

Local actions for Wetlands conservation

The Small Grants Programme in Uruguay, of the Ministry of Housing, Land Regulation and Environment, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme and funded by the Global Environment Facility (SGP/MVOTMA/UNDP/GEF), is present in the country since 2005.

Since then, with the Programme support, more than a hundred of social and environmental projects are being developed successfully by civil society organization, in most of the country, with the purpose of contributing to improve their living conditions, generate sustainable livelihoods and contribute to local development along with environmental conservation. Of these, one third is located in wetlands areas.

In the Ramsar Sites called “Bañados del Este y franja costera”, “Esteros de Farrapos e Islas del Río Uruguay” and “Laguna de Rocha”, as well as in other areas such as “Humedales del Santa Lucía” (recently joined to the Protected Areas National System, SNAP), various actions are carried out by family farmers and small towns neighbors- with support from the SGP- contributing to the conservation of these ecosystems. These actions include productive activities such as farming, apiculture and ecotourism and several recovery and restoration interventions on native forests, coastal and lakeside zones, associated with wetlands.

It is important to point out that all these projects have a demonstration value. Many of them are pioneers, and generate inputs for the implementation of public policies and encourage and complement other actions and supporting activities from other various institutions.

Wetlands restoration and local practices recovery

In the Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar Site called “Bañados del Este”, around a small town named “Pueblo 18 de Julio”, in the Department of Rocha, there is a particular type of shallow wetland, constituted by a system of paludal grasslands (flooded grasslands) locally known as “Varges”.

While from the 70s this area suffered a severe loss due to desiccation for rice and livestock usage, these “Varges” fields were formerly used for livestock production, mainly to feed livestock in the summer, when the rest of the fields are dry because of higher temperature and lower rainfall.

With the support of SGP/MVOTMA/UNDP/GEF, a group of farmers associated to a rural development local organization (“Sociedad de Fomento Rural San Miguel”) managed to implement a restoration and rational management system for these “Varges”, based on the systematization of the ancient local practice.

245 hectares of wetlands were restored in 6 family farmers’ fields, harmonizing its use with the conservation of biodiversity and their ecosystem services through sustainable management of the “Varges” at very low cost. Further data on the diversity and



Varges



Varges

productivity of natural pastures of the wetland were generated. It turned out to be the first significant Uruguayan experience on wetlands restoration, with a major demonstration and replication potential value. Other organizations also participated in the project execution: PROBIDES Programme, the National Institute of Agricultural Research (INIA Treinta y Tres), and the NGO "Aves Uruguay".

Furthermore, in the Ramsar Site "Bañados del Este", various interpretation paths have been implemented and a lot of recovery actions are being made on sand dunes, coastal wetlands and psammophyte vegetation, typical of a coastal area. Among these actions, we would like to highlight the ones regarding the psammophyte vegetation patches conservation, as well as the raise of awareness about the importance and the various possibilities of sustainable uses of the psammophyte vegetation, which are being conducted by a group of neighbors (APROBIO-MA) that live along the coast of Maldonado. Both the local and the national government (MVOTMA and the Ministry of Transport through its National Roads Directorate) and also the academia have been contributing to the initiative, enhancing the support provided by the SGP.

Ecotourism as a way to preserve natural, cultural and archaeological values in wetlands.

In the Protected Area and Ramsar Site "Esteros de Farrapos e islas del Río Uruguay" local people develop actions to promote ecotourism and responsible tourism.

To contribute to the preservation and dissemination of the biodiversity, landscape and cultural values of the site, but also as a way to generate jobs and incomes basically for young people,



San Javier



Nuevo Berlin



Santa Lucía

residents of "Nuevo Berlín" are implementing a path named "La Yeguada" on the side of a stream of the same name, tributary of the "Río Uruguay".

It has several interpretative stations, highlighting the existence of an indigenous cemetery. Some neighbors were trained as nature guides for the interpretation guidance of the path, which is complemented by a canoe trip down the stream.

Also, in the nearby town of San Javier, members from the "Esteros de Farrapos" group, together with other local stakeholders, are adapting an interpretive path located in the "Puerto Viejo" resort. The path has been provided with minimum infrastructure, facilitating the access and an easy route to observe the diverse native species and ecosystems. To diversify the existing offer, another path named "El camisón" is being implemented in the same locality. Thus, it seeks to provide additional tourist services in this natural environment, increasing both the recreational value and learning during the stay of visitors, whose flow is important.

In both cases, the support provided by the SGP has joined the ones from the Ministry of Tourism, the SNAP/DINAMA/MVOTMA park rangers and technicians from several institutions.

Moreover, the same "Esteros de Farrapos" group had previously developed a hard work on control and eradication of the invasive and exotic species *Gleditsia Triacanthos*, providing valuable data on various methods of doing so, as well as the setting up of a nursery of native trees to replace the eliminated ones.

If we travel the west coast of the country from "Esteros de Farrapos" to the north, we reach an area called "Rincon de Franquía", whose northern border with Brazil is formed by the "Río Cuareim", while the "Río Uruguay" is the western limit with Argentina. The local organization named GRUPAMA noticed the biodiversity values importance, especially birds, of this triple border area and with the support of the SGP managed to implement a local protection area in the first instance, which currently has already entered the SNAP.

"Paths to live wetlands" is the core idea in which a project developed by a group of young people called TribHumedal focused on, jointly working with producers settled in the surroundings of the Colorado and Las Brujas in Canelones - inside the "Santa Lucía" Wetlands- recently entered to the SNAP. A participatory map of the area and paths were generated to promote ecotourism as a complementary activity to the family farming that is typical there.

For more information, visit:
www.ppduruguay.undp.org.uy
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