

Spain begins to flood park with peat fire

January 10 2010, By HAROLD HECKLE , Associated Press Writer



In this Oct. 13, 2009 file photo, a boat is seen in a wetland gone dry in Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park, in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. The government has begun flooding an environmentally valuable expanse of Spanish wetland that dried up through mismanagement of water resources in a bid to save it from an underground peat fire, it was reported on Sunday Jan. 10, 2010. (AP Photo/Arturo Rodriguez, File)

(AP) -- Hoping to save a dried Spanish wetland from an underground peat fire, the government has unleashed floodwaters onto an expanse of the marsh now under threat due to past water mismanagement.

The wetlands of Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park are recognized by UNESCO as environmentally valuable because of their importance to both resident and migrating birds.

Over the weekend, waters diverted 150 kilometers (93 miles) from the Tagus River began pouring from an underground pipe onto the wildlife

sanctuary, in the central Castilla-La Mancha plain.

Environment Minister Elena Espinosa said while visiting the park on Saturday that the action was necessary "for the good of biodiversity."

The EU-protected park's wetlands have been drying for decades, and its lagoons now show just 1 percent of the surface water they did in 1981.

But much of the damage has been done in recent years, Espinosa said, as local farmers sank unauthorized wells to leech water from an underground aquifer maintaining the grasslands, while too much water has also been drawn from the Guadiana River that feeds the park's two main lagoons.

In August, an underground peat fire ignited spontaneously amid intense summer heat, sending smoke drifting up from the parched landscape too hot for any bird to want to land. Normally, the park is visited by Black-necked Grebes, Squaccos and Purple Herons, among others.

Following an EU investigation, Spain said it would divert 20 million cubic meters (700 million cubic feet) of water from the Buendia reservoir, on the Tagus. To avoid [water loss](#) through evaporation and ground seepage, the government also cleared the use of the pipeline, which normally carries Tagus water to La Mancha residents.

"This spring is going to be spectacular at Las Tablas, there is going to be plenty of water and many birds," said Jose Maria Barreda, president of the regional government of Castilla-La Mancha.

No one has been punished for illegally draining water from the park, some 185 kilometers (115 miles) south of Madrid. The Environment Ministry said in October it would seek to buy nearby land to halt water being drawn from wells.

Fire safety expert Dr. Guillermo Rein, of Edinburgh University, said heavy winter rains may also help douse the peat. "This water comes at a time when heavy rains in the region will help to reduce the water losses," he said Sunday.

Rein warned, however, that putting out an underground peat fire was not easy, and that the embers could smolder for another few months after the water transfer. He said it had taken three months of flooding to control a similar fire at Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in eastern North Carolina in 2008.

On the Net:

Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park,
<http://www.lastablasdedaimiel.com>

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