

Park Natural of Montgrí, Medes Islands and Baix Ter

In the second of the two planned visits in Catalonia under the Land-Sea project, the Natural Park of Montgrí, the Medes Islands and Baix Ter will be visited. It's a protected marine and terrestrial area recognized throughout the world for their submerged natural values, destination of scuba divers from all over Europe.

Introduction

The Natural Park of Montgrí, the Medes Islands and Baix Ter is located to the NE of the Iberian Peninsula, in the province of Girona, between the counties of the Alt Empordà and Baix Empordà. It is part of the so-called Costa Brava, a name that comes from its steep relief with abundance of marine cliffs.



Aerial image of the Montgrí coast with the Medes Islands and the Baix Ter plain in the background.

The landscape value of this area is characterized mainly by its great heterogeneity, and the park is divided clearly into three physiographic units:

- **The Montgrí massif**, a mountain range that ends with spectacular cliffs over the Mediterranean Sea.



- **The Medes Islands.** The variety of environments and the extraordinary biodiversity of the waters that surround this small archipelago of seven islands, located a mile away from the town of L'Estartit, in the middle of the Costa Brava, constitute a unique place and one of the most emblematic of the Mediterranean.
- **The Baix river Ter basin,** an extensive agricultural plain where there are several areas of coastal wetlands, rice fields and extensive sandy beaches.

The set of geological, meteorological and human factors have given shape to their physical and natural environment with characteristic plant and animal communities.

Protection

At the end of 1969, the Spanish Federation of Underwater Activities launched a project to propose the creation of a submarine park in the Medes Islands, but the first protection laws did not arrive until the 1980s, when the Government of Catalunya published the Order of November 25 1983, which prohibited the fishing and extraction of living marine resources on the coast of the Medes Islands.

In 1990, this protection was extended by Law 19/1990, of December 10, on the conservation of the fauna and flora of the seabed of the Medes Islands, whose application entailed the creation of the Protected Area of the Medes Islands.

On May 13, 2010, the Medes Islands were declared Natural Park, along with the Montgrí Massif, the Baix Ter wetlands, with the approval of the Declaration of the Natural Park of Montgrí, the Medes Islands and the Baix Ter at Parliament of Catalonia. The natural park includes: 1 integral natural reserve in the emerged area of the Medes Islands, 2 partial natural reserves (one in the Medes islands and one in the Baix Ter), 1 peripheral zone of the partial marine natural reserve, and 1 area for protection of agricultural spaces.



Biodiversity

Flora and vegetation

- *Massif of Montgrí.* Montgrí holds a good representation of the vegetation and the flora characteristic of the coastal Mediterranean mountains.
- *Medes Islands.* The flora that inhabits the emerged part of the islands is formed by species that can withstand the lack of water and environmental salinity. On the seabed, the diversity of algae is very high and there are extensive seagrass meadows of *Posidonia oceanica*, an endemic marine phanerogamic plant of the Mediterranean.
- *Baix Ter.* On the plain of Baix Ter, there are dunes and coastal lagoons with their specific flora, among which is *Stachys marítima*, a threatened species.



Fauna

- *Montgrí Massif*. The most emblematic species of Montgrí is bonelli's eagle, which has two territories in the Park. The presence of the eagle owl also stands out.
- *Medes Islands*. The marine fauna is the most representative of the Natural Park and the reason why thousands of tourists visit it every year. Fish are the most benefited group for the protection of the area for the last 30 years and for that reason there is not only a great diversity, but also there are many more specimens and they are larger than those outside the protected area.
- *Baix Ter*. In the coastal lagoons of Baix Ter, there is the presence of fartet (*Aphanius iberus*), a brackish fish in danger of extinction, and the pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*), reintroduced in recent times.



Economic activities

Tourism

The main economic activity of the area is tourism, which is based mainly on the coastal and marine natural values. Since 2014, the Natural Park is working on the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (CETS), an initiative that has the interest and support of most of the territory. About 40 entities and people of different interests and economic sectors of the park make up the Permanent Forum, an organ of debate, consultation and participation.

Agriculture and livestock

Within the park there is a very important area covered with rice fields, an agricultural activity that also benefits bird populations. Rice fields remain practically flooded throughout the year, becoming a feeding and resting area for migrating birds.

At livestock level, extensive pasture is a key tool for the management of the Montgrí Massif and is promoted from the Natural Park. In this sense, the park has different pasture units integrated with forest management, fire prevention and the conservation of biodiversity. However, the entire surface where it would be necessary to graze is unattainable with existing livestock herds.

Fishing

In the strictly protected area of the Medes Islands fishing and any type of natural resource extraction is prohibited. As regards the area around the strictly protected area, professional fishing is allowed exclusively for artisanal fishermen registered in L'Estartit. Some artisanal fishermen collaborate in the Sepia Project, an initiative to conserve the cephalopods of the Natural Park.



Field visit

Objectives

The objectives of the field visit are to know experiences about the two thematic areas of the second Barcelona seminar:

- Analysis of the carrying capacity of a tourist territory: options for improvement through strategic planning.
- Strategies to modify and improve the landscape impact caused by tourism growth.

Program

10:30 The tourist management in the Natural Park

A representative of the Natural Park will make a presentation about the tourist activities in the protected area and which are the regulations that exist to avoid exceeding the tourist carrying capacity of the ecosystem.

11:00 The monitoring of marine biodiversity

The University of Barcelona has been monitoring the underwater ecosystems of the Medes Islands more than 30 years ago. The reports are delivered annually to the Natural Park in order to regulate tourist activities that guarantee their conservation. The person in charge of the monitoring will explain to us what his work is about.

11:30 Sepia project

Sepia project (www.projetesepia.com) was born as a collaboration of local fishermen with the Natural Park to recover an ancestral activity that was being lost: cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) fishing tackle. At the same time, the project includes concrete actions for the conservation of the fishing resource (refuges, incubators ...). His responsible will explain the project and we can observe sepia eggs and, if we are lucky, some birth...

12:00 Visit to Medes Islands

The Medes Islands can be visited in two ways. Or actively: kayaking, diving, snorkeling... or comfortably seated on a glass bottom boat. We will do it in the second way.

14:00 Lunch

16:00 Pletera restoration

A part of the Baix Ter wetlands were close to disappear at the end of the 80's under urban development due to tourism. Fortunately, the urban development project stopped, but an important part of the lagoons had already dried up and streets, lighting and a seafront had been built. The LIFE Pletera project aims to demolish the built-up elements and recover the ecological functionality of coastal wetlands. His technical manager will tell us the details of the project.





18:00 Return to Barcelona

