

## Editor's note

### Points of interest:

- Oléron's salt pans
- Pied Avocet

### A new season

We are in a new salt season and production prospects are not the best. Late rains have delayed production and damaged some of the preparatory work that had been carried out. However, the salt-workers know that these difficulties are inherent to this activity, and recall some memories of the rare - but well-lived - years in which the weather did not allow for a single pound of salt to be produced and hope the weather will improve and allow for a crop that may not be exceptional but may be at least satisfactory.

We have much to learn from the tenacity of the salt-workers. A project like ECOSAL ATLANTIS also has its time, its preparation. It passes, like the water entering the salt pans, through several phases; it mobilizes elements, evaporates, and acquires density. It keeps on advancing, if adverse circumstances delay its path, it plies the water, incorporates new water, and soldiers on with the process until the final stage.

Our project is nearing the end, part of our journey is now inevitably made and our salt will have to be produced with this water.

Renato Neves

National coordinator of ECOSAL ATLANTIS in Portugal

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## The salt pans of Oléron, a landscape of flavours

«(...) The island [of Oléron] is filled with salt pans. What impressed me the most was the whiteness of the houses, of the walls, of the windmills that abound here, everything is white-washed once a year, the mounds of blinding white salt contrasting with the intensely blue sky, reminding one of Arabian villages and camps.»

Excerpt from an anonymous postcard of 1920. Private Collection, DR

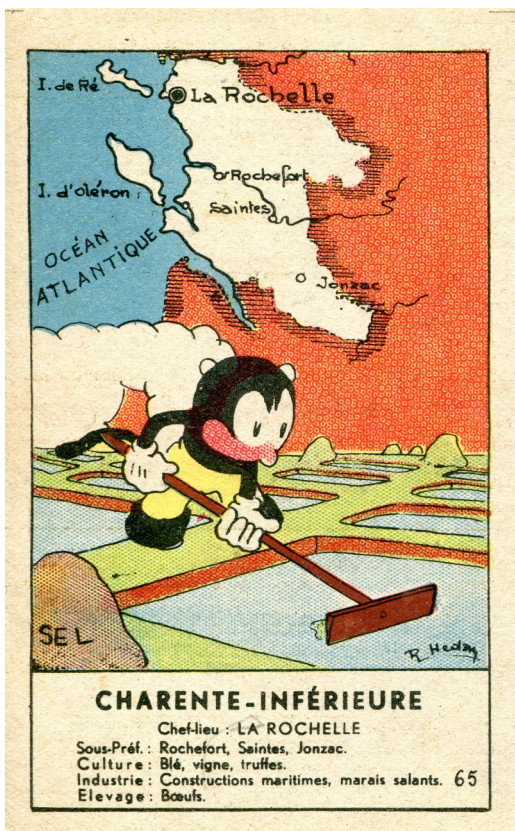


Figure 1: Image, a school prize representing the salt pans as one of the industries of the Charente-Inférieure- (designated Charente-Maritime in 1941). Beginning of the twentieth century. Coll. Le Port des Salines, DR.

The Charente-Maritime has a rich salt-producing tradition spread over five major areas, around two regions:

In Saintonge:

- The salt pans of Brouage (Hiers, Brouage, Beaugeay, Saint-Froult, Moëze and Saint-Nazaire)
- The salt pans of the mouth of the Seudre River (Marennes, Saint-Just, Saint-Sornin, Le Gua, l'Eguille, Saint-Sulpice, Breuillet, Mornac, Arvert, La Tremblade)
- The salt pans of the Oléron Island (Saint-Pierre and Saint-Georges to the north and le Château, Dolus and Saint-Trojan to the south)

In Aunis:

- The salt pans of Ile de Ré (around Fiers d'Ars)
- and to a lesser extent, the salt flats of La Rochelle (Châtelailon, Angoulins, Aytré Tasdon and Nieul).

In Saintonge, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, there was intense marine life in the salt pans of Brouage, where salt and wine were sent in barges to the ships of northern Europe that were anchored off the Pertuis. The production peak of the salt pans of Brouage lies in the second half of the fifteenth century. The following century saw the construction of the stronghold. A ship of stone, remembrance of past political and economic wealth which now seems to appear out of nowhere to upset the horizontality of the salt pans of Brouage, now abandoned. Oléron has not escaped this decline.

The salt pans of Oléron occupy nearly a quarter of the island's surface (35 km<sup>2</sup>) and were essentially very productive a few centuries ago, ensuring the wealth of this region. In the late seventeenth century, the island produced 4256 pounds of salt pans or about 85 000 pans.

As with most of the Atlantic salt-works, the salt pans of Oléron which are located on the east coast of the island, developed in the lowlands, sheltered from the tidal areas. Called 'island of light' or "island of the hundred mills" Oléron has all the conditions for the harvesting of white gold: clay, plastic and impermeable rock and the sun and wind needed for the evaporation of sea water.

If, on the one hand, the overall functioning of salt-works is the same along the Atlantic coast, on the other, each zone has its specificities, its know-how, its nomenclature ... In Oléron the salt workers harvested the salt barefoot on the vée; the central paths of the salt pan, with the aid of a *simouche* and a *servion* (instruments for gathering the salt from the pans).

Workers carried the salt in their *borsau* basket, loaded on their shoulders, up to the *tasselier*, where the *mulons* (mounds of salt) stood protected in winter by a vegetal blanket made up of *rouchés*.



When the salt was sold, the mounds of salt were bagged and transported to the ship by harnessed donkeys.

This description belongs to the past. This fragmentary reconstruction is possible due to personal accounts, to manuscript archives and iconographic documents. The white salt of Oleron, famous for its salting qualities has been replaced in favour of the green oyster, known for its subtle hazelnut flavour. If until 1820 the production areas were almost identical, in the nineteenth century we witness the decline of salt production, due to the accumulation of silt in the canals, the destruction of international trade and the loss of the French markets. The abandoned salt pans were transformed into marais gâts, pastures, hunting plots or tanks used for fish and oyster farming. These new primary activities allowed for the conservation of the landscape of the old salt pans of Oléron.

In the late 1980s, the traditional know-how of the men of salt was not passed down to younger generations, and Albert Masson, salt worker in Chevalerie, harvested his last crop of salt in the summer of 1985. The ecomuseum of Port des Salines was born in 1994, with the will to reactivate this human activity in this region, through the recreation of a salt-works and the construction of an ecomuseum on the history of sea salt from the island of Oléron.

The ecomuseum of Port des Salines is a public institution managed by the Communauté of Communes of the island of Oléron, with expertise in the cultural field since 2006. It holds "Pôle Nature" and "Tourisme et Handicap" certification and aims to raise awareness in the general public as to the scientific and leisure potential of the pans with: exhibitions, guided tours to adjoining salt pans, outdoors events, the organizing of other events, etc.



Figure 2: At the far end, in the direction of Sauzelle, the salt-workers' village, there is a profusion of white cones: mounds of salt, called *mulons* that once speckled the landscape of the salt pans of Oléron. Postcard from the early twentieth century, Coll. Le Port des Salines, ed. Antoine Sagne, D.R.



Figure 3: Plate glass, stereoscopic view of the salt pans on the island of Oléron, in the early twentieth century. Coll. Le Port des Salines, DR.





Figure 4: Aerial views, in 1950 and 2000, of an area of salt-works near the Chenal de la Brande. The fifty years that separate the two photos show the transformation of the landscape of salt pans still in production or recently abandoned, for oyster farming. Missions I.G.N. Michel Bellouis in 1950 and Missions I.G.N. of 01.08.2000

The commitment that the Communauté of Communes took on within the European ECOSAL Atlantis project allows Port des Salines to contribute to the enhancement of European salt works and to share enriching scientific, educational and cultural experiences with other project partners.

The discoveries made within the inventory of salt-related heritage, the joint project with our European partners, are interesting from two different angles: at the project level, in forming a database, with the aim of authoring a work or building a 'Salt Route' and, at the regional level, to know its history and prepare for the future. Photographs, files, old maps or manuscripts are indications that will help young salt-workers in their projects of reactivating the saltpans, so that the Oléron salt-works remain a living heritage and the salt-pans of this region will always be part of the crafted landscape, a source of flavours.

Emilie Drouyer

Communauté de Communes de l'île d'Oléron



Figure 6: Port des Salines, marine educational experience where everyone can gather salt and become a salt worker for a day. Copyright: CDC Ile d'Oléron.



Figure 5: Albert Masson in 1985, the last salt worker at Oléron. After this last season, salt would only be harvested in the ecomuseum of Port des Salines in 1994. Later, seven salt-workers resumed the working of the salt pans and settled on the island territory. Private Coll. DR.

# Character

## The Pied Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*)

The Pied Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and elegant shorebirds in Europe. Its presence as a nesting bird, although very irregular, is quite widespread along the European coastal wetlands, ranging from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

In western France, in the Algarve (Portugal) and Andalusia (Spain) it has a marked preference for salt pans, nesting in small colonies. Elsewhere it nests in wet meadows or pastures, or agricultural areas where there are lakes or ponds.

The populations of Atlantic Europe and Northern Europe (France, England, Netherlands, Germany and the Baltic) are migratory and winter in the Iberian and West African wetlands.

It has very strange gregarious habits, as outside the breeding season it tends to form large flocks both in the high tide shelters or semi-flooded feeding grounds that appear at low tide. This is not particular to the avocet, but in its case it takes on other characteristics; there is some cooperation and coordination in the flock in order to search for food in the mud or in the water flow and they form "rafts" as the flock swims in a compact body that uses a "trawling" technique to catch its prey.

In the geographical context of the ECOSAL ATLANTIS, the avocet is a constant presence in the salt pan landscapes both as a nesting bird or simply while wintering. It is one of the most iconic travellers of the Atlantic salt route. Its silhouette and its call are an integral part of these environments. The beauty, prominence and charisma of this bird have led to its use as a symbol of one of the oldest and most famous ornithological societies in the world: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) founded in 1889. In Portugal, the avocet was also chosen as a symbol of the Natural Reserve of the Tagus Estuary, as this protected area is home to about 20% of the total population of Europe, during the winter.



Figure 1 - Flock of avocets (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) at Brownsea Island, Poole Harbour, UK.



Figure 2 - Avocet feeding in a lagoon at Brownsea Island, Poole Harbour, UK.



Figure 3 - Logos of the Natural Reserve of the Tagus Estuary and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

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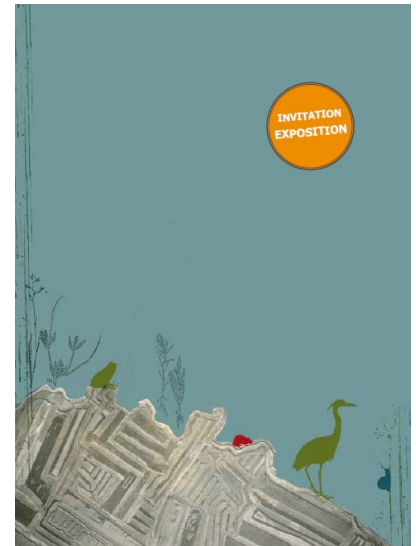
## Events

### Salt for life - A pinch of biodiversity in our saltpans

#### Exhibition starting on April 12, the island of Oléron (France)

The Atlantic saltpans that once ensured the region's wealth through the production of salt form a landscape which is remarkable for its originality. Based on the land and water fashioned by man, this setting discloses a mosaic of habitats that is favourable to the presence of several species. The presence of salt, which could be a constraint, however, proves to be a source of life. This exhibition draws on the example of Port des Salines, where an inventory of fauna and flora was carried out. Developed under the project ECOSAL ATLANTIS, in collaboration with a scientific committee, the exhibition invites you to discover why the saltpans are home to a very specific biodiversity. Tactile visits to the saltpans and teaching modules for the younger ones have given dynamism to a visit that is full of life!

Écomusée du Port des Salines



### Traditional Salt Route of the Atlantic National agriculture fair

#### June 5, 2012, Santarém (Portugal)

On the 5th of June, the city of Rio Maior was represented on the CIMLT stand (Lezíria do Tejo Intermunicipal Community), at the National Agricultural Fair at Santarem. This stand, located in Nave A with the theme "The pleasure of taste" aims to promote all the associated municipalities with tourism interests and has an emphasis on food and wine. As salt is a foodstuff which is often considered a gourmet product, Rio Maior could not fail to take the opportunity to promote the salt of the Rio Maior saltpans and the International Route, of which they form part, and its partners' products in the ECOSAL ATLANTIS project.

Rio Maior Municipality



### "People and wetlands: culture in wise use" 11th Ramsar Conference of the Parties

#### July 7 2012, Bucarest

The Asociación Amigos de las Salinas de Interior were invited to prepare a presentation on the cultural heritage of the salt marshes.

Asociación Amigos de las Salinas de Interior



**Ramsar COP11**  
6-13 July 2012  
Bucharest, Romania

## 7ª Feira International Salt Fair

12 to 15 de July 2012, Aveiro (Portugal)

Between 12 and 15 July, the 7th annual International Salt Fair will take place in Aveiro, marking the season of salt production.

As in previous years, the event sought to promote saltmaking sites, as well as the various uses of salt. This product, in addition to being a traditional condiment, has gained new uses and has given rise to innovative products. The diversity of participants showing a wide variety of new salt products indicates their potential as tools for developing economic growth and cultural tourism.

Aveiro Municipality



## Salt Festival in Salinas de Rio Maior

13 to 15 July 2012, Rio Maior (Portugal)

From 13 to 15 July another edition of "Festival of Salt" took place at the Rio Maior salt pans, with a very full evening musical program that also included a contest of the best lot of salt, an open air mass, a yoga demonstration and a Historical and Ethnographic Recreations.

In this edition was recreated the moment that officially begins the story of salt and Rio Maior (the first written document) while in 1177, Pero de Aragon and his wife Sancha Soares sell part of the well to the Templar Order.

After signing the document and a tour in the salt pans with the Templar's for recognition of their new property, there was a jump in time and we travelled to the late nineteenth century as the salt-makers performed the tasks inherent to all phases of salt production, since the circulation of salt water from the well, to scraping the salt, its transport (carriage) and its marketing. Most of the salt-makers that joined the event dressed as in the 15th century.

The historical recreation was the responsibility of the Companhia Livre and the ethnographic recreation was performed by the local salt-makers.

Rio Maior Municipality



Translation: Departamento de Línguas e Cultura da Universidade de Aveiro

## Salt making Workshop - Heritage Skills Day

22 July 2012 Saltfleetby, Lincolnshire (UK)

Come and join the LCGM project team and Heritage Trust Lincolnshire as they extract salt from the seawater with traditional techniques that shaped Lincolnshire's coastline and economy.

An opportunity to enjoy the season!

For more information see: [www.lincsmarshes.org.uk](http://www.lincsmarshes.org.uk)

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