

Guardians of water



■ Young volunteers on the site of the eco-museum in the Hammamet orange groves.

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The use of water touches at the heart of Mediterranean civilisation, a living memory of society's relationship with its environment. Yet water heritage is staring extinction in the face, buckling under the pressures of development and demographic change. In the face of this threat, a project funded by the European Union is working to mobilise local communities through activities that aim to restore and raise awareness.

Text by **ENPI Info Centre**
Photos by **REMEE project**

It is a project whose full title conjures up both nostalgia for a fleeting memory and at the same time determination to cling on to it. It would benefit from not being so often reduced to its French acronym, REMEE, giving us time to reflect on the sentiment it conveys: Let's work together to rediscover the memories of water.

Speaking of memories of water goes to the heart of the challenge facing this project funded by the EU as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Heritage IV programme. For it represents not merely an everyday heritage, but an often intangible heritage linked to how water has been managed down the centuries.

Threatened from all sides, with no legal protection or the kind of efforts reserved

for monumental heritage, it is an essential legacy nonetheless, "a living memory of Mediterranean societies and their relationship with the environment", illustrating good management techniques "in a situation where water is becoming more and more scarce", as Matthieu Guary, head of the project, emphasises. "Our aim is to raise awareness of what is at stake and the value of this resource, and to enable communities to reclaim their rightful heritage."

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■ **Matthieu Guary**
REMEE project manager

For water management lies at the heart of Mediterranean civilisation. In rural areas, the landscape bears the marks of efforts to develop agriculture in a situation of water scarcity, with a disappearing heritage of terraces, wells, canals and aqueducts. In urban areas, Turkish baths, fountains, gardens and religious sites bear witness to individual and collective customs linked to the harness of water for domestic purposes.

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Raising public awareness

Facing the urgency of fading memories of water, this project aims to highlight man's relationship with the resource and how it has been managed. First and foremost it strives to emphasise its value, using pilot schemes involving local people, whose commitment is a measure of their success. In so doing it aims to raise public awareness of the wider issues pertaining to water management in the Mediterranean and thus the fragility of the environment.

"It is important," explains Matthieu Guary, "to weave actions into local development – not to freeze the area in time, as it were, but rather reintroduce the social dimension, i.e. through tourism and other means... we hope to allow inhabitants to rediscover the value of this resource, which they often consider antiquated." This, moreover, is the best guarantee that efforts will continue and of finding the necessary investments to ensure sustainability beyond the 30 months of the REMEE project.

A pilot scheme in Tunisia is focusing on the region of Hammamet, where mass tourism is threatening the area's orange groves, which year by year give way to the pressures of demographic change and tourism. With the help of young volunteers and support from farmers, the project has created an orchard using traditional techniques, which, along with an ecological museum, offers a journey of discovery and entertainment.

The scheme reflects the project's basic principles: "We need to recognise expertise so as better to promote a traditional profession which left its mark on the landscape and to show how this heritage can still serve us today." Furthermore, the Tunisian Agricultural Institute hopes to benefit from the opportunity in order to test the comparative merits of traditional and modern irrigation techniques.

The fountains of Marrakech

The project also deals with urban heritage. In Marrakech (Morocco), the scheme aims to involve the locals of the Medina in preserving Turkish baths and fountains, with a 'heritage inventory', interactive workshops, renovation sites and an exhibition on the uses of water in the Medina. Young volunteers, who take part across the region, "help rally the support of communities".

This is also the aim of a series of educational programmes in all of the participating countries where teams of organisers, in collaboration with local teachers, will work with groups of young people on one aspect of the 'memories of water' theme, such as the traditional profession of water carrier in Marrakech, or to highlight traditional drainage

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■ Heritage at risk:
The el-Bahia fountain
in Marrakech.





techniques used on the plains of Algeria. “Our aim is to get groups of young people together to rediscover their area’s heritage,” declares Matthieu Guary, who emphasises how, through them, word of the project may spread to friends and relatives. In this way they become guardians of the memories of water.

“We are facing a risk inherent to any project dealing with small-scale heritage not protected by law. In Marrakech, there were a hundred fountains fifty years ago; today half have disappeared or face neglect. Mobilising people around the project is the only way of salvaging such a vital piece of the area’s heritage.”

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■ The Hammamet orange groves: young people are key to raising local awareness.

EuroMed Heritage IV

Contributes to the exchange of experiences on cultural heritage, creates networks and promotes cooperation

www.euromedheritage.net

Participating countries

Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia

Objective

Based on the objectives defined in the “Strategy for the Development of Euro-Mediterranean Heritage: priorities from Mediterranean Countries (2007-2013)”, it focuses on the appropriation by the local populations of their cultural heritage and favours access to education and knowledge of cultural heritage. It supports a framework for the exchange of experiences, channels for the dissemination of best practices and new perspectives aimed at the development of an institutional cultural environment. A Regional Monitoring and Support Unit provides technical support to 12 projects, one of them is REMEE.

Timeframe

2008–2012

Find out more

EuroMed Heritage IV fiche > www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=243&id_type=10

ENPI Info Centre – Culture thematic portal > www.enpi-info.eu/thememed.php?subject=10

Budget

€ 17 million

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