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Preserving the potential of the Douro canyon

LAYMAN'S REPORT



LIFE Rupis
LIFE14 NAT/PT/000855



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LIFE Rupis

In the LIFE Rupis project, we took an integrated approach to the conservation of natural values, based on combining nature protection and the development of the unique region of the international Douro canyon. We joined forces across two countries united by a river to ensure the conservation of threatened birds, which know no borders.

The project demonstrated this region's value and potential, and the importance of continuing to protect them.

Concerted work on both sides of the border enabled us to find synergies and complementarities and harmonize approaches that stem from the different legal context in Portugal and Spain, to the benefit of nature in this cross-border area.



The region's riches

Over millennia, the Douro River sculpted monumental canyons along the border between Portugal and Spain.

These apparently inhospitable rock walls are a refuge for threatened birds, which share the cliffs with a people and culture itself shaped by the forces of nature.

As heat rises on a summer morning, the sight of vultures, eagles and kites riding the thermals will make your heart soar. The Douro valley hosts one of the most important populations of Egyptian Vulture in the Iberian Peninsula, drawing visitors from all over the world, who flock to the region in hopes of seeing this bird which is the symbol of both natural parks: Parque Natural do Douro Internacional and Parque Natural Arribes del Duero.

With their white body, yellow head and black 'fingers', Egyptian Vultures arrive in February and March. They nest on the cliffs, and by Autumn the brownish juveniles are ready to follow the adults, migrating to Africa to escape the rigours of the region's winter.

Another regular presence in the region's skies is the majestic Bonelli's Eagle: over a dozen pairs of this threatened bird nest among the cliffs.





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By preserving the Douro valley's nature we safeguard this unique region's beauty, culture and potential.

Little by little, a population of Cinereous Vulture is also establishing itself here, thanks to some pioneering pairs that settled in the region, tens of kilometres away from their home colonies in Spain. The success of these birds in recent years demonstrates the region's potential and the positive impact of nature conservation actions, raising hope for a species which was extinct in Portugal in the 1970s, and also suffered a worrying decline in Spain, where it is considered a priority species for conservation.

The region is also an important refuge for Red Kite.

Besides their potential as a tourist attraction, the region's vultures also play an important role in safeguarding public health: by feeding on dead animals, they remove sources of disease.

To thrive in this demanding region of parched summers and harsh winters, troublesome access routes and challenging topography, local people have developed intimate connections to nature, accumulating centuries of experience and knowledge which can now bring opportunities for innovation in areas such as sustainable agriculture, production of quality foods, or nature tourism.



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Protecting natural values



© Inês Matos



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Thanks to the LIFE Rupis project, threatened birds of prey in the Douro region now have a brighter future.

To monitor these birds and ensure their safety, we developed joint action protocols for the natural parks on both sides of the river, which will continue to be implemented well beyond the end of the project.

We now have more Bonelli's Eagles nesting in the region. These eagles now find better conditions, as a result of actions such as the revival of 38 traditional pigeonhouses and the decrease in disturbance and other human-induced threats.





© Xemendura



490K

quilometers of
Egyptian Vulture
trips tracked



51km

of safer
powerlines



105%

increase
in Special
Protection Area



955

feeding
sessions for
vultures

Egyptian Vultures and other scavenger birds also have more food available, thanks to supplementary feeding stations created in Portugal during the project, where over 36 572kg of food were placed in over 955 feeding sessions. On the Spanish side, our work with cattle ranchers reinforced the idea that these birds help to keep properties clean and disease-free, highlighting the importance of allowing them access to food by leaving dead animals in the field whenever possible, as well as implementing measures that improve extensive cattle raising activities.

Eagles, Egyptian Vultures and other large birds are now less at risk of being electrocuted or colliding with powerlines, since we made 51.15km of powerlines safer in the region.

Soon, the region's natural values will have increased protection, with the expansion of the Douro International and Águeda Valley Special Protection Area. Supported by our data regarding the region's importance, the proposal to increase the protected area by 105% received wide public support, with 95% of responses to the public consultation agreeing with the proposal, and none disagreeing.



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Defending public health

In Portugal, we created two anti-poison brigades, each comprising a police officer and a dog, specially trained to detect and investigate poisoning cases. Throughout the project, these brigades undertook 329 patrols in the region – a presence which, alongside the Spanish authorities' actions in their jurisdiction, enabled the investigation of 36 suspect cases, in 17 of which the use of poison was confirmed and identified.

These brigades will continue to make the region safer, not only for wild animals but also for domestic ones and even for people.

Alongside police action, we organised awareness-raising activities with local populations, warning of the dangers of using toxic substances.

An important result of this project was the increase in coordination between Portuguese and Spanish authorities in investigating these cases, as an Egyptian Vulture that dies of poisoning on a Portuguese cliff may have consumed the poison on the Spanish side of the border, and vice-versa. The strengthening of working relationships and increase in communication across the border has already enabled a greater efficacy in investigating suspected poisoning cases, and will surely continue to bear fruits.



36
cases
analysed



329
patrols
conducted



750^{ha}
of sustainably
managed
land



© Hugo Marques



© Inês Matos



Promoting sustainable development

To recognise, encourage and support entrepreneurs whose vision of development is based on valuing biodiversity, we created the “Friends of the Egyptian Vulture” Landowners Network, whose 27 members implement good practices in their properties and sell environmentally-friendly goods and services. In the Network they find a forum to share experiences, with an element of friendly competition for the recognition of excellence embodied in the Friends of the Egyptian Vulture Prize. The project also brought them additional means for promoting their offerings, by organising food tastings in other points of Portugal, Spain and Europe, and creating networking opportunities for selling products in shops, for instance.

As well as recognising and supporting those who already implement biodiversity-friendly measures, with LIFE Rupis we also aimed to encourage greater adoption of these practices in the region. To this end, we purchased properties on which we demonstrated the efficacy of this approach, and which we invite local populations to visit. On other properties, we signed agreements with owners so as to take over the sustainable management of their land. As a result, in total in this project we managed over 750 hectares of land in harmony with biodiversity.

Some of the environmentally-friendly practices we encourage:

- ➔ **Extensive grazing instead of intensive livestock rearing**
- ➔ **Creation of sowing areas and clearings as a refuge and feeding ground for rabbits, partridges and other species**
- ➔ **Biodiverse pastures, with less impact on the soil**
- ➔ **Maintaining and reviving traditional pigeonhouses**

Promoting nature in the region

Throughout the project, we worked closely with local communities.

The Rupis mascot took our educational programme to all the schools in the project's area of action. Between talks, fieldtrips and witnessing the release of birds back to nature, the next generation gained new pride in their region's natural values.

RUPIS

The project's mascot



The friendly "Rupis" character enabled us to quickly make a connection with school-age children, generating immediate empathy for Egyptian Vultures. This iconic character garnered a place in everyone's heart, and quickly became an ambassador for the project.





© LIFE Rupis



© LIFE Rupis

In a region which is losing its life and workforce, this new appreciation of natural values and their potential opens new doors to youngsters who until then did not consider remaining in the region.

By working directly with schools over several years, we also nurtured allies who will continue to generate these effects long after the project officially ends: teachers.

For them, as well as all the interaction inherent to developing activities at, with and for their schools, we also organised accredited training sessions, providing teachers with the tools to integrate this discovery and appreciation of the surrounding natural environment into their lesson plans.

We also produced a range of educational materials, such as guides and activity manuals, which they can use as a tool to create their own educational programmes on the theme of species conservation.

Promoting the region to the world

From the Casas del Parque to the British Bird Fair, LIFE Rupis put the Douro valley on the map.

The ObservArribas Festival, organised by the project, became a veritable annual birdwatcher migration to the region. Over the course of 3 years, a single weekend brought hundreds of nature-lovers who dined here, slept here and discovered the region's charms, boosting local economy and whetting appetites to return.



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5270

Students
involved



15.546

Participants
in activities



27

'Friends of the
Egyptian Vulture'



Web

www.rupis.pt
#LIFERupis

We also promoted not only the region's nature but also its culture, cuisine and beauty to national and foreign tourists – always with an emphasis on environmentally-friendly approaches. We did this through such varied activities as food tastings and guided trips to 'Friends of the Egyptian Vulture' properties, as well as the more conventional talks and workshops.

And we left visible marks onsite, such as the information panels placed at points of interest, in places where we implemented specific actions, and in high-visitation sites such as the Science Centre in Barca D'Alva or the Casas del Parque in Parque Natural Arribes del Duero.

Online, we reached tens of thousands of people through the www.rupis.pt website and social media, with campaigns such as Bird of The Year or the vote to choose the name of the Egyptian Vultures we tracked in the project.

Both over the internet and through technical and scientific conferences and workshops, in LIFE Rupis we took the Douro canyon to Europe and beyond.

Investing in the future

**The natural treasures
of the Douro canyon
are now safer, thanks
to LIFE Rupis.**

**But we can't stop at this.
We must continue to:**

- ➔ **Fight threats** such as poison, fires, and persecution of species;
- ➔ **Decrease disturbance** caused by human activities, ensuring that tourism and leisure activities, as well as agricultural and forestry activities don't impact the most sensitive sites and times;
- ➔ Contribute to a more **sustainable management of the territory**;
- ➔ **Reduce dangerous infrastructures** such as powerlines;
- ➔ **Invest in the nature** of this unique region, encouraging practices where the importance of natural values is at the heart of development.

Can we count on you?





LIFE Rupis

Conservation of Egyptian
Vulture and Bonelli's
Eagle in the Douro Valley

LIFE14 NAT/PT/000855

Coordinator



Co-financed by



Partners



distribuição



Project duration

75 months [07/2014 – 10/2020]

Total budget

3,578,924 €

EU contribution

2,672,481 €

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