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General News

Sand dunes in a sea of cement

Mercedes Perri  ez

The dunes of Saladillo-Matas Verdes make an important natural enclave extending three kilometres along the coastline. The Coasts Authority has enlarged the public space in the area as a means of conserving it

FEW of the tourists and residents of the houses and apartments know the full ecological value of a stretch of coastline in their midst. These are the sand dunes of Saladillo-Matas Verdes, which occupy three kilometres of coastline at the eastern end of the municipality of Estepona, rich in flora and fauna and the site of valuable archaeological remains, some of them submerged in the sea. This is an oasis of natural wealth amidst the concrete strip that makes up much of the Costa del Sol coastline. It came close to being wiped out completely, but finally, the local and regional authorities are doing something about saving it.

The ecological value of the area cannot be underestimated, although few serious studies have been carried out on the ecosystem. A group of researchers from the University of Granada, along with the Municipal Archaeological Museum of Estepona, among others, have decided to carry out a full investigation. It is scheduled to take a year, and is expected to demonstrate the full value of the enclave.

This is, in fact, the only area of sand dunes on the Mediterranean coastline which, thanks to its proximity to the Straits of Gibraltar, has the natural conditions necessary to sustain certain species more usually associated with the Atlantic coastline. These include many cork and kermes oak species growing right behind the rich vegetation on the sand dunes.

There is a wide variety of flora growing here, representing many protected species, including the rare Mediterranean posidonia plant, which is an important source of nourishment for many marine species and which helps retain the sand on the beaches and prevent contamination in the water.

Importance

The work being done by the Granada University team is aimed at making people more aware of the importance of the natural enclave, protect its ecosystems and prevent further building being carried out in the area. The chief researcher of the programme, Jos   G  mez Zotano, tells us that one of his aims is to determine, in a scientific manner, the true environmental value of the area in order that the Junta de Andaluc  a can decide on its designation as the first nature reserve on the Estepona coastline.

This designation as a nature reserve would halt the advance of tourism in the immediate area of the sand dunes, which has changed considerable over recent years. The past fifty years have seen radical changes in the area, with much of the coastline now built-up. In fact, half a century ago, the the sand dunes stretched the full length of what is now the A-40 highway on this part of the coastline.

The building of residential developments in the decades of the sixties and seventies encroached on part of the natural area, which is now limited to 200 metres in width. In some places, in fact, it is difficult to make out the remains of what were once sand dunes. Another danger to the dunes is the constant coming and going of cars and jeeps in the area over the years, causing deep ruts in the sand and preventing vegetation from growing.

The wind and rain blowing in from the eastern Mediterranean has also contributed towards the natural erosion of the sand dunes, which would not have been so destructive had it not been for the part played by man. The Coasts Authority has drawn up plans to establish with more exactitude the limits of the sand dune area, with certain changes in these limits likely following studies carried out by the research team in the area.

The Environment Ministry tells us that the planned changes relate mainly to the size of the area in question, as well as the volume of the sand dunes, which have suffered over the years as a result of the weather and the passage of time. This has resulted in the coastal strip moving inland. According to a spokesperson from the Delegation for the Environment in the Estepona Town Hall, the movement has amounted to between 40 and 100 metres, with another six metres or so of movement into the sea. One of the aims of the Coasts Authority is to provide protection for the strip under official conservation, and to increase the right-of-way to 190 metres, which is the maximum the law will allow.

These changes in the outer limits of the sand dune area will become something of a life insurance policy for the land. Further building in the area will be prohibited by law, and present buildings, such as beach bars and the like, will be knocked down.

Nevertheless, we are assured by the Coasts Authority, the new outer limits of the sand dunes area will not affect present buildings in the Saladillo area to any great extent, although some residents have been worried enough to seek official explanations about what is happening and what exactly is planned. Work on the sand dune area is expected to be finished next year.

A state of alert

With the times that are in it, too many precautions cannot be taken to conserve what is left of the sand dune area. That means that anything new raises the alarm among local residents, and rumours of something happening in the area of the Estepona sand dunes has united the local residents in opposition to any further erosion of their environment. It has not always been the hand of man which is responsible. The forces of nature have played their part too, and demands have been made for the Coasts Authority to tackle the problem of erosion. Another danger is the car and jeep traffic on the sand dunes, where driving beach buggies has been a favoured sport. "The solution amounts to no more than the sticking of posts in the ground at the entries and exits to the beach," says one local resident.