

LARNAKA SALT LAKES

Where nature and people walked together for millennia

...at 'Sultan Tekke' a little outside of Larnaka...the shadows of leaves that shift rhythmically with the wind and look like a winnow-sieve that works ceaselessly exactly like consciousness...

Odyseas Elytis, 'Cyprus' from the poetry collection 'The Little Mariner'

The Larnaka Salt Lakes are a unique Mediterranean landscape fashioned over thousands of years through the co-existence of humans and nature. It is a landscape that combines the natural beauty of the salt lakes –and an ecologically important biotope– with a unique human heritage. The natural and cultural are closely intertwined around the lakes; the physical environment having been shaped by local traditional practices greatly influenced by this specific wetland. The two elements –nature and culture– now comprise an integrated entity, and provide our focus as we study, protect and learn from this important site.

Not all human activities in the wetland have been positive for the local environment. In recent decades, some of the damage caused over time to this fragile ecosystem has been reversed. However, the site's sensitive environmental balance could benefit still further through the elimination of other threats the salt lakes continue to face, as well as from a coordinated promotion of its values, thereby offering visitors a more integrated cultural and environmental experience.



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Natural Heritage

Local ecosystems

Found southwest of the town of Larnaka in Cyprus, and east of the villages of Meneou and Dromolaxia, the Larnaka Salt Lakes are one of the most important biotopes in Europe. Together, the lakes and their associated wetlands – Lake Alyki (or Salt Lake), Lake Orphani, Lake Soros and Airport Lake – cover an area of 1761 hectares.

The Larnaka Salt Lakes ecosystem is part of the European Network Natura 2000 and is also covered under the European Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the Cypriot Law for the Protection and Management of Nature and Wildlife (153(I)/2003). Furthermore, since 2001 Lake Alyki has been included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. With the aim of protecting wetlands throughout the world, the Ramsar Convention promotes the sustainable use of their resources.

Diverse geological and archaeological findings from the area reveal that the lakes were open to the sea until relatively recently. In terms of wildlife, the lakes are best known for the waterbirds that winter there, including thousands of flamingos, wild ducks and gulls. But the most basic element of the food chain in the lakes' ecosystem, and on which so much other life relies, is the small brine shrimp *Artemia salina*. The reproduction and survival of this crustacean is dependent on the high salinity of Lake Alyki and its seasonal fluctuations. When flamingos and other waterbirds are unable to find the shrimp upon which they feed, they desert the salt lakes and continue their journey by travelling to Lake Akrotiri in Limassol or south towards Africa. If the living and reproductive conditions of the Artemia shrimp are disrupted, the consequences for the entire ecosystem can be devastating.

Also contributing to the important ecological balance of the wetland is the crucial maintenance of its water levels, through rain-water feeding the lakes, drainage from the natural surrounding basin and underground waterways, as well as from other aquifers or subterranean streams from the sea.



Biodiversity and local livelihoods

The salt lakes have long been an important resource and habitat for the Larnaka region. They have influenced urban development and consequently suffer from a number of collateral pressures. Several structures have been built around the wetland that detract from the area's cultural and natural character, such as the desalination plant, an international airport and several farms. The area also suffers from illegal access, driving within the sensitive lake zone when dry weather has evaporated the water, and the prohibited disposal of garbage and other waste material.

With a Ministerial Decision in 1997, the Committee for the Protection and Management of the Larnaka Salt Lakes was established and all measures and projects for the protection and enhancement of the wetland must meet its approval. Several efforts for the improvement and restoration of the ecosystem have since been carried out, such as the fencing off of certain parts of Lake Alyki in order to prevent vehicle entry and protect sensitive halophyte plants, the construction of two bird-watching towers, the removal of a shooting club that operated next to Lake Alyki, the regular cleaning of the wetland, the analyses of the water and substrate of the salt lakes and the removal of acacias, a foreign tree variety that negatively influences the development of native endemic species.

Cultural Heritage

Archaeological sites

In the broader area of Hala Sultan Tekke, two important archaeological sites can be found. The first is the prehistoric settlement near the Tekke, a cosmopolitan harbour town dating from the Late Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC), and one of the earliest known places of political organisation in Cyprus. Found near the village of Dromolaxia, the site location is today known as Vyza-kia. Several studies indicate that the adjoining salt lake was navigable in antiquity, thereby providing an ideal harbour. Founded in this naturally sheltered anchorage, the ancient port town enjoyed a favourable location for commercial trading. The abundance of imported items from Mycenaean Greece, Minoan Crete, Anatolia, Egypt and the central Mediterranean attest to the wealth and prosperity it enjoyed, and indicates the extent of its pan-Mediterranean connections.

The site of Hala Sultan Tekke was systematically excavated by a Swedish team from 1971 onwards. Excavations brought to light a number of tombs that contained wealthy burial gifts, including gold jewelery, bronze and tin-glazed faience vessels, and ivory artefacts. In addition to the rich tombs, excavations at Hala Sultan Tekke revealed some of the flourishing settlement which had once existed there and a town plan which included residential compounds, a possible sanctuary and metallurgical workshops for the processing of copper.

When the silting up of the harbour affected its trading activities at the end of the 12th century BC, Hala Sultan Tekke was peacefully abandoned. It is possible that the town's population moved to the neighbouring settlement of Kition.



A second important archaeological site was discovered during restoration works at the Hala Sultan Tekke in 2002, directly beneath the wing where male visitors and priests would have been hosted. The findings date back to the Late Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods. A number of figurines, inscribed local earthenware and large quantities of imported Attic red-figure pottery decorated with mythological representations indicate that the area was probably used as a sanctuary from the 1st millennium BC.

A statue of Artemis *Paralia* (*by the beach*, in Greek) was discovered in the salt lakes region, indicating the presence of a corresponding temple. This would have been a rare sanctuary as the sites where Artemis was venerated are found usually on the mainland. As Artemis was the Greek goddess of the hunt, this suggests that the area in ancient times was particularly rich in game. Although the remains of the temple have not yet been discovered, the beautiful statue (for which there is no information regarding the exact location where it was found) is displayed at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna in Austria.

The remnants of another important temple, excavated at the end of the 19th century and dating from the Classical period, are located on the site occupied by the old Larnaka airport.



Um Haram shrine - Hala Sultan Tekke

The shrine was built in 648, in the place where Um Haram died after falling off her mule during the first Arabic raids on Cyprus. According to tradition, Um Haram was a relative of the Prophet Muhammad. Upon hearing of her death, the Caliph Moavia, who led these Arabic raids on the island in the 7th century AD, ordered the construction of the shrine. Today, the Tekke is an important place of pilgrimage for Muslims, as it is one of the holiest of Islamic sites after Mecca, Medina and Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Tekke has twice been restored, in 1816 and later in 2002 by UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services).

The salt lakes and salt harvesting

When he arrived in Cyprus, St. Lazaros visited a vineyard and asked a woman for grapes to quench his thirst. Instead of grapes she offered him salt. To punish her, he cursed the site, and when the vineyard eventually became desiccated the Larnaka Salt Lakes were created in its place. The presence of St. Lazaros in Cyprus is demonstrated by the local traditions associated with him and by the beautiful Byzantine church built upon his grave. Despite the fact that St. Lazaros, who would later become the patron saint of Larnaka, cursed the site of the salt lakes, the wetland was to become one of the most important and lucrative natural resources on the island. Throughout the Middle Ages, and especially during the Venetian occupation, salt was so plentiful that it became one of the primary export commodities of Cyprus. Its harvesting and selling were strictly controlled and taxed, being not only an important nutritional additive, but having a wide range of uses at the time, including the preservation of food, as well as being an important element in fodder production and manufacturing. Salt was last harvested from the Larnaka Salt Lakes in 1986.

The Larnaka Salt Lakes are an impressive natural and cultural monument, encompassing the protected wetland, important archaeological sites and the traditional methods for harvesting salt. Together, these cultural and natural values reveal the bonds that unite people and nature over time. Promoting these values of the Larnaka area through sustainable forms of tourism and environmental education is an important way to protect the salt lakes more effectively. And by increasing public awareness of the wetland's importance, especially amongst the younger generation who in time will become the future users and stewards of the area- can help influence those responsible for it today. This conservation approach doesn't seek to keep people away from nature, but relies on them to help protect it.