

Wildlife endangered by unsustainable developments in Spain's Balearic Islands

By PERE TOMÀS and JUAN RITA

The incoming conservative Balearic Regional Government has recently declared as "ineffective" the enlargement of s'Albufera de Mallorca Natural Park (a Ramsar site) that the previous Regional Government had approved in May 2003. The area removed from the park is a former fossil dune system, which was used for sand extraction until the 1970–80s, and which still holds one of the last colonies of bee-eaters in the Balearics. Local hoteliers want to build a golf course in the area. After the construction of a thermal power station to the north, large tourist development to the east, intensive agriculture to the west, sewage works to the south and several roads around the wetland, s'Albufera will be further encroached and polluted by this new golf course, under the excuse of "promoting quality tourism".

This reduction comes a month after the Balearic Parliament approved a law to reduce the size of two other natural parks created in 2001 and 2002 – Parc Natural de Llevant in Mallorca and Parc Natural de Cala d'Hort in Ibiza. Both were reduced by more than 20,000 ha, by excluding private land and leaving only

the public areas*. This gives the Balearic islands the lowest proportion of protected areas in Spain, with less than 2% protected – in contrast to 42% in the Canary Islands and 18% in Andalusia.

Overall, 2003 was a disastrous year for conservation in the Balearic Islands. In the previous four years good progress had been made: protected areas had been designated, an 'ecotax' created, and uncontrolled urban development prevented. But, in 2003, the change in the Regional Government led to the cancellation of many of these measures and the start of several mega-projects to build new infrastructures, which will cause irreversible damage to the natural environment and landscape.

Since May 2003 the Regional Government and Parliament have been controlled by the conservative Partido Popular. The Regional President is Jaume Matas, who was Minister of Environment in the Spanish Government until the end of 2002. Conservationists fear that he may now be spoiling the last beautiful corners of Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza, Formentera and Cabrera. And despite the numerous and expensive media cam-

paigns about sustainable development he has promoted, the evidence is that sustainability is not at the top of the political agenda of the Regional Government.

In one of its first decisions, the new Government suppressed the 'ecotax'; this was charged to tourists at €1/night and mainly used to fund environmental and cultural projects. More than just fund-raising, this was a way to make millions of tourists – 10 million in 2003 – participants in the conservation of nature and landscape. The tax only operated for one year, but had it continued longer it would probably have been copied in other tourist destinations.

At the same time, Palma Local Council and the Regional Government have approved development on ses Fontanelles wetland, one of the last remains of the Prat de Sant Jordi, a large wetland in the plain of Palma between the airport and the El Arenal tourist area. A 90,000m² commercial centre and a 50,000 m² aquarium will be created for tourists. The area has a great potential for restoration, and was one of the 70 wetlands listed in the Bill to



Soybeans threaten the Brazilian rainforest

Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rose 2.1% last year to its second-highest level. After cattle ranching, clearing of the forest for growing soybeans is the main cause of Amazon destruction. Deforestation rates declined in most states in 2003, but jumped nearly 30% in Matto Grosso, Brazil's top soy-growing region. With soybean prices at a five-year high, Brazilian farmers are rushing into the jungle to take advantage of cheap land. Farmers are cutting down everything to plant a new variety of soybean developed by Brazilian scientists which can flourish in this equatorial climate. This increase in production could lead Brazil to surpass the USA as the world's leading exporter of soybeans.

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▲ s'Albufera Natural Park, its recent extension declared "ineffective"

▶ Ses Fontanelles wetland, threatened by development

▶▶ *Limonium barceloi*, from the Virtual Herbarium of the Balearic Islands.

protect wetlands prepared by the previous government, a plan that now lies abandoned at the bottom of a drawer in the Regional Ministry of Environment. The area is especially important for plants because is the only locality for the endemic sea-lavender *Limonium barceloi*, which will probably become extinct in the wild if this development takes place. This species will join *L. magallufianum* and *L. majoricum*, other endemics critically endangered by the destruction of the last wetlands of Mallorca.

In the south of Mallorca, Salobrar de Campos (also known as Salinas de Levante), the second largest wetland of the island and a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive, is also

Toni Muñoz/GOB



under threat. There are plans to build a large hotel and spa centre beside it, where there is now a small and traditional spa.

There are also plans to build seven new motorways in Mallorca, to create four new desalination plants, to make an electricity cable connection with mainland Spain – so to be able to import energy produced by nuclear plants – and a new gas pipeline to feed several new power stations, and to enlarge the airports in the three main islands. The prospects for the next 3–4 years are really dramatic.

Pere Tomàs and Juan Rita write on behalf of the Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa (GOB)
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* For more information see www.birdlife.net/action/campaigns/iba_campaign/help/balearic.html

US Botanical Garden Fined over Orchid

In April, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida, and one of its plant experts were sentenced by a federal judge to probation and ordered to pay fines for their role in a case involving the alleged smuggling of a spectacular new orchid species from Peru. Last summer orchid grower Michael Kovach brought a specimen to Marie Selby Botanical Gardens' Orchid Identification Center for identification after purchasing the unusual lady's slipper orchid at a roadside stand in Peru. After

examining the large, red-purple-coloured flower, scientists regarded it as the most important orchid discovery of the past 100 years. Usually lady's slipper orchid flowers are smaller and are a drab green or moss-colored. In June Selby Botanical Gardens published a scientific description and named the plant *Phragmipedium kovachii* after Kovach. Soon after, Peru filed a complaint with the US Fish & Wildlife Service, claiming Kovach violated the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES),

which prohibits collecting endangered plants in the wild for export. After an extensive investigation, Selby Botanical Gardens pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of accepting and handling the orchid and agreed to pay a \$5000 fine. The Garden was also placed on probation for three years and will recommend the new species be renamed. Kovach pleaded not guilty to charges of smuggling and illegally possessing the rare Peruvian orchid and awaits trial.