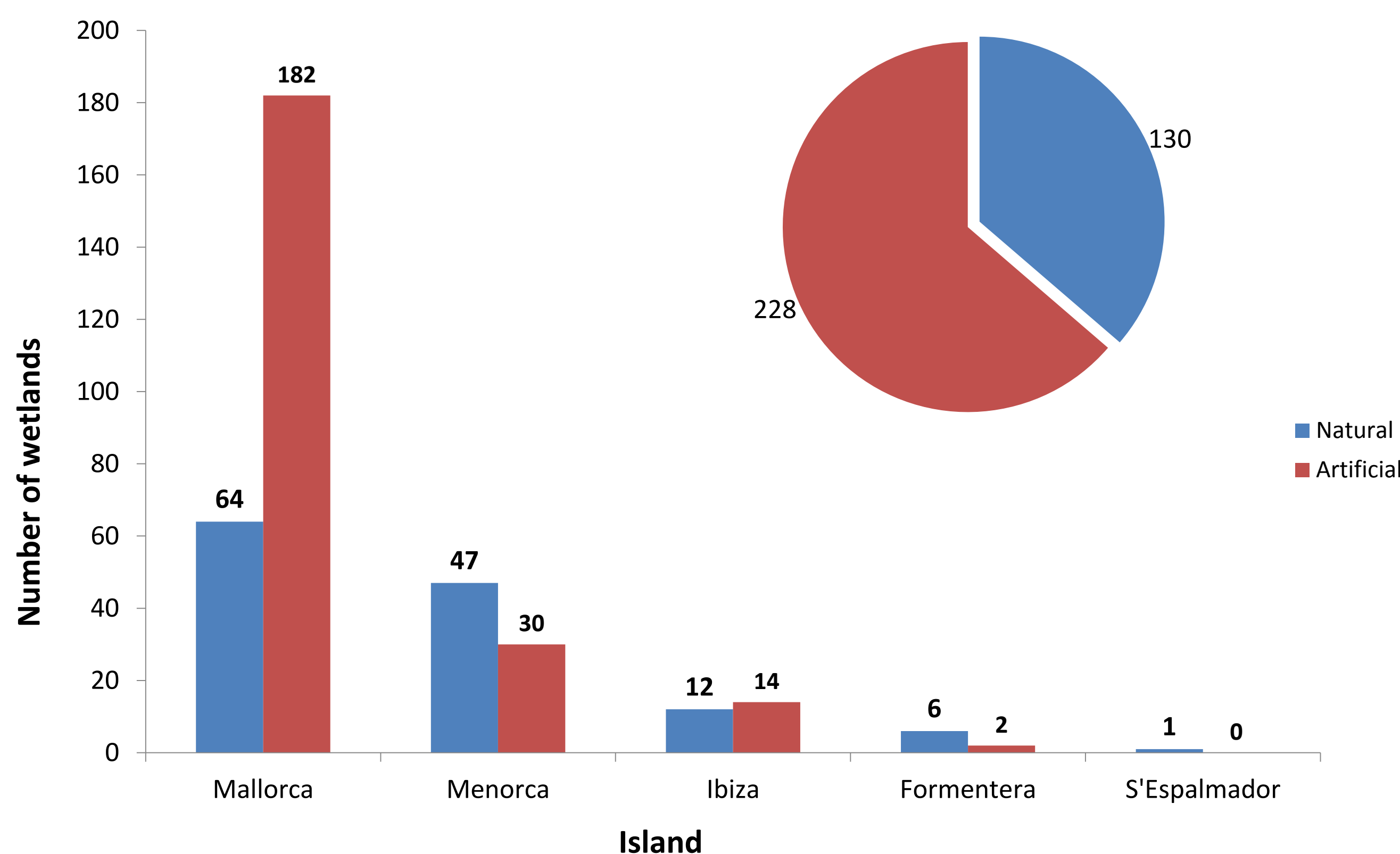


Figure 1. Number of wetlands inventoried per island and per type



Figure 2. Old saltpans, like this in Formentera, still need some active management to develop their full conservation potential.

Multilateral conservation

The state of conservation of the wetlands of the Balearic Islands is uneven depending mainly on their size and on whether they are in public or private property. The large wetlands have been declared a protected natural area, most of them after decades of environmental campaigns. This is the case of the Ramsar site and Natural Park of s'Albufera de Mallorca. On the other hand, the smaller wetlands are far from having their future secured.

Measures of other authorities, other than classic Nature Conservation ones, have also played a key role for the protection of these ecosystems: Land use planning regional authorities and municipalities have implemented the *regional law on natural areas and urban planning* (Law 1/1991, of January 30), preventing the urbanization of small coastal wetlands, and have as well developed small restoration projects to delimit, fence or sign wetlands; Coast authorities have delimited the Terrestrial-Maritime public domain, following the National Coast Law, avoiding the destruction of natural coastal wetlands that now survive surrounded by hotels, restaurants, shopping centers and housing; Water Authorities, finally, have defined a Catalog of Wetlands in the Balearics River Basins Plan, which is quite complete, and implies a formal recognition of the existence of most of these areas as well as of their water needs.

A joint challenge

A multilateral approach has proven to be key for wetland conservation, but still needs to be further developed. Knowledge of our wetlands needs to continue growing, mainly in Ibiza and Formentera, and periodical monitoring should be implemented. New protection measures need to be established, especially for small wetlands, in a coordinated way from all the authorities, for example thought the approval of a decree for Wetlands Conservation, improvement of current land use regulations and the improvement of the Catalog of Wetlands. But the main challenge remains the management, for which a Wetland Management Plan of the Balearics would set a specific guideline to ensure coordination among authorities and with the private sector -both owners of lands encompassing wetlands, and companies operating in the area-. While private wetlands imply an added challenge for conservation, appropriate land stewardship agreements with owners would allow for improved and better informed management.

WWF will continue working with authorities to identify the best measures to implement, developing restoration activities and raising awareness on the value and beauty of the Balearic wetlands.



Figure 3. Many small wetlands that remain unaltered close to the coast face a big threat if left unprotected.



Figure 4. Measures to direct human use with wooden paths, signs or light fencing have proven very useful on reducing disturbance.

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