

Kneiss islands

Legal status	Nature reserve
Foundation year	1993
Foundation text	Law no. 88-20
Management body	Forestry Commission at the Ministry of Agriculture
Superficy	5850 ha



Territory

The Kneiss Islands lie in Skhira Bay (gouvernorat of Sfax), about 25 km. south-east of the town of Mahrès. This archipelago is located about 3.5 km. off the continent. The Kneiss archipelago is made up of 4 islets (Dziret el Bessila, Dziret el Hjar, Dziret el Laboua, and Dziret el Gharbia).



The Kneiss Islands archipelago has been a SPAMI since 2001 because of its having one of the Mediterranean's biggest estran ecosystems with exceptional avifauna.

Physical features

The entire archipelago is that part of the shallows that has emerged above the waterline, belonging to a shallow extended platform cut into by tidal channels that become visible at low tide. The highest point is only 7 m. above the shore, and the altitude is usually less than 2 m.

All the islets have a backbone of calcareous sandstone, and Bessila is occupied by sebkhas, chotts and, especially, maritime marshes. Everywhere the soft material of the islands' shores is the victim of erosion.

The originality of the site's appearance is a result of the existence of a very big sandy-silty estran, crossed by channels.

Specificities and Importance

The estran encourages the presence of many halophilous species, covering over 80% of the soil surface.

These vast stretches are a favourite site for aquatic avifauna, basically migratory and wintering birds, which occupy all the niches in the various available water levels. Because it lies in pre-Saharan Tunisia, this site is a major stopover for migratory birds. There are a great many birds: 70% of Tunisia's birds winter in the Kneiss Islands, and there may be more than 100,000 of them.

Over 75% of the marine plant populations are marine phanerogams, including several thousand hectares of Cymodocea lawns.

The archipelago is obviously of heritage interest: partially submerged classical ruins appear above the surface. Many other sites are present on the coast, such as a mausoleum with a pyramidion; there are also cisterns and a large number of amphora; on the El Laboua islet there are the remains of a monastery and of a little church, and all along the cliffs, stripped bare by erosion, there are classical ruins including a funerary monument.

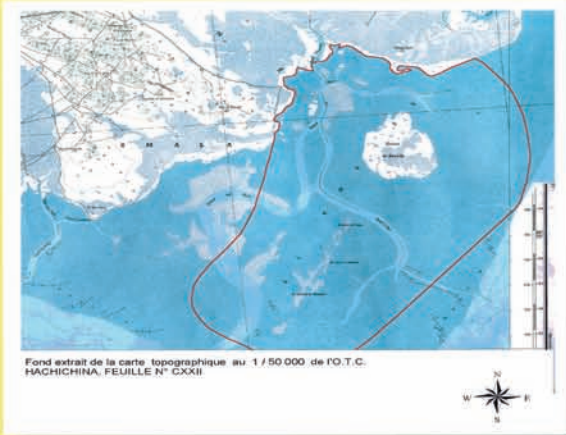


Threats and pressure

The Kneiss islands environment is suffering from considerable pollution through hypertrophication, basically due to the consequences of the phosphate processing industry and the dumping of hydrocarbons. The presence of hundreds of boatless fishermen in the islands, especially El Bessila, seriously harms the conservation of the environment, since it greatly disturbs the nesting birds or even prevents them making any attempt at nesting.

Marine turtles present in the area are caught sporadically.

For the entire marine coastal area, the scraping of the seabed is very likely to lessen the area's biodiversity.



Management

The Kneiss Islands do not have any management plan in force; one is being finalised by the APAL.

Since the area is marked out by nature, there is no zoning; only 2 boards indicate that this is a nature reserve.

Monitoring is carried out by one occasional guardian (forest warden), who does not have a boat. But in the event of breaches of the law, there are fairly severe punishments for practices that harm the site.

Protection measures have gone ahead with the aim of preserving the site's natural, cultural and landscape potential. This basically means protecting the flora and fauna by managing local uses and extraction activities, protecting the archaeological heritage, stepping up the wardens' activities, and paying attention to the problem of erosion observed in the site by carrying out regular monitoring.

These measures have enabled the site's fitness to receive light development that takes account of both the vulnerability of the Kneiss archipelago and the environmental context of the continental coast, to be envisaged.

