

# SEČOVLJE SALINA NATURE PARK



Sečovlje Salina Nature Park covers 6.5 km<sup>2</sup> along the Slovene-Croatian boundary in the extreme southwestern part of Slovenia, in the southern part of the community of Piran. Its northern part, where salt is still being harvested, is called Lera. From the Park's southern part, called Fontanigge, it is separated by the Grande - Drnica channel. The Sečovlje salt-pans are, together with the nearby Strunjan pans, the northernmost and still active salt-pans in the Mediterranean and amongst the very few, where salt is still produced in compliance with several centuries old procedures.

At Fontanigge, salt-harvesting was abandoned in the 1960s, but the tradition of salt-making, which originates from the 14th century, is still practiced within the Museum of Salt-making. Here, each salt-field used to constitute an independent salt-pan, with its own basins for condensation and crystallisation of salt. At Lera, the salt-fields used for crystallisation of salt are separated from the fields used for condensation of seawater (evaporation basins). The difference between the two procedures of salt-making therefore lies in the technological process, associated with the preparation of brine, harvest and storage of salt, and in very diverse tools. Their common characteristic, however, is that at Fontanigge and Lera the salters cultivate, on the bottom of salt-fields, the so-called *petola*, a special type of biosediment that prevents sea mud merging with salt and at the same time restraining separate ions from building in salt.

In 2001, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia proclaimed the area of Sečovlje Salina a nature park and the Museum of Salt-making a cultural monument of national importance. In 1993, the Salina became the first Slovene wetland, inscribed on the list of internationally important marshes under the auspices of the Ramsar Convention.

## The Salty World

The submediterranean climate, high salinity of water in the shallow basins, and the traditional production of salt create very special ecological conditions, which in turn support high diversity of species and their natural habitats.

At Lera, the habitats of plant and animal species are limited to diversely saline salt-fields, channels and levees. Even more diverse habitats can be found at Fontanigge: these are reeds, halophilous meadows, dry, bare or partially overgrown basins and islets in the salt-fields, mudflats and different habitat types on the levees. The remains of salt-pan houses, too,



are inviting for certain species. The area of Fontanigge is surrounded by scrubs and dry as well as wet karst meadows, while its high-sea embankments on the west are drenched by the shallow sea.

## Salt-lovers

Characteristic of the salina's salty ground are its salt-loving plants (halophytes). They have mostly lignified leaves and stems, for they suffer drought as fresh water is not accessible to them. Most typical amongst them are the Marsh Samphire (*Salicornia europaea*), Glasswort (*Arthrocnemum fruticosum*), Sea Purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*) and Annual Sea-bite (*Suaeda maritima*). The most attractive halophyte, however, is the Common Sea-lavender (*Limonium serotinum*) with its tiny violet flowers and salt glands on its leaves. In the autumn, the halophytes acquire red-violet colour due to the lack of nitrogen.

## Life everywhere ...

The characteristic salt basins' species is the Brine Shrimp (*Artemia parthenogenetica*), no less than a centimetre long bright red type of plankton. Well adapted to the high salinity of water in the basins is also the Tooth Carp (*Aphanius fasciatus*).

The most salient in the Salina's diverse world of animals are its birds. More than 270 birds species have been established here, with some 90 breeders among them. To the Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) and Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*), the Sečovlje Salina is the only regular nest-site in our country, while for the Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*), Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) and Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) this is the most important breeding ground in Slovenia. The bird fauna is even more diverse in the spring and autumn months, when numerous birds stop here on their migration routes between Europe and Africa. In the Sečovlje Salina, three heron species can be seen throughout the year, although they do not breed here: the larger ones are the Great White Egret (*Egretta alba*) and Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), while the smaller one is the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*).

## The Salt-pans Heritage

Cultural heritage of the Piran salt-pans reflects centuries-old life and work of the salters on the northeastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. The oldest heritage has been preserved in the Fontanigge basin of the Sečovlje Salina, where ruins of the old salt-pan houses, traces of salt-fields, levees and channels speak of the fact that the Old Piran Salt-pans had been active until the 1960s. The Old Piran Salt-pans cultural heritage has been preserved, protected and demonstrated by the Museum of Salt-making situated on the bank of the Giassi Channel. The area's technical heritage is represented by the entire Lera and Strunjan pans. Here, the updated salt-making procedures have modernised the mediaeval tradition of the Old Piran Salt-pans, while the salt harvest itself has preserved their basic characteristics.