

# GUARDIANS OF NATURE

HEROES IN ACTION TO SAVE THE PLANET



Interreg  Co-funded by the European Union  
Italy - Croatia  
 ACTION

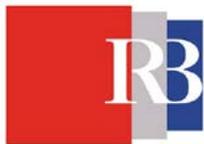
**ADVANCED LEVEL**

# Preface

The digital educational kit “Guardians of Nature” provides **digital materials** that can be freely downloaded from the page <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/action/library>. This educational tool is created as part of the dissemination activities of the **Interreg Italy-Croatia ACTION project**.

The educational kit is designed with language suitable for primary and middle school students, to raise awareness and introduce them to the themes of biodiversity protection, climate change, and Nature-based solutions, as well as the actions that every European citizen can take to preserve the environmental heritage. The contents of the educational kit have been structured taking into account the current needs of school curricula for achieving **interdisciplinary skills** between Science and Civic Education, combining concepts of a purely scientific nature with those of key European competences, which as a whole represent the necessary skills for the personal fulfilment of each student, also as a future European citizen.

The kit includes a series of **educational supports** divided into a single module for students in the early years of primary school and 3 modules and 3 teaching units for the later years of primary and middle school, which can be integrated in various ways to create a kit suitable for both a few and several meetings. At the link above, in addition to the student manual for use in the classroom, you can download the teacher’s manual and printable sheets for carrying out extracurricular activities.



DEPARTMENT  
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## CHAPTER 1

# GUARDIANS OF NATURE

In the heart of Planet Earth, on the coasts of the ancient Adriatic Sea, watched over the **Alliance of the Guardians of Nature**, composed of three superheroes with great powers:

**Little Leaf**, the **Green Seer**, with deep roots and special leaves, sniffed out the secrets of the air and the earth, purified the atmosphere and strengthened the soil;

**Wave**, the **Knight of the Sea**, riding the waves with grace, guided tides and currents, moved nutrients for marine creatures and guided fish in their migrations;

**Sand**, the **Wizard of the Dunes**, thanks to his ability to shape sand, created impenetrable barriers to protect the coast and built safe havens for animals and plants. Together, they were the keepers of nature and the guardians of the perfect balance between land, water and air.



# BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEMS

When we say “variety is the spice of life”, it’s absolutely true: seeing different plants and animals is truly delightful!

This variety is an example of a key concept in science: biodiversity, or biological diversity, which is the variety of life forms present on Earth. Even our cities host biodiversity: from the rooftops of buildings to the bottom of any puddle.

Biodiversity includes three components

1. **GENETIC:** due to differences between individuals, even if they belong to the same species. We can easily observe this in humans and domestic animals!
2. **SPECIES:** thanks to the presence of different species, like wolves, bees, foxes, butterflies...
3. **ECOSYSTEM:** due to the variety of environments.



The network of various organisms living in a specific area and interacting with their environment is called an ecosystem. The prefix eco refers to the environment, while system refers to the group of components that are interrelated and in balance – like a web. Thus, we can define:

- ✦ **Abiotic components:** the non-living elements of an ecosystem (geographical features), such as water, soil, rocks, light, and air;
- ✦ **Biotic components:** all living organisms – animals, plants, mushrooms and microorganisms.

Abiotic and biotic components are constantly interacting. For example, vegetation contributes to the water cycle through transpiration and reduces temperature increases thanks to shading. This concept of mutual interaction is fundamental because if one element is altered, the entire ecosystem may shift – like a domino effect.

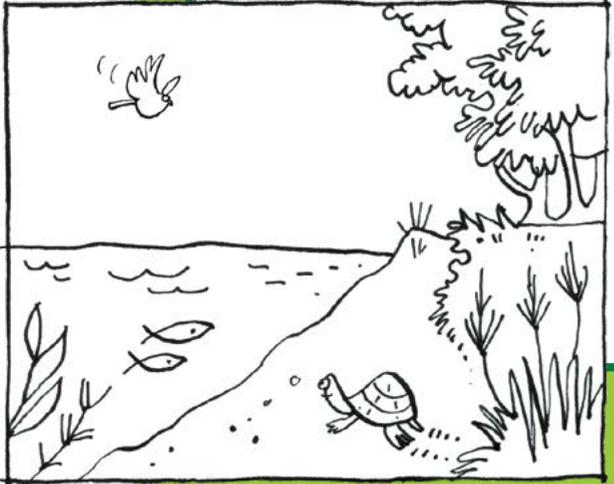
22 May **INTERNATIONAL DAY**

To commemorate the adoption in 1992 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which defines the concept of biodiversity, the United Nations established the **International Day for Biological Diversity**. Each year a different theme is chosen to highlight various facets of this topic. Search online for this year’s theme!

 **IN ACTION**

**Colour** the abiotic and biotic components of the ecosystem below using two colours of your choice.





## KEYWORDS

**Habitat:** a terrestrial or aquatic area with physical and environmental features that allow certain organisms to live or develop. Example: a marsh.



## IN ACTION

Grab your pen and write the names of the species on the appropriate labels under the photos in the illustration beside. Below you'll find some suggestions, but be careful: the species listed are more than those shown in the illustration.

- Eel
- Dragonfly
- Heron
- Flamingo
- Sturgeon
- Kentish Plover
- Turtle
- Nutria
- Frog
- Dolphin
- Fox
- Wolf
- Red crayfish
- Mussels

## COASTAL ENVIRONMENT

The **coastal environment** includes ecosystems found along coastlines, where land and sea meet. In the area just behind the coast, there are particular intermediate zones between land and water, such as marshes and lagoons. In this area, the fresh water from the river mixes with the seawater and takes the name of **transitional waters**.

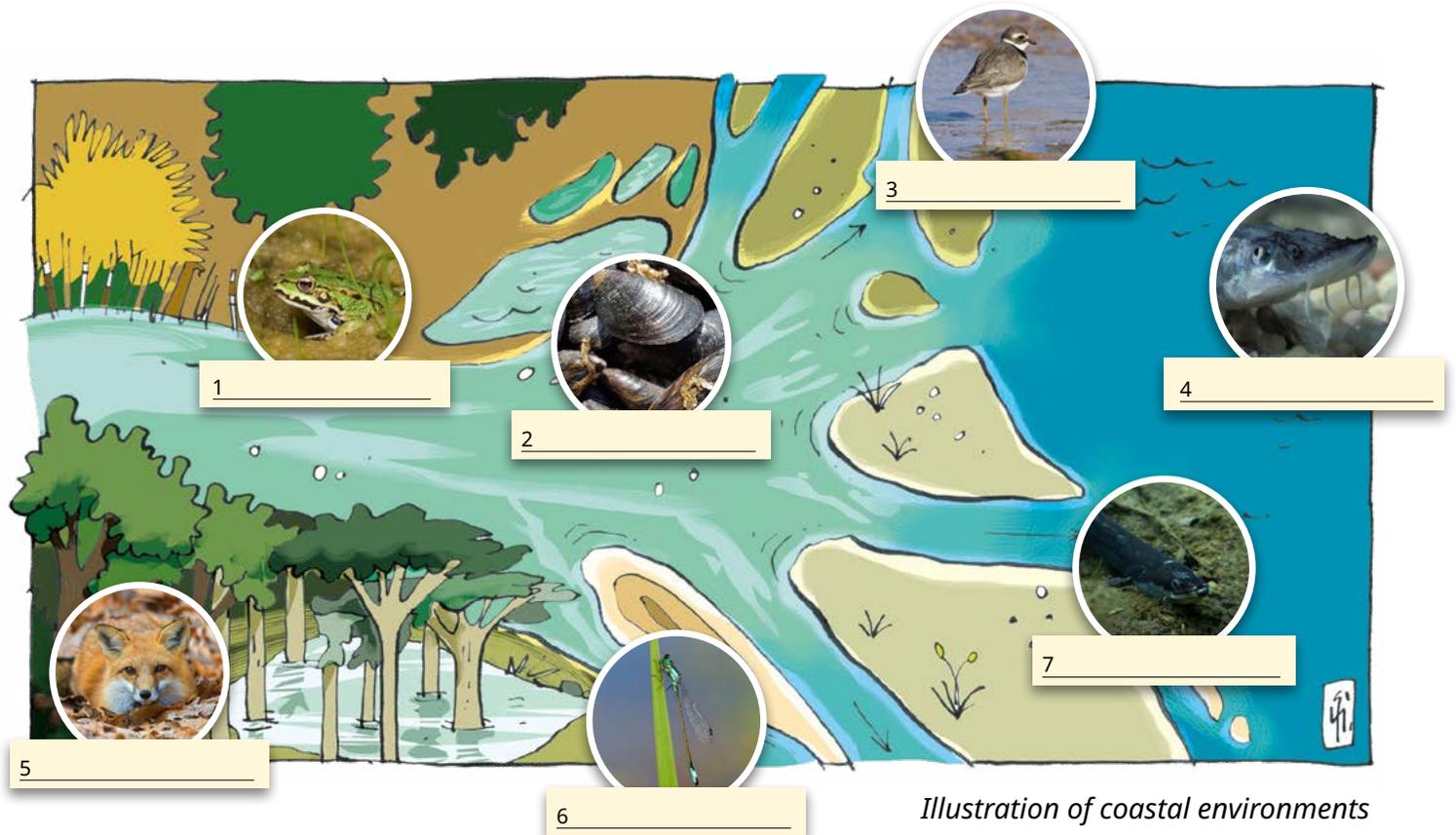


Illustration of coastal environments

In these environments, the water is neither fresh nor salty, but rather brackish, and they are characterized by unique conditions due to the combination of various factors such as the influence of tides, wind, and salinity variations. This is a very complex environment and, for this reason, it is home (**habitat**) to a great variety of bacteria, plants and animals that find water, food, and shelter, forming complex food relationships known as **trophic relationships**.

River mouths and lagoons are examples of wetlands, which in coastal areas are called **coastal wetlands**, characterized by salty and brackish waters. Although wetlands make up only 6% of the Earth's surface, they provide extremely **important services**: they protect coastlines from waves, serve as food production areas (an example is the farming of clams and mussels in lagoons), collect excess rainwater that would otherwise cause flooding, and provide water reserves. Their biodiversity is crucial for fishing, tourism, and water quality. Protecting these ecosystems is essential in the fight against climate change: their loss increases the risk of natural disasters, threatens food security, and accelerates climate change itself. Unfortunately, due to human activities such as land reclamation and drainage, many wetlands have been destroyed worldwide. The Ramsar Convention protects these precious ecosystems by recognizing their ecological, economic, and social value.



Lake Vrana (Croatia)



Flooded forest in the Po Delta Park (Italy)

02 Feb **INTERNATIONAL DAY**

On **February 2**, World Wetlands Day is celebrated around the globe. It marks the date in 1971 when the Ramsar Convention was signed during the Ramsar Conference, promoted by international offices and specialized agencies, and supported by numerous international organizations (FAO, UNESCO, CIC, ICBO, IUCN, WWF...).

 **KEYWORDS**

**Wetlands:** complex environments characterised by the presence of still water (no deeper than 6 metres) or waterlogged soil, where aquatic plants grow, at least for part of the year. These areas can be permanent or temporary, meaning they do not exist all year round, but are linked to wetter periods with more water available. A marsh, a wet meadow or a lagoon are all examples of wetlands.





## KEYWORDS

**Ecology:** from the Greek meaning “study of the house,” ecology refers to nature understood as the home that hosts us. Ecology studies the interactions between organisms and the environment, which together form the ecosystem. It should not be confused with environmentalism, which is an ideology and opinion movement that often follows trends very different from this branch of science.

**Extinction:** when a species completely disappears, and there are no living individuals of that species left, it's called extinction. We know that most species that have lived on Earth are no longer here today. We know this thanks to fossils, which are like ancient “photographs” of animals and plants. A famous example is the Dodo, a large bird that lived on the island of Mauritius and no longer exists. A species is at risk of extinction when only a few animals or plants of that type remain, and their number continues to decrease. Even though extinction can happen naturally, humans often speed up this process!



## CONSERVING NATURE

We have compared ecosystems to a network—but what happens if one component disappears? The balance breaks. This is exactly what happens with the **loss of biodiversity**: when an organism disappears, or becomes extinct, the entire ecosystem is affected, and the impacts are also felt by humans. Less biodiversity means a higher risk of natural disasters, reduced availability of food and water, and greater vulnerability to health issues.

Human activities have always had an impact on Earth—sometimes contributing to environmental improvement, but more often with the opposite effect. Human development tends to be fast-paced and relentless, ignoring the rhythms of nature and causing climate changes, habitat transformations, and alterations to the biological cycles of some species—sometimes leading to **extinction**. For this reason, the growth of human well-being is often linked to a decline in biodiversity.

You can also help protect nature and biodiversity by adopting a few good habits:

- ✦ To start, **reduce all kinds of waste**: everything that is produced requires energy, and if it's thrown away, that energy is wasted. So don't take what you don't need! From food to clothing, think twice before making a purchase;
- ✦ **Take care of pollinators**: did you know that without pollinating insects, most flowering plants wouldn't be able to spread their seeds or bear fruit? Over three-quarters of global food crops depend on pollinators. Create shelters and nesting areas for these small creatures and try not to destroy their hiding places.
- ✦ **Respect nature**: when you're in green spaces, observe animals from a distance, pick only what is allowed, and always take your litter with you!



## CHAPTER 2

# THE SHADOW OF CHANGE

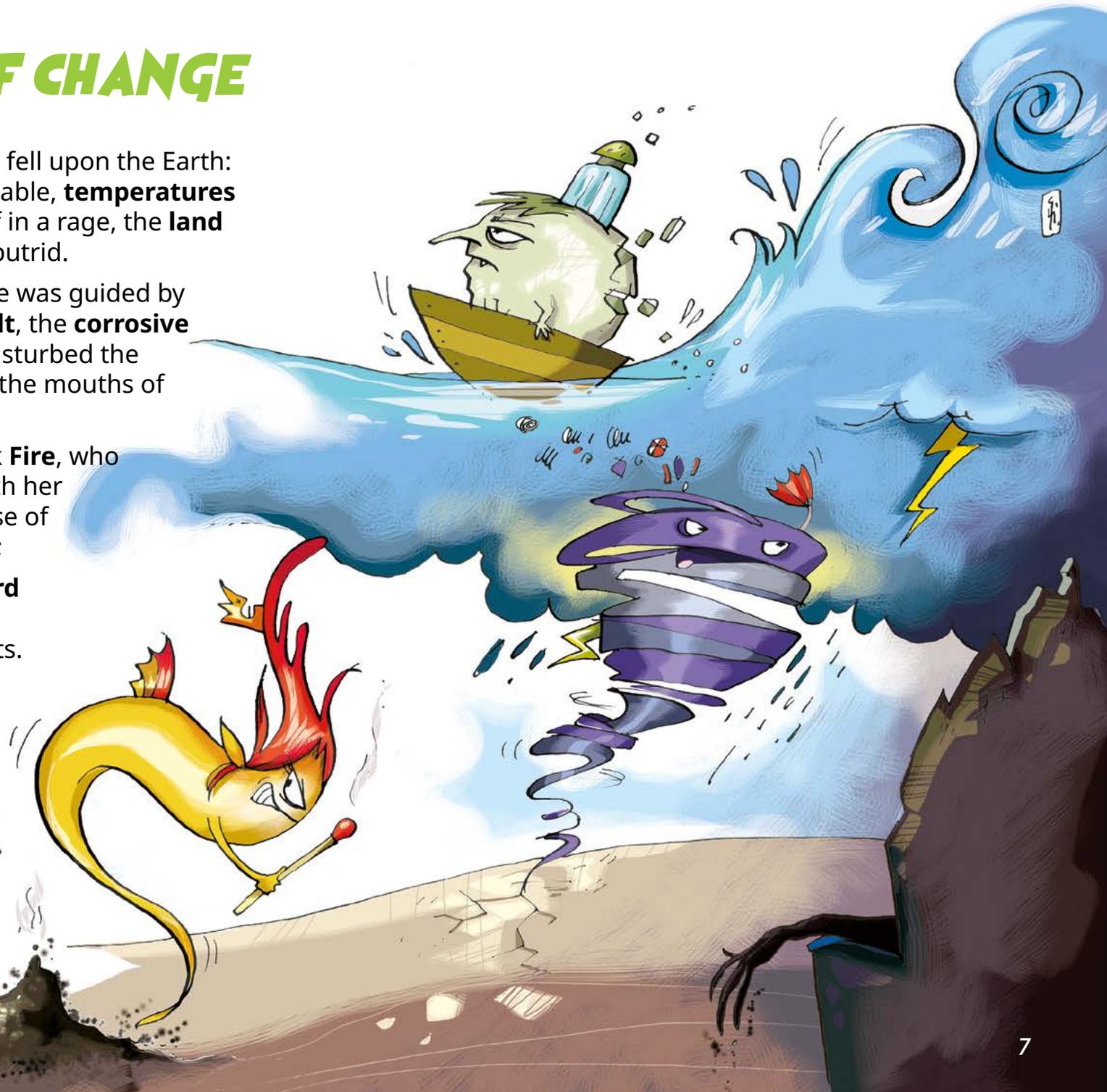
One day, however, a **dark shadow** fell upon the Earth: the air became gray and unbreathable, **temperatures** began to rise, the sea swelled as if in a rage, the **land** became dry, arid and sometimes putrid.

The shadow of this strange change was guided by the powers of three dark lords: **Salt**, the **corrosive Mutant**, an unstable being who disturbed the balance of fresh waters, going up the mouths of rivers;

Flame, the **greedy Queen of Dark Fire**, who set forests and beaches ablaze with her burning touch, for the sole purpose of accumulating more and more ash;

and finally **Wind of Chaos**, the **Lord of Storms**, who unleashed floods alternating with immense droughts.

These, unbeknownst to all, were pawns of a mysterious supreme leader: **Lord Thermon**, the **Global Warming destroyer of the Climate**, an invisible enemy that threatened the entire Planet.





## CLIMATE CHANGE BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE

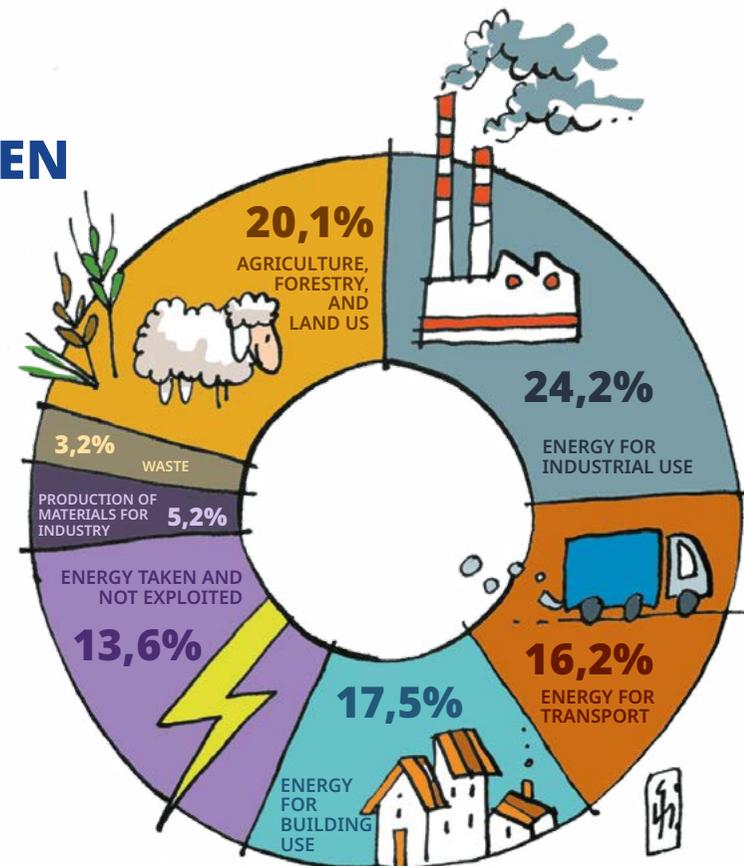
The consequences of the **climate crisis** affect us closely. The news now updates us daily on the climate changes occurring in our territories, reporting the social, political and economic effects caused by such changes.

You've surely heard of climate change, but do you know what it means?

**Climate change** (often abbreviated as "CC") is the alteration of Earth's climate over a prolonged period of time. But let's take a step back first: the term **climate** refers to the average weather conditions recorded in a specific area over a period of at least 30 years. It shouldn't be confused with **weather**, which instead refers to the set of meteorological elements (rain, wind, temperature...) that describe a specific moment in time. You just need to look out the window to see what the weather is like today!!

Overall, climate change can be caused by:

- ✦ **natural factors**, such as changes in solar activity, volcanic eruptions, and variations in Earth's axial tilt;
- ✦ **human activities**, which release polluting gases mainly deforestation and intensive farming. In particular, human activities have been the main triggering factor due to the high consumption of coal, oil, and gas.



Percentages of global greenhouse gas emissions (data graphically reprocessed from [OurWorldInData.org](http://OurWorldInData.org))

To understand whether climate change has occurred or is ongoing, it's not enough to check if today is warmer or if it rained more last year. Scientists analyze a series of long-term **data** describing the climate such as whether Earth's **average temperature** has risen, if rainfall has increased or decreased, if rain is falling at different times of the year, or if extreme events like heatwaves or floods have become more frequent. It's a bit like looking at the average height of all the students in your school over a long period: if the average has increased significantly, it means that students are generally getting taller!



### EXPLORE

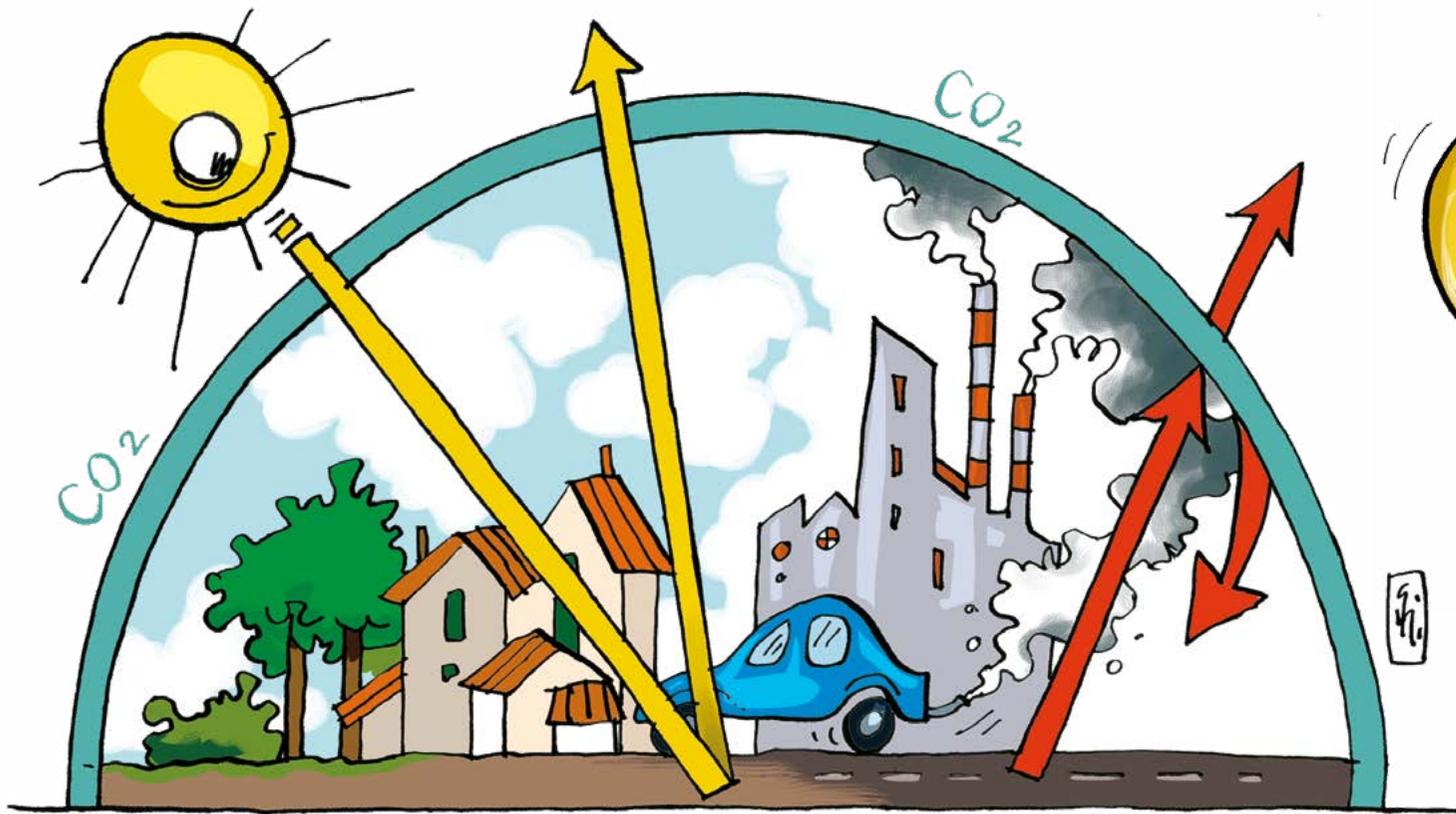
Visit the interactive website: [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/our-planet-our-future\\_en](https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/our-planet-our-future_en) to learn about climate change, how it is affecting all of Europe, and how each of us can help fight it.

The teacher's corner also contains a selection of classroom exercises and materials on this topic.

If you want to explore further, the NASA Climate Kids sections at

<http://climatekids.nasa.gov/menu/weather-and-climate/>

and <http://climatekids.nasa.gov/bingo/> offer additional resources and games in English.



■ HEAT (RADIATION)    ■ LIGHT

*Mechanism of the greenhouse effect*

Since the mid-1900s, the planet's temperature has begun to rise due to human activities that have changed land use, deforested large areas, and released large amounts of gases into the atmosphere—known as **greenhouse gases**, including the well-known **carbon dioxide** (often referred to as CO<sub>2</sub>). These gases trap solar radiation near the Earth's surface, warming it just like the glass of a greenhouse. This phenomenon is called the **greenhouse effect**, and it helps maintain a temperature suitable for life on Earth, so it's not necessarily a negative event! However, the **increase** of these gases in the atmosphere causes temperatures to rise, leading to **global warming**, which in turn contributes to **climate change**. Global warming is measured over a specific period of years, and even a change of just a few degrees can lead to deep and unpredictable changes in the climate. The main threat lies in **how quickly** this warming occurs: if it happens too fast, some species cannot adapt to the change, putting their survival at risk.



### IN ACTION

Can you define the difference between global warming and climate change? Fill in the blanks with the following words:

- GLOBAL WARMING
- CLIMATE CHANGE

\_\_\_\_\_ is caused by the increase in Earth's temperature ( \_\_\_\_\_ ), which results from the addition of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere beyond what is naturally present. \_\_\_\_\_ describes the current increase in Earth's temperature. It is just one of the characteristics of \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ includes the many effects of \_\_\_\_\_ on the Earth's climate system.



## EXPLORE

Visit the interactive game in the Recycle City on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website (<https://www.epa.gov/recycle/recycle-city>).



## GIORNATA MONDIALE

**Earth Overshoot Day** is the date when humanity has consumed all the natural resources that the Planet can regenerate in one year. From that day onward, we start accumulating a debt to the Earth because we are using more than what can be sustainably provided. The date is not fixed: it changes every year depending on how quickly we consume resources. If we live more sustainably, Earth Overshoot Day moves later in the calendar; on the other hand, if consumption increases, it comes earlier. Search online with a teacher to find out when Earth Overshoot Day falls this year. Has it already passed?



## IN ACTION

**Ecological Footprint Quiz:** answer the following questions, mark the points for each response and total your score!

# ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

The impact of our actions on the planet can be measured through the **ecological footprint**, an indicator that shows how much of the Earth's surface is used to produce the resources we consume and to absorb the carbon dioxide we generate. When the focus is only on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, it is called the **carbon footprint**.

The **water footprint**, on the other hand, refers to the amount of water, measured in cubic meters, evaporated and/or polluted by producers and consumers.

These parameters help us understand the environmental impacts caused by human activities, how many resources we use, and what we release into the environment.



### 1 How do you usually get to school?

- a. By car, alone or with a parent **4p**
- b. By car, with other schoolmates **3p**
- c. By bus or public transport **2p**
- d. bicycle or on foot **1p**

### 2 What do you usually eat for lunch?

- a. Packaged food or fast food **4p**
- b. Meat or fish every day **3p**
- c. Home-cooked meals with some meat **2p**
- d. Vegetarian or local food **1p**

### 3 How much do you recycle at home?

- a. Never **4p**
- b. Sometimes **3p**
- c. Often **2p**
- d. Always **1p**

### 4 How many new things (clothes, toys, electronics) do you buy each month?

- a. Many **4p**
- b. Some **3p**
- c. Only when needed **2p**
- d. I prefer to reuse or swap **1p**

## Results

- **4-6 points**
- **Earth hero!**
- You have a small ecological footprint. Your habits help protect the planet.
- **7-10 points**
- **Friend of Nature**
- You're on the right path! With a few improvements you can do even better.
- **11-13 points**
- **Caution!**
- Some of your habits use many resources. Try to change something.
- **14-16 punti**
- **SOS Planet!**
- Your ecological footprint is very large. Take time to reflect on your daily choices.

# COASTAL ENVIRONMENT THREATS

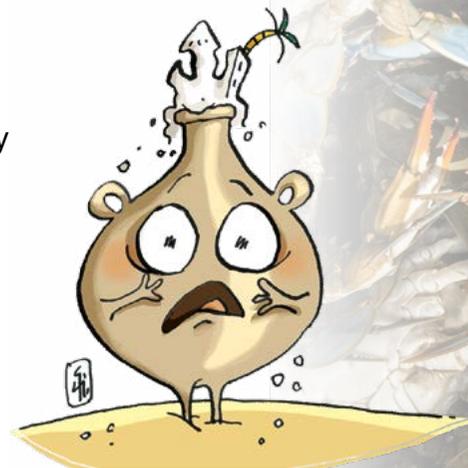
Coastal environments face numerous **threats**, as these habitats are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

We've already discussed global warming and some of its effects. One of the main effects is that, with the rise in temperatures, glaciers and polar ice caps are melting more rapidly, leading to a rise in sea levels. This results in coastal erosion, where the sea "devours" the beach, carrying away sand and soil, threatening both habitats and human infrastructure. This is referred to as **coastal retreat**, where the boundary between the land (beaches, houses near the sea) and the sea shifts inland.

Another problem caused by rising sea levels is **saltwater intrusion**. In estuaries, saltwater is pushed further inland, rising up rivers and infiltrating the underground aquifers.

When saltwater reaches areas where only freshwater should be, it makes it difficult to irrigate fields or access potable water. Finally, we must not overlook the impact of **alien species**. These are organisms that come from other places (but don't be fooled, they belong to planet Earth too) and, due to climate change, are finding it easier to thrive in environments where they previously couldn't survive. When they spread, they threaten local ecosystems by competing with native species and altering the balance of the ecosystem.

The most famous example is the **tiger mosquito** (*Aedes albopictus*), which has spread globally due to the accidental transport of its eggs through trade, such as the sale of used tires and ornamental plants. Recently, we've heard a lot about the **blue crab** (*Callinectes sapidus*), one of the most invasive alien species in the Mediterranean. It is currently threatening the entire local ecosystem as it is a voracious species, preying on numerous native fish species, particularly mussels, and causing havoc among clams, cockles, and oysters. The species is native to the Atlantic Ocean, living along the coasts of the entire American continent. It's likely that it arrived in the Mediterranean via ballast water from ships, one of the most common cases of invasion.



## KEYWORDS

**Native Species:** A species naturally present in a specific geographic area, where it either originated or arrived without human intervention. An example is the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*).

**Alien Species:** A species that is not native to a specific geographic area, introduced (either intentionally or accidentally) by humans. A species is considered an invasive alien species when its introduction or spread has become a threat to biodiversity. An example is the yellow-bellied slider (*Trachemys scripta spp.*) in Europe.



## EXPLORE

Browse CIRO (Climate Indicators for Italian Regions), the online database created to spread information and best practices on the path to climate neutrality: <https://italyforclimate.org/ciro-database-regioni-clima/>



## KEYWORDS

**Urban Heat Island Effect:** the temperature increase experienced when moving from rural areas to the city centre. Cities are hotter than the surrounding countryside because asphalt, concrete, and other materials absorb and retain heat, while vegetation is often scarce.



## ARE YOU CURIOUS?

Have you ever come across people who don't see climate change as a problem? These are the so-called **climate change deniers**, who deny, minimise, or question the existence of climate change or the role of human activities in causing it. We must remember that some industries, such as the fossil fuel sector, have strong interests in protecting their profits, which are based on highly polluting processes. Be cautious about believing everything you hear: information is an important tool, and one must know how to use it.

# LET'S CHANGE THE CLIMATE

“There is no Planet B,” “You’ve broken our lungs,” are just some of the slogans we’ve all seen displayed by people of all ages during the **climate strikes** that began in 2018, led by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. These strikes brought over seven million people, mostly young people, to the streets in more than one hundred countries to demand action against climate change.



Our summers are getting hotter, **extreme weather events** like heavy downpours are becoming violent and sudden, often leading to flooding, and the number of wildfires is on the rise. The increase in temperatures is causing the **polar ice caps** to melt, which in turn raises sea levels: by 2050, it is estimated that sea levels will rise by 30 cm!

We can see how our mountains now have limited snow and glaciers. Think of them as large “water batteries” made of snow and ice, which recharge during the winter. When summer arrives and it’s hot, these reserves slowly melt, releasing water into rivers and streams. But if the recharge is insufficient, it can increase the risk of **drought**.

It’s easy to see how these events **threaten** many **plant** and **animal species**, including humans, causing extinctions, forced migrations, and disruptions to ecosystems. But don’t despair; the final word hasn’t been said yet! In fact, the words we hear most often alongside climate change are **adaptation** and resilience. We’ve already heard about adaptation: in nature, when change occurs, species that do not adapt become extinct. Adaptation, therefore, is the ability to change in response to a new condition, such as the ongoing climate change to which we must adapt.

**Resilience**, on the other hand, is a more complex concept and represents the ability to face a difficulty or extreme event, returning to the initial state of balance. Think of a spring that is pulled and then returns to its original shape. Similarly, in the face of climate change, we must prepare ourselves to overcome the emergency and return to a state of normality. Being adaptable and resilient helps us better prepare to tackle the challenges of climate change!



Scientists have long been wondering how to fight and address climate change. In the infographic below, you can follow some of the main milestones.

 **1972:** The **UN Stockholm Conference**, the first major environmental summit, establishes the UN Environment Programme.

 **1988:** The **IPCC** (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) is established, a group of scientists tasked with studying climate change and providing scientific evidence and advice to governments.

 **1992:** The famous **Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit** takes place, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is created.

 **1997:** The **Kyoto Protocol** is signed, the first international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

 **2015:** The **Paris Agreement proposes** limiting the global temperature rise to below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels (before the Industrial Revolution) to prevent the most severe consequences of climate change. The EU committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. In 2021, this goal was increased to a 55% reduction by 2030 and climate neutrality (zero emissions) by 2050.

*Each year, the countries that have adopted the UNFCCC Framework Convention and are signatories of the Kyoto Protocol meet at the so-called Conferences of the Parties (COP) to monitor progress and assess the implementation of the Convention.*

 **Today,** the fight against climate change involves more and more actors, from governments and businesses to environmental movements like Fridays for Future. Policies have been introduced for a green shift towards energy transition, sustainable mobility, and the circular economy, but global emissions remain too high.



## IN ACTION

You are a special UN representative and have been asked to debunk some of the most common climate change myths or fake news. Match each of the following (1-3) with the correct solution (a-b) that highlights the reality of the situation.

**1** \_\_\_\_\_ **2** \_\_\_\_\_ **3** \_\_\_\_\_  
.....

- 1.** The climate has already changed throughout human history, it's not serious!
- 2.** But if it's cold in winter, why are we talking about global warming?
- 3.** There's no scientific consensus on global warming, and the IPCC is too alarmist.  
.....
- A.** Over 97% of scientists agree that global warming exists and is caused by humans.
- B.** A cold year has nothing to do with long-term trends (climate variations are measured over 30 years) that show global temperature increases.
- C.** The climate has always changed, but the current driving force is human activity, which operates on different timescales than natural processes.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE IMPOSSIBLE CHALLENGE

The **Guardians**, determined to defend the Planet, hurled themselves against these formidable adversaries. Wave unleashed **gigantic waves** to bring Salt back to the sea, Little Leaf evoked the **filtering power** of her leaves to purify the contaminated air and water, and, with her strong roots, tried to hold back the land, which risked being carried away by the floods. Sand erected **impenetrable shields** and, with patience, tried to **rebuild** the dunes that had been swept away by the enemies in action.

But these dark lords proved to be truly overbearing adversaries: the **fires** continued to rage, the land and water were **contaminated**, the air was still full of **unbreathable gases**. It was then that Little Leaf, while Wave and Sand held back the enemies, resorted to the power of vital sap to discover the identity of their real enemy: **Lord Thermon**. Now everything was clear: only by **joining the forces** of heroes and enemies could they defeat him!



# NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

When we talk about **Nature-based Solutions** (or NbS), we refer to actions inspired by nature, economically beneficial, and that produce environmental, social, and economic benefits. NbS mimic and use natural processes to “protect, **sustainably manage**, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, addressing societal challenges in an effective and adaptive way, while simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits” (Cohen-Shacham et al. PBES-IPCC - Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2016).

These actions increase **ecosystem services**, meaning the benefits that people derive from ecosystems (the concept is explained in detail in the next section). In summary, NbS can be actions or strategies supported by nature that contribute to creating a more resilient and adaptive society.

An example is green roofs and facades, implemented in many cities to absorb heat and help regulate the internal temperature of buildings during hot weather. The plants in these infrastructures, known as green infrastructure, absorb rainwater and reduce runoff.



NbS primarily address four key objectives:

- ✦ **create more sustainable cities**, making them greener, more livable and healthier, and improving human well-being;
- ✦ **restore damaged ecosystems**, helping nature regenerate and continue to provide its benefits;
- ✦ **tackle climate change**, making the environment more resilient to extreme events and reducing the amount of carbon in the atmosphere;
- ✦ **reduce the risks of natural disasters**, by harnessing the power of nature instead of relying on artificial technologies.



**Sustainable development** is a more respectful way of consuming and producing: we meet our current needs while also thinking about those who will come after us. Sustainable development is a way to reconcile ecology, economy, and social life, while taking into account the limits of our planet. This concept can be applied to a wide range of areas, which is why the United Nations has promoted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that you can see in the graphic below.



Watch the video by A. Marino, created for the educational kit “The river box, for a fluid teaching. Environmental Settings 2020” - IREN Territorial Committee of Turin, to discover what the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** is. Have you ever heard of it? [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1R5NvsWmkvTB7FCKKiRycUc\\_3HZI8LPBI/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1R5NvsWmkvTB7FCKKiRycUc_3HZI8LPBI/view)



## EXPLORE

At this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOQdRLV-VY>, you can watch an animated video on ES created in the European AlpEs project.

At this link <https://www.mite.gov.it/pagina/capitale-naturale-e-servizi-ecosistemici>, you can explore a page from the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security about ES and the concept of natural capital.



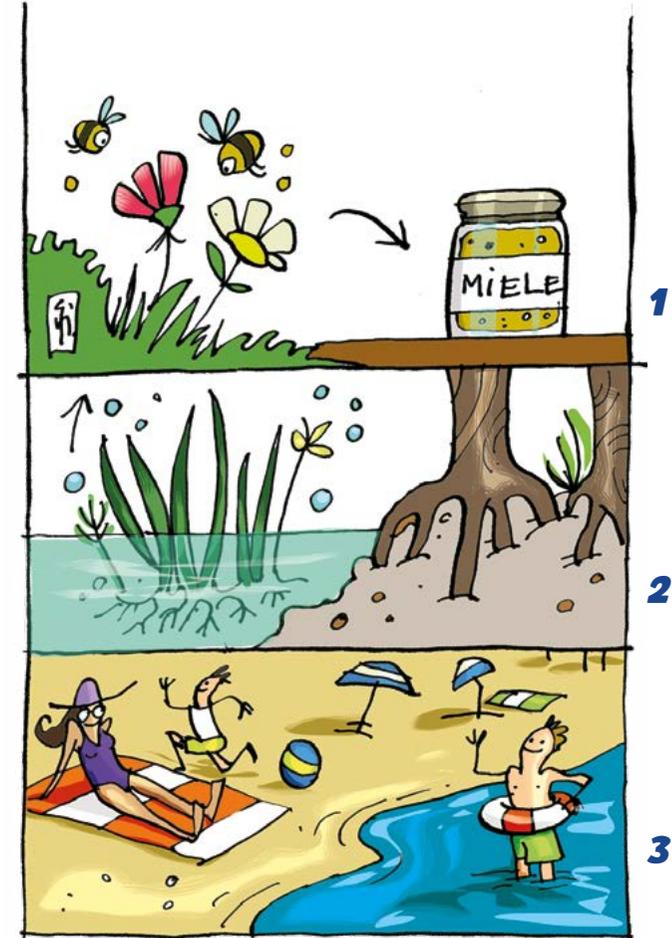
## ARE YOU CURIOUS?

The **CICES** (Common International Classification of Ecosystem Services), developed by the European Environment Agency (EEA), is a standardized classification system that categorizes ecosystem services. This system supports environmental accounting (i.e., the economic value of nature) and provides a common language for assessing the contributions of ecosystems to human well-being.

# ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

**Ecosystem services** (or ES) are the set of benefits that nature provides to humankind. Specifically, they are defined based on the ability of ecosystems and natural components to provide goods and services that directly or indirectly meet human needs and ensure the survival of all species. For all these important services that nature offers us, we have the responsibility to protect the environment and its biodiversity, which are often threatened by our own actions!

Since the 1990s, **Ecosystem Services** (ES) have been increasingly studied, leading to the development of a common international classification system: the **CICES (Common International Classification of Ecosystem Services)**, which groups ES into three main categories:



1. **Provisioning Services:** the products people obtain from ecosystems, such as food, fresh water, timber, fibers, and medicinal plants;
2. **Regulation and Maintenance Services:** the contributions to human well-being through the regulation and maintenance of the environment. These services help purify or moderate environmental conditions that would otherwise affect human health, safety, or comfort—such as climate stabilization, waste recycling, and water purification;
3. **Cultural Services:** opportunities for enjoyment, social bonding, and the preservation of traditions. These include recreational and aesthetic experiences like outdoor sports, leisure activities, fishing, and tourism, which support health by offering opportunities for reflection, spiritual enrichment, and educational development.



# MISSION ADRIATIC

Have you ever heard of the **Adriatic Sea**? It's the sea that borders our coasts and those of many other countries and, over the centuries, has been the stage for great adventures, thriving trade, and epic battles. In this section, we want to take you on a short journey through the Adriatic in four coastal areas where the activities of our **Interreg Italy-Croatia ACTION project** are being implemented, which we'll explore in more detail in the next chapter.

On the map below, you can see the so-called **"pilot areas"** where project activities are carried out using some of the nature-based solutions we've studied in previous paragraphs to tackle climate change! In each of these areas, a sort of small-scale project is carried out. Its evolution and effectiveness are studied, and like a pilot, this analysis will guide future projects to achieve larger goals and share good practices. Now that you've learned about the importance of coastal environments, their biodiversity, and why it's essential to protect nature, you're ready to dive into this little journey!



## LEGEND OF PILOT PROJECT AREAS

1. Po River Delta
2. Neretva River Delta
3. Regional Natural Park of Coastal Dunes
4. Vransko Lake Nature Park



## IN ACTION

You are a European official and have been asked to list the issues in the four pilot areas of the ACTION project. **Highlight what might be the main threats in the list below and find out if you were right by reading the next pages:**

- ✦ poor water quality;
- ✦ decrease in biodiversity;
- ✦ saltwater intrusion;
- ✦ extreme weather events;
- ✦ coastal erosion;
- ✦ pollution.

*Coast type: flat and sandy*  
*Dimensions: length approx. 800 km*  
*width from 90 to 220 km*  
*Extent: between 40° and 46° N latitude*  
*between 12° and 20° E longitude*  
*Surface area: approx. 132,000 km<sup>2</sup>*  
*Maximum depth: approx. 1,220 m*

## PO DELTA

In Italy, the Po Delta Park in Emilia-Romagna protects the southern part of the Po River delta, including its Goro and Volano branches. This historical delta features the mouths of rivers flowing down from the Romagnolo Apennines, which once formed vast marshes within the larger delta. The park embraces environments rich in biodiversity thanks to its unique geographical location and an unusual concentration of different habitats: marine coasts, beaches, and dunes; lagoons and brackish valleys; freshwater marshes and flooded meadows; and broadleaf forests and pine woods.

### Context

North of Ravenna, a municipality within the **Po Delta Park**, the **Lamone River flows** into the Adriatic Sea. Its mouth lies within the Delta itself. The Lamone's current mouth is a result of significant land reclamation and hydraulic engineering works carried out in the last centuries. Luckily, these efforts preserved some crucial peripheral wetlands, such as **Punte Alberete**, **Valle Mandriole**, and **Bardello**. However, the river's diversion from its main course and the drastic reduction of its flooded area (from approximately 8,000 hectares down to about 550 today) have caused several issues: **water quality has declined**, and many **plant and animal species have vanished**.

### ACTION to the rescue

Our ACTION project carries out a series of activities in the Po Delta area aimed especially at improving **water resource management**, including:

- ✦ **studying** how to **reconnect** the river with wetlands, so that the waters of the Lamone River and nearby areas can be linked again, allowing their natural functioning. Even if we cannot undo what humans have built artificially, we can propose studies to restore the roles and functions of forests, wetlands, and salt meadows, so they can "defend themselves" and survive climate pressures;
- ✦ **creating** freshwater "**reserves**" by setting up areas to collect



*Detail of Salicornia*

Consequently, these areas have become more vulnerable to the impacts of **climate change**. These include rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion into the river mouth, and increasingly frequent extreme weather events like heatwaves, droughts, floods, and storm surges.

Currently, various public and private entities, including the Municipality of Ravenna, the Park Authority, the Forest Carabinieri, the Region, and the Land Reclamation Consortium, are working together. Their goal is to find solutions to protect these invaluable places and restore their natural characteristics as much as possible.

excess water (such as floodwaters), functioning like large "bottles". These reserves can be useful during droughts or can protect certain habitats by holding back saltwater advancing from the sea;

- ✦ **opening the Climate Adaptation Centre (CLAC)**, both online and physically in Ravenna—a place where everyone can learn about the Park's territory, discover the animals and plants that inhabit it, and understand how climate change is affecting them;
- ✦ **joining** forces for Nature by creating partnerships among people with different roles and skills to develop projects that protect this unique territory. Together, we can achieve even more!



## EXPLORE

The **Po Delta Park** is part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserves under the MaB programme, which promotes local and international strategies for sustainable development, balancing human progress with nature and biodiversity conservation. The park represents the harmony between land and water, with a mosaic of landscapes: flooded woods, pine forests, and forests alternating with freshwater and saltwater wetlands. Explore the park at English website <https://www.parks.it/parco.delta.po.er/Eindex.php>



## KEYWORDS

**Mouth:** the part where a river ends on the coast, which can take two forms: a delta or an estuary. A river mouth is an ecologically important area, as it is where the river's freshwater meets the sea's saltwater, creating a unique ecosystem home to many species, some of which are found nowhere else.

**Water resource management:** controlling and using water in the best possible way, to avoid damage to people and property (such as floods), and to ensure that water is available and useful for everyone, without waste.



# VRANSKO LAKE NATURAL PARK

Vransko Lake Natural Park includes the largest natural lake in Croatia, a uniquely protected area located along the Dalmatian coast.

The bottom of this extraordinary lake lies below sea level, while its water surface is above sea level—a characteristic known as a crypto-depression, making it a fascinating and ecologically significant site.

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## Context

Lake Vransko serves as a resting, feeding, and nesting place for a wide variety of birds, including herons, ibises, waders, passerines, birds of prey, as well as many coots and duck species. The northwestern part, in particular, is an **ornithological reserve**, a favorite destination for birdwatchers who love to observe birds in their natural habitat using binoculars. The lake's **fish fauna**—the various fish species inhabiting the lake—is also of notable interest.

The park as a whole consists mainly of wetlands, precious ecosystems that not only support exceptional biodiversity but also provide vital **ecosystem services**, such as carbon capture and climate regulation, playing a concrete role in the fight against climate change. However, when these habitats are degraded, they lose their ability to provide these benefits.

That's why ecosystem restoration plays a crucial role: regenerating natural environments also means restoring the services they offer, reducing reliance on artificial solutions and constant human intervention and maintenance.



## ACTION to the rescue

Vransko Lake Natural Park was selected for the ACTION project to implement a **habitat restoration plan** that will define objectives and target species for the proper management of the lake. In this context, habitat restoration is a clear example of a **Nature-based Solution**. A shared plan is the ideal and essential tool to guide managers and policymakers in the recovery of wetlands, identifying key values, threats, and solutions to restore them, thereby increasing the effectiveness of restoration actions.

In particular, the plan for this area:

- ✦ defines the **ideal state** of this specific ecosystem, which should be the goal to increase biodiversity, improve water quality, and enhance flood control;
- ✦ **identifies the types** of species and the interactions between them necessary for the proper functioning of a wetland like this;
- ✦ **assesses the current state** and the necessary actions to approach the desired ideal;
- ✦ lists and defines the actions to be taken in the restoration plan;
- ✦ **implements restoration** actions in close connection with monitoring activities, which allow adjustments to be made based on the current effects of climate change.



## KEYWORDS

**Ornithological reserve:** a protected area specifically managed with the primary goal of conserving and preserving wild bird populations and their habitats.

**Target species:** in research and project activities, this refers to a specific species (or group of species) of plant, animal, fungus, or other organism that scientists or stakeholders choose to focus on. The word "target" comes from English and means "aim" or "goal."

**Monitoring:** the collection of qualitative and quantitative data (such as numbers and descriptions), conducted according to a standard procedure defined by specific "rules" over a set period of time. It is essential for environmental study, as it provides information on variations compared to the desired state, measures the success of management and conservation actions, and detects the effects of changes and disturbances.



## EXPLORE

Visit the English website <https://www.pp-vransko-jezero.hr/en/> to discover the park.

# NERETVA DELTA

The Neretva River is one of the coldest rivers in the world, renowned for its crystal-clear waters and the pristine natural environment surrounding it. It originates in the southwestern region of Bosnia and Herzegovina and flows through breathtaking landscapes before emptying into the Adriatic Sea near the Croatian city of Ploče.

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## Context

The Neretva Delta includes six **nature reserves**, spans 20,000 hectares, and is recognized as a site of international importance by the Ramsar Convention on **Wetlands**. However, during flood periods, it becomes one of the **most polluted areas** in the city of Ploče due to waste carried along the river. Agricultural activity in the area, along with fishing, tourism, and other local economic activities, are already experiencing the effects of climate change—for example, increased soil salinity, rising temperatures with heatwaves, and fluctuations in precipitation.

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## ACTION to the rescue

Due to climate change, cities are heating up at an alarming rate, creating what is known as the **urban heat island effect** (discussed in the previous chapter). This is precisely what is happening in the river city of Ploče, which has been selected for the ACTION project to carry out initiatives aimed at reducing this effect and raising awareness about the impacts of climate change in three strategic intervention zones:

- ✦ **at the river mouth**, an eco-action is carried out to clean the land and water surface of the area. Then, activities are organized with citizens—especially young people—to raise awareness about environmental protection and the importance of combating invasive species.



- ✦ **at the city entrance**, a strategic location with high pedestrian traffic, citrus gardens are created to assess the resilience of certain plant species under extreme conditions caused by climate change.
- ✦ **on the city beach**, facilities are installed to reduce pollution during visitors' stays and to raise awareness of the environmental impact of human activities. Becoming more aware is the first major step in learning how to protect nature!



## EXPLORE

The **Neretva Delta** is a complex of wetlands; the riverbanks of the Neretva and its tributaries are rich in reeds and other typical riparian vegetation. The river mouth features extensive lagoons, shallow sandy bays, low shores, sandbanks, and salt marshes. The reclaimed land is covered with large arable fields and a well-developed network of irrigation canals. Numerous birds live here, including the largest populations of Eurasian bittern and spotted crane. Visit the website <https://narenta.ch/it/narenta-it/> to discover the Neretva River and its features.



## ARE YOU CURIOUS?

When we talk about environmental threats, pollution often comes to mind first. Pollution can introduce chemicals, plastics, or heavy metals into nature, degrading water quality and negatively impacting living organisms and ecosystems, as well as human health.

For instance, fertilizers used in agriculture can lead to **eutrophication**, a phenomenon caused by an excess of nutrients in the water, which leads to algal blooms and a drop in oxygen levels. Or, heavy metals and toxic substances released by industry can **poison** aquatic organisms, accumulate inside them, or spread through the food chain. Lastly, **plastic waste** is now a well-known cause of suffocation for many marine species, such as turtles and fish.

Over time, this waste breaks down into tiny fragments (microplastics) that can be ingested by marine organisms, causing harm to them and potentially to humans who consume them.

# REGIONAL NATURAL PARK "COASTAL DUNES FROM TORRE CANNE TO TORRE S. LEONARDO"

The Park is a protected natural area nestled in the landscape of the Plain of Monumental Olive Trees of Apulia. It stretches along the inlet between the promontories of Torre Canne and Torre San Leonardo, bordered by a dune ridge that separates the beach from the wetland areas behind it. From here, the territory extends inland into agricultural landscapes characterized by centuries-old olive groves.

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## Context

The Park spans approximately eight kilometers along the Adriatic coast, crossing coastal dunes and Mediterranean scrubland, and then advancing inland, dominated by expanses of ancient olive trees. Along the coast are watchtowers built during the Aragonese era to monitor the coastline for Saracen raids and to raise alarms to inland settlements. The entire plain of monumental olive trees is dotted with historic masserias (farmsteads), dating from the 16th to 18th centuries, some of which contain hypogean oil mills (underground olive presses) from Roman and medieval times. This

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## ACTION to the rescue

In the Coastal Dunes Park, our project aims to **strengthen the capacity of land managers** to tackle the impacts of climate change on dune ecosystems.

Planned activities include:

- ✦ **environmental monitoring**, risk and threat assessment, and analysis of the benefits that nature provides—such as storm surge protection and rich biodiversity;



*Detail of Prickly Juniper*

environment represents a cultural landscape of high archaeological and naturalistic value. The area is a protected natural habitat rich in biodiversity, conserving a wide variety of ecosystems—among the most threatened by climate change and rising sea levels. These are extremely fragile environments, located in a transition zone between land and sea. Coastal dunes, in particular, serve as important natural barriers that protect the shoreline from erosion and prevent saltwater from advancing inland.

- ✦ **community engagement** to collaboratively identify the best techniques for developing **mitigation and adaptation strategies** for dune systems in the face of climate change. The process includes in-person meetings with policymakers and stakeholders of the protected area, the development of an action plan, and the submission of a preliminary plan to local municipalities to explore future funding opportunities and potential improvements. Finally, **guidelines** are created to share and transfer the results and suggestions collected through the project to other managing authorities as well.



## KEYWORDS

**Coastal dune:** Natural sand formations found along coastlines, shaped by wind and waves. They are often home to many specialized plant and animal species that thrive in extreme conditions such as high salinity and water scarcity. An example is the sea daffodil (*Pancratium maritimum*).

**Mediterranean scrub:** An ecosystem especially rich in biodiversity, adapted to drought conditions typical of Mediterranean climates, with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Examples of typical species include myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), and olive trees (*Olea europaea*).

**Mitigation and adaptation planning:** A set of sustainable strategies and targeted actions to address climate change, reduce its risks (mitigation), and learn to cope with its now inevitable effects (adaptation). These plans are essential to protect both the environment and human health.



## EXPLORE

Visit the English website <https://www.parcoduneco-stiere.it/eng/index.php> to discover the park



## ARE YOU CURIOUS?

Did you know that **coastal dunes act as natural climate shields**? By absorbing storm energy, they reduce coastal erosion. Dunes aren't static; they can shift over time due to wind and waves, constantly reshaping the coastline. However, humans have learned that some plants, like the large-fruited juniper (*Juniperus oxycedrus subsp. macrocarpa*), can help stabilize dunes by trapping sand with their root systems.

## CHAPTER 4

# UNITY IS STRENGTH

So, the Guardians also summoned Salt, Wind of Chaos, and Flame, and **together** they **defeated** Lord Thermon and restored the **climate balance**:

Wave **cooled** the oceans and **guided** the now disoriented currents back to their ancient routes; Little Leaf restored balance to the air and land by **increasing oxygen** and **eliminating** the toxic substances that were poisoning them;

Sand and Salt **created** coral reefs and dunes to defend the coasts; Flame **generated** clean energy with the force of her fire and **renewed** numerous areas where new plants sprouted. Finally, Wind of Chaos, who had now learned to control his fury, **brought cool winds**, refreshing rains, and **dissipated** the storms.

The Alliance of the Guardians of Nature, united with their former enemies, thus became the legendary **Union of the Planet**, which watched forever over the balance of the elements of our beloved Earth!



# EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Do you know the difference? Europe is a geographical region, a continent made up of numerous countries, the only continent entirely located in the Northern Hemisphere. Among these territories, 27 have decided to belong to a common space called the **European Union (EU)**.

The EU is a collaboration among countries—called Member States—that was born from the desire to build a space of **brotherhood, free from hunger and war**. Its motto, “United in Diversity” captures the idea of people across Europe coming together—of all ages—to live and **work in harmony**.

The EU has only existed for a few decades and has changed names over time. But the idea behind its creation has roots that go back centuries. The **timeline** beside this text will guide you through some of the key events that shaped the EU we know today.



The EU does not only affect the daily lives of individual European citizens, but also plays an important role around the world. Let’s try to imagine the EU as a big puzzle made up of intertwined stories, cultures, traditions, and different needs. Building this puzzle isn’t easy! In the same way, the EU joins forces to **invest** in many areas: **education**, the **environment**, **research** into new **technologies**, **agriculture**, **humanitarian aid**, and more. If we look closely, we can see the **EU** at work **around us**. Can you think of any examples in your own area?



**09**  
may **INTERNATIONAL DAY**

On **May 9**, 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed a new form of cooperation among European countries to preserve peace. This is why, every year on this day, we celebrate **#EuropeDay**. Check the event calendar of your **municipality**, **local parks**, or **museums** to see if they are organizing anything! Why not suggest a **Europe-themed day** at your school?

**EXPLORE**

Visit the official website to listen to the **European anthem**:  
[https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-anthem\\_hr](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-anthem_hr)



## A GREENER EUROPE

Who doesn't enjoy tasting delicious food or taking walks through breathtaking landscapes? The air, water, energy, and raw materials on our planet are essential for life and must not be wasted. Since these elements do not stop at borders, countries **must cooperate** to take care of the environment.

The EU has always worked to offer all of us a **healthy natural environment**, a "home" to live in and is one of the main promoters in the fight against climate change, always at the forefront in **reducing greenhouse gas emissions**.

The timeline below highlights some important dates related to European nature laws, regulations, and directives, with a short explanation.

**2024:** The **Nature Restoration Law** is the first nature law proposed and adopted by the European continent to enable the recovery of a diverse and resilient natural environment. It contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation and helps meet international commitments.

**2019 - 2020:** The **European Green Deal** outlines an inclusive and sustainable growth strategy to strengthen the European economy and improve people's health and quality of life. It acts as an EU Biodiversity Strategy, aiming to protect and restore biodiversity, including ecosystems.

**1979 - 1992:** The nature directives: "**Birds**" **Directive 79/409/EEC** (updated as **Directive 2009/147/EC**) lists bird species at risk of extinction and their nesting, resting, and wintering habitats. "**Habitats**" **Directive 92/43/EEC** promotes biodiversity conservation by protecting various endangered habitats and species. It established **Natura 2000**, a network of areas created by the EU to ensure the conservation of biodiversity, focusing on endangered species and habitats.

**2021: Regulation (EU) 2021/1119** is the first EU climate law. With this law, Europe commits in writing to becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, meaning it will produce no more greenhouse gases than the environment can absorb, in line with the objectives set in the European Green Deal.



### EXPLORE

Visit the European Commission's website to learn more about its environmental protection efforts:

[https://commission.europa.eu/energy-climate-change-environment\\_hr](https://commission.europa.eu/energy-climate-change-environment_hr)

Look through the various topics to find the ones that interest you most.



### ARE YOU CURIOUS?

Since 2010, Italy also has a **national biodiversity strategy**, structured around three themes:

- ✦ Biodiversity and ecosystem services
- ✦ Biodiversity and climate change
- ✦ Biodiversity and economic policies.

The strategy, developed in line with international commitments, focuses on concrete actions to protect the variety of species, habitats, and ecosystems in Italy, thus helping to counter the loss of biodiversity.

# COOPERATION BETWEEN REGIONS AND THE ACTION PROJECT

The EU has created—and continues to create—programmes to fund projects, some of which are specifically aimed at regions and local operators, the beating heart of the European economy. By working together as “partners,” regions can share their ideas, knowledge, and resources. The EU carefully checks how each project is carried out and ensures that spending is transparent and accountable. If you’re reading this, it’s thanks to European funding!

Interreg



Co-funded by  
the European Union

Italy – Croatia

ACTION

## NAME:

Interreg Italy-Croatia ACTION -  
*Increasing coastal ecosystem resilience to  
climate change.*

## DURATION:

From 01.04.2024 to 30.09.2026.

## CHALLENGES: joining forces to...

- ✦ identify threats caused by climate change
- ✦ assess the risks facing the project areas
- ✦ raise awareness among as many people as possible

## SUPERPOWER: developing a Joint Action Plan to...

- ✦ promote adaptation to climate change and disaster risk prevention;
- ✦ encourage behaviours that make coastal areas more resilient to the effects of climate change;
- ✦ use nature-based solutions;
- ✦ preserve the natural and cultural heritage in the project’s pilot areas, as an example for others;
- ✦ increase the knowledge of local communities and site managers.

## HOW TO GROW THE SUPERPOWER:

The **Interreg VI-A Italy-Croatia 2021-2027** Programme funds projects between the regions of these two EU Member States facing the Adriatic Sea, with the goal of promoting cooperation in various sectors, including the environment.



## EXPLORE

Visit the project website (in English) to learn more: <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/action>



## IN ACTION

Now that you’ve reached the end, what do you remember about this project? Complete the following short text with your classmates:

The Interreg Italy-Croatia  
A \_\_\_\_\_ project promotes  
joint actions to address the  
ongoing c\_\_\_\_\_  
c\_\_\_\_\_. The project  
is inspired by N\_\_\_\_\_  
-b\_\_\_\_\_ s\_\_\_\_\_  
to develop a shared action plan.  
The project’s pilot areas are \_  
(two in Italy and two in Croatia),  
namely the Po D\_\_\_\_\_,  
the N\_\_\_\_\_ Delta,  
the Regional Natural Park of  
C\_\_\_\_\_ D\_\_\_\_\_  
from Torre Canne to Torre  
S. Leonardo, and the  
V\_\_\_\_\_ Lake Natural  
Park.

**THIS BOOKLET BELONGS TO:**

**ADDRESS:**

**SCHOOL:**

**CLASS:**

