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## Environmentalists stress the need for care in replenishing Mar Menor beaches



The storms just before Christmas and now the snow only add to the work which must be undertaken to replenish beaches and remove silt from the Mar Menor

The Spanish Oceanographic Institute (Instituto Español de Oceanografía, or IEO) has published a long report warning that the condition of the

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marine environment in the Mar Menor has suffered “progressive deterioration”.

The IEO conclude that already there is an urgent need to replenish sand on the beaches and “reinforce some infrastructures” in order to keep the Mediterranean at bay, as well as to implement alternative agricultural practices in the Campo de Cartagena.

These conclusions are contained in a book entitled “Mar Menor: una laguna singular y sensible. Evaluación científica de su estado”, which contains contributions from researchers at the University of Murcia, the Universidad Politécnica of Cartagena, the Instituto Geológico y Minero de España, the University of Alicante and the IEO itself. Various articles highlight the pollution brought to the Mar Menor not only by agriculture but also by tourism, urban development, mining, water sports and transport, and it is calculated that every year the environment of the lagoon is contaminated with 11 kilos of harmful pharmaceuticals and 18 kilos of pesticides and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs).

The dangers of floods such as those which occurred in September 2009 and December 2016 are also commented on, as runoff water can bring more pesticides into the Mar Menor in a couple of days than is normally the case in a year. To combat this risk the recommendations include the withdrawal of certain fertilizers from use in the Campo de Cartagena and the implementation of more efficient irrigation techniques, as well as the design of “more realistic” water management policies in terms of using underground water resources in times of drought.

These findings were presented at a seminar in

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2014, but the relevance has been made far clearer in the light of last year's visible problems with the water quality of the Mar Menor, the regional government's plans to restore and protect the lagoon, and the flooding which occurred in December. However, the regional government finds itself caught to a certain degree between a rock and a hard place, as the issue of beach restoration following the December floods illustrates.

On the one hand, it is seen as **essential to the tourism sector that the beaches be restored to prime condition by Easter**, and a budget of 4.6 million euros has been set aside for achieving this goal. On the other hand, though, this has caused concern in some quarters over the potentially detrimental effects of artificially dredging the bed of the Mar Menor and re-creating the beaches destroyed by floodwater last month, and the dilemma is a hard one to resolve satisfactorily.

It is estimated that the heavy rain in mid-December caused the loss of some 120,000 cubic metres of sand from 16.7 kilometres of coastline in the Region of Murcia, a large proportion of it in the Mar Menor. In Los Alcázares only 0.5 kilometres of the 5 kilometres of beach survived, and much of the 56,000 tons of replacement sand is destined for this part of the shoreline.

At the same time, the flooding has made it necessary to extract some of the sediment which was brought into the lagoon down the "ramblas" (or natural floodwater channels), but dredging the floor of the Mar Menor is not necessarily advisable as it causes turbidity and can do more harm than good.

For this reason the regional government is



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reported to be putting the finishing touches to a "code of good practice" to be implemented during the beach restoration program, the aim being to guarantee that the process will be as un-invasive as possible.

The main points contained in these guidelines are simple: the use of heavy machinery should be avoided, and action should be taken as soon as possible, taking advantage of the cooler water temperature and other factors which reduce the risk of disturbing the ecological balance at this time of year.

Manual procedures are recommended in preference to the use of machinery, while dredging is frowned upon unless essential as it leads to the accumulation of mud close to the shore. Where sediment is sucked from the floor of the lagoon it should be done so in horizontal layers rather than vertically.

In the longer term, the scientific committee overseeing the process recommends that traditional jetty-style bathing facilities should be constructed, enabling people to take to the water in areas where mud has accumulated or the beach has been eroded by natural processes.

In the meantime, the latest water quality samples from the Mar Menor, which were taken after the December storms, show that there has been an increase in the level of nitrates at the southern end of the lagoon. Of course this is of concern to everyone working to resolve the issues for the future, but the fact that it has not occurred near the mouth of the Rambla del Albuñón can be taken as an indication that correct procedures have been adopted at the agricultural concerns next to the rambla and the measures put in place to deal with the water run-off are starting to bear fruit.



The other parameters measured are all stable, including turbidity, oxygen and chlorophyll.

Image: regional president Pedro Antonio Sánchez inspects the damage at the beach of Los Alcázares

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