

Recovery and promotion of traditional salt production and restoration of salt pans, Castro Marim - PT

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Sound use of resources and promotion of less resource intensive processes/products
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Improving competitiveness

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Participation
- Ecosystems based approach
- Socio-economic

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

How a traditional sustainable activity – the production of salt collected by hand - can be recovered, promoted and recognised as local cultural heritage while allied to biodiversity and nature conservation.

4. Overview of the case

In the past decades, traditional salt production in Southern Europe has diminished considerably as it became economically non-viable and illegal. Active salt-pans present a high ecological value since they support high biodiversity. Furthermore, this human-shaped landscape also represents a legacy of knowledge and cultural identity. The recognition of these aspects are leading to strategies and actions aimed at revitalising and recovering this activity in several traditional salt-pan areas throughout Europe.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

Throughout the centuries, salt has had an important economic role in the Atlantic littoral space, sustaining important commercial trade between Northern Europe and Latin America. However, during the last half of the XX century, this activity showed a clear regression and disappeared from many of the original production areas, as it suffered strong spatial pressures and competition with industrial production. As a consequence, their environmental importance and the cultural and human heritage associated with the salt pans also became threatened. These systems support high biodiversity, particularly several protected species of birds that depend on this type of habitats for shelter, feeding and nesting. Furthermore, the salt pans constitute conspicuous human-shaped landscapes and the activity represents a legacy of “know-how” (the traditional producers still active are usually reduced in number and aged). This situation is further intensified for the lack of European regulation and even national legislation, as in some European countries the marketing of traditional salt, for lack of specific treatment procedures, is (or was until recently) illegal.

In Portugal, the traditional salt production has been one of the main economic activities of the country and Castro Marim (East Algarve) is still nowadays the most representative area, supporting the largest community of traditional salt artisans in

Portugal. The salt pans represent 28% of the 2,000 hectares, mostly wetlands and salt marshes, that integrate the Natural Reserve of Castro Marim. The geometric ponds for salt evaporation were introduced in Castro Marim by the Romans and this activity was closely associated with the industry of fish conservation that was well established in the Algarve. With the bankruptcy of most of these industries, the traditional salt activity was deeply affected. The abandonment of many salt pans, their conversion into aquaculture and industrialised units reshaped the landscape and reduced their ecological value. Compared to industrial salt, traditional salt is not washed or whitened so it retains all the minerals present in seawater. It naturally crystallises in special salt ponds and is collected with hand- instruments. The thin crystal foil that forms at the surface and must be collected every day before it sinks to the bottom, constitutes the “fleur du sal” (Flower of salt) - salt crystals with special features which value is gradually being recognised.

b) Objectives

Revaluing the identity of salt pans and its associated activity, restoring and promoting the biological, economic and cultural potentials of the coastal wetlands. Specific objectives include the recognition of the importance of the salt pans for nature conservation, the restoration of the salt pans, organisation and structuring of the profession, bringing back value to the traditional salt produced in the coast.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Project Management

In Castro Marim, the Natural Reserve of Castro Marim Salt Marsh and the municipalities of Castro Marim and Vila Real de Santo António were responsible for leading the actions and implementing the revitalisation of the traditional salt activity in the area. TradiSal, an association of traditional producers from the eastern Algarve, established as part of these objectives, became actively involved in further actions for certification, promotion and recognition of traditional salt and its profession.

Project SAL, is a partnership of traditional salt producing areas in the North East Atlantic and is led by the University of Cadiz, Spain.

b) ICZM tools

- Valuing the salt obtained by traditional methods and the profession associated

Several actions of awareness and mobilisation among regional stakeholders in the areas are being undertaken, including workshops and promotional European fairs about traditional salt and the promotion and support of associative structures for the producers. At the European level, the European Federation of Traditional Salt is being set up. These associative structures can lead to changes in the legal status of traditional salt at the National and European levels, allowing specific supporting mechanisms of the activity or a certification status of the product. In Castro Marim, the Natural Reserve initiated and supported the establishment of TradiSal – an association encompassing the traditional salt producers from Eastern Algarve which was officially established in 1999. TradiSal, with a business structure and financial means, supports their 30 associated producers in finding ways in the national and international markets and organises a collective marketing of salt and fleur du sal. It has also been working on the certification and promotion of traditional salt, and leading actions aimed at guaranteeing the pureness of the product. In 2004, the Cooperative of small-scale traditional salt producers of Castro Marim “Terras de Sal” was founded in order to facilitate the commercialisation of their products, as most of the producers in other parts of this region were already working as independent companies. In Castro Marim, TradiSal is promoting courses for youngsters that will enable them to be qualified professionals and integrate this renewed activity, not only at the production level but also associated activities such as the marketing of the products and eco-tourism activities.

- Promotion of Biodiversity

The Project SAL, included funding for restoration of abandoned salt pans in many of the sites involved, including Castro Marim. Furthermore it helped set up an integrated and sustainable management, compatible with the protection status associated with the areas (e.g. Natura 2000), which included the definition of a methodology applied to key species (mainly birds), the selection of indicator species and its monitoring, and a programme of active management of the salt pans and the water levels.

- Cultural heritage and diversification of activities

Other initiatives of the Project SAL was the establishment of a route of Traditional Salt from the Atlantic, the promotion of tourism in the areas through the establishment of a common identity and the support in the establishment of museums and interpretation centres about the traditional production of salt. The study of new uses and products obtained from the salt pans in Castro Marim (such as special algae, other halophytic plants and clay), that are compatible with the traditional production of salt and the objectives of nature conservation has been promoted through projects and partnerships with research entities. Courses were set up, involving approximately 15 students, aimed at identifying, collecting, and transforming these products but also analysing potential markets for their commercialization.

7. Cost and resources

The restoration and recovery of a few salt-pans from members of Terras de Sal had a total investment of €500,000.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

The most successful action was the change in the European and Portuguese legislation regarding traditional salt as a product that, though it is subject to strict quality control, its existence and market are now legal. This achievement was due to an intensive pressure from different European countries through their national federations and governments. TradiSal and Terras de Sal helped their associates to independently commercialise their products in Portugal but also introduce them in international markets.

Certification of traditional salt to combat competition with the industrial product: the salt and fleur du sal produced by the members of Terras de Sal are periodically controlled and are certified products since 1999.

9. Success and Fail factors

The participation of Castro Marim in European initiatives allowed the cooperation and exchange of experiences with other traditional salt producing sites providing mutual support and steering of the actions. Though partnerships of producers have a clear added value, this is limited by the fact that the different producers are direct competitors.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

None, so far.

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13. Sources

- SAL - Sal del Atlántico: Revalorización de la identidad de las Salinas del Atlantico (Interreg IIIB - Proyecto 159). Final report and results. (Not available)
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