

Competition for Coasts – Platja Llarga

The coastal zone in Spain is a battle-ground, not just between the land and the sea, but between competing land uses. This competition is creating development pressures that threaten the coast's natural environments.

Before the arrival of mass tourism in the 1960s, the coastal zone was used for fishing, with fishermen's homes lining the beach in many places. Behind the homes were vineyards, which were cleared for the construction of a coastal rail line between Barcelona and Tarragona in 1865.



Platja Llarga, Vilanova Barcelona (February 2008)

Until 1881, Platja Llarga was a large area of coastal wetland and dunes, forming part of the delta of the River Foix. Today, although badly damaged, it remains one of the last undeveloped sites along the Catalan coast.

In June 2004, the local Vilanova i la Geltrú town council passed planning permission for the construction of 300 apartments and an hotel on the site, less than 30 metres away from the sea. The zone had been earmarked for urban development since the 1960s and according to the town mayor, "the Council acted properly". The planning process forced the promoter, Grup Subirats Berenguer, to replenish the beach, create a groundwater lake and build four breakwaters to protect the sand. The breakwaters required 50,000 tons of boulders, an expensive undertaking.



Planned Platja Llarga apartment blocks



Aerial view of the planned Platja Llarga development

A local citizen's action group collected 5000 signatures to stop the development. The environmental campaign group *Salvem la Platja Llarga* helped coordinate the protest

action with the support of Greenpeace. But it was a report from Dr. Maria Àngels Marquès, a professor in the Department of Geophysics and Geodynamics of the Faculty of Geology at the University of Barcelona, that won the day. Her study concluded that the Platja Llarga is a wetland zone "by virtue of low lying morphology and proximity to the sea". Building on such land would contravene planning laws.

Following Dr. Maria Àngels Marquès' work, a government report by the Directorate General Medi Natural de la Generalitat concluded that "in Platja Llarga there are natural areas that meet the biological and hydrological characteristics of wetlands." The report stated that "all wetlands must be preserved and protected from activities likely to cause recession and degradation."

With the breakwaters already constructed and the beach replenished, the town Council was forced to negotiate a way out with the promoter.

Platja Llarga will now be protected as an '**Espai Natural**' (natural area) to provide a rare example of a traditional Mediterranean wetland and dune landscape.

Background to conflicts along the Catalan coastline

Urbanisation is almost continuous along the entire 672 kilometres of Catalan coastline. Between 1981 and 2001, the construction of houses along the coast grew at double the rate of population. The population increased by 36%, whereas the number of houses increased by 60.5%. Half of the houses are second homes, with the highest percentages in the Costa Dorada (71.3%), and the Costa Brava (64.6%).

Saturation point has evidently been reached: there are now 75 coastal municipalities where practically 100% of the land is urbanised. In a further 30, the figure is 75%. Catalonia has one yachting marina for every 10 kilometres of coastline - which rises to one every 5 kilometres in the Costa Dorada

The Spanish Government is finally fighting back against the coastal concrete and its 'Strategy for Coastal Sustainability' (2007) aims to buy up unoccupied coastal land, recategorise as protected areas land already approved for construction, and demolish buildings and recreational ports that occupy public beaches. The plan also demands the enforcement of an existing law that requires the first 100 metres of shore be kept free of all construction. All in all, the proposal is expected to cost €5 billion and to affect more than 400 miles of coastline. New legislation in Catalonia has established a system of protection for non-urbanised land located within 500 metres of the sea in 50 coastal zones. This affects 23,500 hectares of coastline.

Platja Llarga – why is it valued?

Platja Llarga was (until 1881) a large wetland, of abundant reed grass, marsh land, fixed and mobile dunes formed in north half of the Foix delta. It was colonised by important groups of marsh birds and people mainly used the area for duck hunting and fishing.

Today, fishing still takes place off the beach. Underwater prairies of sea grass (Oceanic Posidònia) lie a short distance offshore. These grasses are a now protected area as they are the producers (first trophic level) of the marine food chain.

Platja Llarga has been a "sanctuary" for the sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) which has used the beach for laying eggs.

The characteristic vegetation is salicornia, an uncommon salt marsh community in Catalonia, with several sectors of reed grass and communities of sand dune and halophytic species typical of saline environments.

In some sectors of the beach, especially to the west, little of the natural vegetation community that existed before 1881 remains.

The current fauna are still little known. Among the birds, the most studied group is the Kentish Plover, (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), a protected species that has been the symbol of the beach preservation campaign. Other observed species are the plumed cabussó and the white kingfisher. A more thorough study is needed since other rare species of insects and reptiles may exist.

TASK 1: Complete the Criteria Table to identify high value areas in Platja Llarga

Criteria to Identify High-Value areas	
Criteria	Score (0 = no value, 5 = great value)
Presence of endemic species (plants and animals that are only found in this area)	
Biodiversity	
Aesthetic value (scenic beauty)	
Vulnerability to human impact	

TASK 2: Study the 1980 aerial image and google satellite image below. Identify the changes that have occurred since 1980. What has changed? What hasn't changed?

Platja Llarga 1980: What hasn't changed?	Platja Llarga 2008: What has changed?

TASK 3: Label the different land use zones on the contour map and google image below. Include urban developments, dunes, wetland, railway line, camp sites and pools. Identify evidence of environmental damage and management strategies.



Platja Llarga 1980



Platja Llarga contour map



Platja Llarga Google Earth

TASK 4: Complete an Environmental Impact Assessment for an area under development:

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

PLATJA LLARGA (DEVELOPED)

Study the view in front of you carefully. Read each of these statements and decide if you think that they apply to the view.

LOCATION 1			SCORE 1-5
Natural features	A	There are several different landforms (e.g. hills, cliffs, dunes, etc.) which give an interesting view.	
	B	The view has some pleasant wooded country.	
	C	The view has some pleasant open country.	
	D	There are unique or highly unusual features in the landscape.	
	E	The landscape has considerable ecological value (e.g. vegetation or animal life).	
Artificial features	F	The style and materials of the buildings adds interest to the view.	
	G	The buildings fit well into the landscape.	
	H	There are no artificial features (e.g. rubbish dumps, pylons, quarries, industrial buildings etc. which spoil the view).	
	I	There are artificial features (e.g. reservoirs, castles, historical monuments etc.) which add interest to the view.	
	J	The land use is not damaging the environment, directly or indirectly.	
Uses of the land	K	The use of the land adds interest to the view.	
	L	The landscape would provide interest and enjoyment for many people.	
	M	The landscape has been affected by people, but in an interesting way.	
	N	The land use is not damaging the environment, directly or indirectly.	
Personal feelings	O	The view has interesting or pleasant features.	
	P	The different colours in the view blend well together.	
Overall impression	Q	The view is beautiful.	
	R	This landscape needs to be specially conserved because it has such an interesting variety of features.	

TOTAL VIEWSCORE

Can you identify any specific threats to this environment? Should the environment be conserved?

Can you identify ways in which this environment is being managed?

TASK 5: Complete an Environmental Impact Assessment for an area NOT under development:

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

PLATJA LLARGA (NOT DEVELOPED)

Study the view in front of you carefully. Read each of these statements and decide if you think that they apply to the view.

LOCATION 1		SCORE 1-5	
Natural features	A	There are several different landforms (e.g. hills, cliffs, dunes, etc.) which give an interesting view.	
	B	The view has some pleasant wooded country.	
	C	The view has some pleasant open country.	
	D	There are unique or highly unusual features in the landscape.	
	E	The landscape has considerable ecological value (e.g. vegetation or animal life).	
Artificial features	F	The style and materials of the buildings adds interest to the view.	
	G	The buildings fit well into the landscape.	
	H	There are no artificial features (e.g. rubbish dumps, pylons, quarries, industrial buildings etc. which spoil the view).	
	I	There are artificial features (e.g. reservoirs, castles, historical monuments etc.) which add interest to the view.	
	J	The land use is not damaging the environment, directly or indirectly.	
Uses of the land	K	The use of the land adds interest to the view.	
	L	The landscape would provide interest and enjoyment for many people.	
	M	The landscape has been affected by people, but in an interesting way.	
	N	The land use is not damaging the environment, directly or indirectly.	
Personal feelings	O	The view has interesting or pleasant features.	
	P	The different colours in the view blend well together.	
Overall impression	Q	The view is beautiful.	
	R	This landscape needs to be specially conserved because it has such an interesting variety of features.	

TOTAL VIEWSCORE

Can you identify any specific threats to this environment? Should the environment be conserved?

Can you identify ways in which this environment is being managed?

TASK 6: Complete a questionnaire seeking the views of the local people about the proposed Platja Llarga development.

1.	Should planning permission for the construction of 300 apartments and an hotel be allowed on the Platja Llarga site? En caso de que el permiso para la construcción de 300 apartamentos y un hotel se permitirá en la Platja Llarga sitio?
2.	How would you like to see the Platja Llarga area used? ¿Cómo le gustaría ver la zona de Platja Llarga utilizado?
3.	What are the main problems facing the Platja Llarga area? ¿Cuáles son los principales problemas en este ámbito Platja Llarga?