

PARCO REGIONALE DELLA FASCIA FLUVIALE DEL PO, TRATTO VERCELLESE/ALESSANDRINO, E DEL TORRENTE ORBA

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Region: **Piedmont**
Area: **14,035 ha**
Established in: **1990**
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A zero-cost natural sanctuary

A new wetland for wild birds, and zero-cost. The Park of the River Po, Stretch Vercelli-Alessandria has promoted this idea, using mining activity not as a goal but as a means to recover the flood plain near the river.

The Park stretches from Crescentino (VC) to the confluence with the Torrent Scrivia through a variety of habitats in close relationship with the river. In the first part, the landscape is characterized by two elements: hills and rice-fields. Downhill from Casale Monferrato the most natural and wild side of the Po emerges: here the river receives the waters of Sesia, Tanaro and Scrivia and builds wide gravel areas, small islands and oxbow lakes, which are the perfect habitat for rare birds, herons above all. The park is home of the only Purple heron colony in Piedmont, but there are also Night herons, Squacco herons and Little egrets. Among bird species worth mentioning there are also: Black kites, Marsh harriers, Cormorants, Terns, Plovers, Little terns and, during migration periods, Ospreys.

The intervention provides for the *ex-novo* creation of a wetland in an ancient meander on the left side of the River Po, in an advanced state of aggradation, based on the model of a young river oxbow. From an ecosystemic and economic point of view, it is better to create a new wetland instead of recovering an old one with excavation works. For this reason, the Park Authority promoted a mining activity, planned and implemented by mining firms on private lands: these lands were eventually handed over to the Park Authority. The mining works affected the fields on an old riverbed, characterized by alluvial deposits with an intermediate/high primary permeability and unconfined groundwater, in direct connection with the riverbed and under-river waters of the Po, near the land level.

Through excavations below groundwater level, the implementation of the project led to the creation of some interconnected lakes, in order to convey the morphology of an abandoned meander, as far as the plan is concerned. The wetlands were designed with a high rate of morphological diversity, with winding bights, peninsulas, small islands with gently sloping shores, in order to offer a wide variety of habitats. The maximum depth in the middle of the basins is 4,5 meters below the average groundwater level. Altogether about 430,000 cubic meters of sand and gravel were mined.

Along the shores, lower water areas and areas at the groundwater oscillation limit were created in order to favor the spontaneous formation of reed thicket and sedge. A canal connects the new oxbow with the old one, thus maintaining a continuity between water bodies. The nearby territory was devoted to a seminatural hygrophilous wood and, in a small part, to a dry meadow. As far as the wood is concerned, about 12,000 trees were planted.

These works, which ended in 2003 and affected an area of 26 ha, were carried out near one of the most ecologically precious areas of the Park, i.e. the heronry in Valenza (the first small protected area in Piedmont established along the River Po in 1979). Among the problems to be faced, the Park reports, there is an inadequate preparation of the workers, who are used to carry out more regular jobs than unusual interventions like this.

The Park was charged with no cost for the implementation this project. The mining firms had to deposit 335,000 Euros as guarantee for the proper execution of the works.