

Country Life 2002  
How land lies in Spain

# HOW THE LAND LIES IN SPAIN

Drift in a horse-drawn barge across the marshes of Andalucía among a flock of rare birds. CAROLINE CRANBROOK reveals the secrets of sustainability on the Continent.

**F**ARMERS and landowners are responsible for most of Europe's landscape, but to maintain it, their businesses have to be profitable. Although landowners in Britain are keenly aware of the need to innovate, it is interesting to see how their counterparts elsewhere in Europe deal with similar problems but in different circumstances. The European Union-wide organisation Friends of the Countryside enables its members to do that. This summer, they met in Seville to learn from Andalucía.

A good example is the Veta la Palma estate, which lies between the Guadalquivir river and the Coto Doñana National Nature Reserve. More water than land. It is a highly innovative enterprise, using both traditional techniques and modern technology to farm rice, cattle and fish and at the same time providing food and refuge for huge populations of migratory and resident birds.

Originally a *veta*, or island, in the river estuary marshes, the area was drained by British owners in the 19th century. Later, it was surrounded by a wall and until the 1980s was used for rice and grazing. Flooding was prevented and it ceased to be wetland. Then, in 1982, it

was bought by the Hernandez family, who have rescued and transformed it into what is probably the most successful fish farm and bird reserve in Europe.

The first sight of the farm was a small herd of bulls, cantering beside the road in two single files, escorted at the front and the back by horsemen carrying long lances. The horses are the famed Spanish breed—different from the more widely known Andalusian. They are heavier and trace back to the Middle Ages and were used by the Army as war horses. Today, they work with cattle. At Veta la Palma they have adapted to marshland life with broader feet than usual.

Some 4,600 hectares is marshland pasture for the horses and 1,000 local Ybarra cattle, producing fighting bulls; on 3,200 hectares rice is still grown. But the most remarkable part of the estate is the fish farm, covering a further 3,200 hectares. It is an extraordinary expanse of water, reeds and marshy pools. There are 44 rectangular, 70-hectare lagoons, each surrounded by a canal half a metre deeper. To maintain oxygenation and water quality, one million cubic metres of river water is pumped daily through the whole system. Local fish—grey mullet, sea bream, sea bass and eels—swim in from the river as

babies, or are introduced when they are 14cm long. They live in the lagoons, feeding off a profusion of wild shrimps until they weigh 3–4kg, after about three years. When ready to harvest, a pond is gradually drained so that the fish swim into the deeper canals and are then gently guided by fishermen, up to their armpits in the water, to the end of the canal. Here they are scooped into tanks of icy slush, which kills them quickly with minimum stress. They are packed in the farm's factory and are sent all over Europe to the best restaurants—a premium product.

Veta la Palma is much more than a fish farm—it is a highly successful bird reserve and, in the words of our guide, it is 'the lungs, larder and hospital for aquatic birds'. Attracted by the abundance of fish and shrimps, birds congregate in their thousands, increasing from 30,000 in 1984 to 400,000 today. More than 100 species are recorded, including 10 endangered and 15 vulnerable. It is a wintering ground for northern birds, such as the 70,000 visiting greylag geese and 1,000 cranes. It is also a nesting haven for spring-migrating species from Africa. Most startling of all is that it is the essential feeding grounds for the colony of 10,000 flamingos, which breed in a lagoon near

Visitors to Veta la Palma, Doñana Natural Park, watch birds from a horse-drawn *patera*



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GAVAN GOULDER

**Traditional fishing: fish and shrimps from Veta la Palma feed 400,000 birds and also customers at the best restaurants in Europe**

Antequera, 80 miles away. Parents fly in for 48 hours feeding, leaving their young behind with 100 adult flamingos in charge. It is also an important refuge for the National Park birds during the summer droughts when the Doñana marshes dry out or the stagnant pools become infected with naturally occurring botulism epidemics.

This huge environmental success has come at an economic cost—it is estimated that the birds eat 1 million kg of fish annually. In order to compensate, the Hernandez family is embarking on another source of income—tourism. But this will be done on a limited basis, with no more than 250 visitors daily and only in groups.

Friends of the Countryside were the first group to have this fascinating experience. We were shown everything—the bulls and the horses, the drama of the fish being driven in thrashing, shining shoals along the canals, buckets of shrimps and slithering eels—but the best moment was travelling across the marshy pools in two large, flat-bottomed barges, drawn by two horsemen, water up to their horses' chests, each pulling the boat by a narrow, nylon ribbon. We glided silently through the water, almost at the same level as the birds—nesting, feeding, circling, taking off

## 'Veta la Palma is the lungs, larder and hospital for aquatic birds'

and landing. There was constant movement and the sky was never empty—large birds and small. It is a remote and unforgettable landscape, approached through the wild, wetland pasture along straight, sandy roads disappearing into the distance, with strange shapes of mirage-like trees outlined on the horizon.

Last of all, the family entertained us to a farm-produced feast of mullet caviar, shrimps, crayfish, eels, smoked mullet, duck, Ybarra beef and milk rice pudding. Veta la Palma is a visionary and exemplary undertaking. It provides tangible meaning to sustainability: it is economically successful and provides real support to the environment and to the local economy.

Some of the same principles can be

seen applied at the El Esparragal estate, owned by Don Carlos Oriol e Ybarra, the Marquis of Merito. It is one of the oldest and largest farmhouses in Andalucía, dating from 1615, although its history goes back to its Bronze Age mines. Later, the Romans built a large villa farm here. The remains of Roman baths and a mill still exist, as do the Roman farm's actual boundary marks. The house itself is a wonderful example of a type of farmhouse whose basic design has remained virtually unchanged since the Romans. Built in the same style as the original Roman villa, its living rooms open onto cloistered courtyards below and onto roofed galleries above.

In the heat of the day, we walked into the flower-filled courtyards, shaded with linen and cooled by fountains. Everywhere are *azulejos* (tiles)—even on the treads of the stairs and the ceilings. The farm is ever present. There is a ceramic map of the estate and the walls are adorned with heads of famous fighting bulls from the farm and, in the drawing room, paintings of the 19th-century matadors who killed them.

El Esparragal is not just history. It is a prosperous, 3,000-hectare estate which

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GILIAN GOZZARD

**Horses at Veta la Palma have adapted to marshland life with broader feet than usual**

successfully combines modern agriculture with traditional farming and tourism, sustaining both the local rural economy and the environment. Crops are grown on 1,000 hectares of low-lying land and are used to feed a 1,000-head dairy herd. In addition, there are 700 Retinta cattle, an ancient breed with open, lyre-shaped horns derived from the primitive *Bos primigenius* and adapted to the heat and harsh local conditions. Like the Ybarra cattle, they provide Toros Bravos fighting bulls, as well as sought-after lean meat. Milk, yoghurt, cheese and butter are all made on the farm and sold locally, not to supermarkets but privately and to independent shops.

The farm also specialises in the ancient Spanish breed of horse. They work with the cattle and there are regular displays in the farm's bullring. Their horses are also shown and repeatedly win all-Spain championships. The higher, hillier part of the farm is wooded *dehesas*, with deer, wild boar, eagles, vultures, partridges and many other species, but even the more cultivated areas are bordered with trees, brushwood and wildflowers.

Carefully managed tourism is central to the enterprise. The house is a quiet, exclusive hotel where guests eat food from the farm, see the cattle that produced it and the horses that work with them. They can ride, walk, shoot, stalk or take part in a variety of other adventure tourism activities. This income enables the owners to look after the *dehesas* and its wildlife. Modern agriculture, tradition, ecology and tourism are all in harmony, each an integral part of the enterprise.

I visited these estates as a guest of Friends of the Countryside. Members had come from all over Europe to Seville to discuss the challenge of combining environmental and economic goals creatively, to listen to top European Union officials

and to see for themselves Spanish examples of sustainability in action.

During the meeting we were told by ecologist Enrique de Leyva about the problem of the *dehesas*, semi-wild pastureland, scattered with holm, gall and cork oaks and Mediterranean brushwood—myrtle, lavender, rosemary, cistus, heaths and brooms. Together with the wilder, upland *montes*, they are characteristic of much of south-western Spain and are essential to the rich bio-diversity of the region. They are grazed by sheep and deer, and in the autumn the *Iberico* pigs,

of Spanish ham fame, come into feast on the acorns. They also support a huge variety of wildlife, including the rare Spanish lynx, five species of eagles, many hawks, vultures, owls and other rare species. Many of the *dehesas* have been obliterated by modern agriculture and overgrazing. Funds are needed for proper management. Consequently, those that survive and flourish are the ones where there is a sustainable base of profitability provided by the cork harvest, by the pigs and by income from carefully organised wild boar and deer shoots.

The moral is that traditional landscape and its wildlife cannot survive unless there is an income to maintain it.

For further information visit [www.vetalpalma.com](http://www.vetalpalma.com) and [www.elsparragal.com](http://www.elsparragal.com).

*The European Landowners' Organisation (ELO) is a federation of 20 national landowners' associations and provides a voice for 30 million EU landowners. The Country Land & Business Association (CLA) is the England and Wales member. Friends of the Countryside is the ELO supporters' club, with a branch in each member country. Its 2003 Congress meeting will be held in Sicily. ELO, Avenue Pasteur, 23, B-1300 Wavre, Belgium (00 32 10 23 29 00; [www.elo.org](http://www.elo.org)).*

**The skies are never empty: there are more than 100 bird species at Veta la Palma**



GILIAN GOZZARD