

Seventy-year chronology of Salinas in southern France: Coastal surfaces managed for salt production and conservation issues for abandoned sites

After World War II, twenty-nine coastal Salinas (122 km²), located in the vicinity of coastal lagoons and in deltas, were exploited along the Mediterranean coastlines in South France. Today, only five of these are still actively producing salt, currently representing 175 km². Concomitant with the abandonment of many of the smaller Salinas, the larger Salinas in the Rhône delta (Camargue) strongly increased their surfaces at the expense of natural ecosystems, of which a part has also been abandoned after 2009. This paper documents these changes in landscape use by chronological GIS mapping and describes the fate of the 91 km² of abandoned Salina surfaces. The majority of this area (88 km²) is included in the Natura 2000 network, among which most (74 km²) has been acquired by the French coastal protection agency (Conservatoire du Littoral) to be designated as Protected Areas. Only a very minor part (<1%) has been lost for industry and harbour development. Managing abandoned Salinas as Protected Areas is a challenge, because of the different landscape, biodiversity conservation, natural and cultural heritages issues at stake. In two cases, abandoned Salinas have been brought back again into exploitation by private initiative thus allowing for the protection of original hypersaline biodiversity. In other cases, the shaping of the landscape by natural processes has been privileged. This has facilitated the spontaneous recreation of temporal Mediterranean wetlands with unique aquatic vegetation, and offered opportunities for managed coastal re-alignment and the restoration of hydrobiological exchanges between land and sea. In other areas, former salt ponds continue to be filled artificially by pumping favouring opportunities for waterfowl. This has often been combined with the creation of artificial islets to provide nesting ground for bird colonies protected from terrestrial predators.

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