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Wetland Contracts as Sustainable Governance Tools: A Review of the Output of the Interreg Project CREW "Coordinated Wetland Management in Italy-Croatia Cross Border Region"

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Abstract: Wetlands are complex ecosystems, considered among the most productive environments in the world. They contain important biodiversity hotspots, provide the resources on which countless plant and animal species depend and perform important environmental and economic functions. Wetlands reduce flooding events, improve water quality and represent a valuable cultural and natural heritage. The European Directive (2000/60/EC) requires fostering an integrated approach to wetland management through collaborative governance processes. The Wetland Contract is a tool that has been developed and implemented in order to promote the sustainable governance of water systems. Among the Mediterranean countries, Italy and Croatia count on a rich variety of coastal wetlands that, together with the plants and animals that inhabit and pass through them, constitute an extremely valuable natural heritage. This paper presents and discusses the results of the Interreg Project CREW that, between 2018–2021, contributed to the drafting of seven new Wetland Contracts. Through a comparative reading, the aim is to understand, on the one hand, how the different Contracts have responded individually to a shared programme based on European requirements; on the other hand, the aim is also to bring similar experiences closer together to assess their overall potential on an international scale. The article shows how the constant exchange between CREW partners and the continuous updating on ongoing activities, methodologies and proposed solutions in the seven target areas facilitated the construction of a shared cross-border strategy for wetland governance. The comparison also highlights some principles considered fundamental by all partners (protection and enhancement; integrated governance; awareness-raising and learning) that have served the construction of a transnational Observatory, aimed at monitoring, sharing practices and able to guide the formation of future Wetland Contracts.

Keywords: wetlands; Interreg Italy-Croatia; governance; biodiversity; protection; participation

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, the scientific interest and the public debate have increasingly focused on the status and health of water bodies such as rivers, deltas and wetlands, among others [1]. This increasingly transversal interest, shared by local authorities, private economic sectors, research institutes and civil society, has guided and promoted institutional and innovative forms of management of these environments which are crucial for the survival of all species [2]. In particular, coastal wetlands constitute a key transitional environment, central to planetary biodiversity. For example, they play a leading role in mitigating some of the effects of climate change and storing CO_2 [3].

Coastal wetlands face several challenges in contemporary territories: productive systems causing water consumption and water and soil pollution; strong urbanisation and population growth (often associated with undeveloped or non-existent public sewage systems) causing habitat loss and fragmentation; changing global climate patterns; unsustainable tourism, particularly during the summer season; introduction of invasive exotic

species and eutrophication. Moreover, rivers and wetlands are rarely considered in territorial development strategies, so much so that different, often contradictory levels of planning tend to overlap on them, denoting poor institutional coordination.

This condition has led to the need to create special tools for the governance and management of wetlands. In this respect, the Ramsar sites [4] in the Mediterranean region have made great progress with the development of management plans and tools for the protection and preservation of coastal ecosystems and the related socio-economic systems. In particular, Wetland Contracts and River Contracts [5] have been developed and implemented to promote the sustainable governance of water bodies. These tools are based on voluntary agreements that promote, in accordance with EU strategies, the integrated management of water resources and the cross-border coordination of governance processes.

The Interreg project *CREW-Coordinated wetland management in Italy-Croatia cross border region* [6] is part of a string of European projects that aim to test the Wetland Contract as a multi-level tool in coastal areas (among the other projects, see for example WETNET, funded by the Interreg MED programme). The main goal of CREW was to develop seven new Wetland Contracts in selected target areas located along the Adriatic Sea coast.

One year after the signature of the CREW Contracts, this article aims to reflect in comparative terms on the different Action Plans proposed in the seven target areas, on the convergence of values and specificities that guided the drafting of the operational documents. It is worth mentioning that the signing of the Wetland Contracts is not only the conclusion of a participatory process, but also (and above all) the beginning of a subsequent implementation phase, which is still ongoing in all target areas.

For this reason, the article does not want and cannot give a quantifiable account of how the actions have developed and concluded, as CREW foresees another 3 years of activities. Instead, the article discusses the state of the art of Action Plans in the light of the partnership experience and the shared project.

How, despite the fact that the projects refer to an established Wetland Contract methodology, can different contexts influence the process? How do the different Action Plans reflect social, economic and political differences? On the other hand, what are, despite different backgrounds, the convergences, trends and challenges common to the different territories?

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 traces the recent history of the 'Wetland Contract' and the implementations undertaken in different countries, highlighting differences and common aspects; Section 3 describes the specific objectives of the CREW project; Section 4 describes the network of subjects related to the project and the main characteristics of the target areas; Section 5 presents the criteria for the proposed comparison of the Action Plans and highlights the common trends emerging from this very comparison. Section 6 highlight how the similarities emerging from the Action Plans respond to CREW's strategic objectives and represent a resource for overcoming the challenges related to participatory processes.

2. Evolution of the Wetland Contract Tool

In recent years, many Mediterranean coastal territories have taken advantage of the trend to address environmental governance of water resources with River Contracts [7,8]. The process is developed through a path leading to the definition of a Contract whose fundamental elements are as follows: the sharing of a clear objective; the signing of an agreement among the key stakeholders based on this shared objective; the search for sponsors willing to provide the necessary resources to achieve the set objective.

Already tested mainly in France, Belgium, Spain and Italy, the River Contract is a methodology for water management consistent with the EU Environment policy (Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, River Basin Management Plan), and based on the active engagement of the main stakeholders in participatory planning. The Contract represents a formal agreement through which public and private territorial actors voluntarily commit themselves to realising strategies and projects in which the criteria of public utility, private economic return, social value and environmental sustainability are equally taken

into account. The River Contract tool was born in France in the early 1980s (Contrat de Rivière), with the intervention of a national steering act [9] (Ministère de l'environnement et du cadre de vie, 1981). Water policy in France has been based on watershed management since 1964 and, within this context, the River Contract extends the so-called "operations clean rivers" [10]. River Contracts are voluntary programmes lasting 5 to 7 years, developed across the whole watershed and whose main objective is to fight pollution. They also aim to reduce flooding and improve the management of banks and structures (dams, locks, etc.). At the end of 2008, there were nearly 200 of them—including a dozen cross-border areas (Spain, Belgium, Switzerland)—at various stages of implementation. At the European level, the community texts give a central place to consultation, imposing a genuine contractual status on this type of tool.

In Belgium, River Contracts have been successfully developed in the Walloon Region for more than 20 years. Following the first Walloon experiences and the enthusiasm aroused among the stakeholders in the water sector, an official recognition of the approach was formalised by the Ministerial Circular of 18 March 1993 on the conditions of acceptability and methods of elaboration of River Contracts in the Walloon Region. From now on, River Contracts are part of the Walloon water policy. To date, 89% of the territory is covered by these River Contracts. Inspired by the French model, the Walloon approach favours a participatory approach within a community of users who commit to the development and implementation of an Action Plan for the restoration and management of rivers and watersheds [11].

In Spain, the basic law regulating water management is the Water Act of 1985, adapted in 2003 to the European WFD. The recently published Green Book on Governance (March 2020) also supports this methodology to promote the co-responsibility of society in water management through the implementation of at least one River Contract pilot experience in each River Basin District [12]. The River Contract for the Matarraña River basin was first implemented in Spain in 2011 and covers three autonomous communities and 27 municipalities within the Ebro River basin demarcation.

In Italy, River Contracts have been started since 2000 following different institutional paths, in the framework of community programmes and local and regional initiatives. Indeed, although the mentioned experiences are developing in the coherent framework of EU legislation, according to a preliminary survey on the European River Contracts currently in progress, the process of subscribing a River Contract is not codified by the legislation, but follows a semi-codified procedure. This consists of the description of environmental criticalities, the development of territorial policies, a medium- and long-term strategic scenario and an Action Plan. For example, the Italian National Board of River Contracts with the participation of the Ministry of Environment and ISPRA (Superior Institute for Environmental Protection and Research) defined the "Guidelines for the recognition and quality criteria of River Contracts at national and regional level" and the Legislative Decree 152/2006 in art. 68 bis identified the River Contract as a tool for the implementation of the River Basin Management Plan.

The common approach of Wetland Contracts aims to overcome the critical issues arising from the high fragmentation in wetlands management, where conservation approaches and objectives are intertwined and overlapping, putting sustainable development and biodiversity conservation at risk [13]. By promoting a multi-level governance approach [14], the tool aims to ensure greater coordination among stakeholders and decision-makers in order to limit and absorb the growing conflicts between different issues: preservation and economic activities (agriculture, aquaculture, tourism), enhancement of natural heritage and protection of environmental values and functions. Furthermore, given the 'hydro-social' dimension of wetlands [15], (understood as the "spatial configuration of people, institutions, water flows, hydraulic technologies and biophysical environment that revolve around water management"), it is important, also in the light of now-established international provisions and recommendations (first of all, the Water Framework Directive, but even before that, the Ramsar Convention and the Barcelona Convention), to translate

participatory practice within and in synergy with the decision-making model. This makes it possible not only to include actors but also to activate important empowerment actions during the implementation phase [16].

3. Objectives

The chapter presents the specific objectives of the Interreg Project CREW "Coordinated Wetland Management in Italy-Croatia cross border region" and the description of the study areas.

The main objective of CREW was the development of seven Wetland Contracts, one per study area. The aim was also to put them in contact in order to compare the different Action Plans as a final output of the processes that led to the signing of the Contracts (Figure 1). This meant creating a network of multi-level governance tools [17–19] with the aim of managing local fragilities and opportunities in an integrated, collaborative and sustainable manner. The Contracts had to be consistent with the ICMZ principles for sustainable management and use of coastal zones [20] and consider European expectations for the protection of wetlands. These include landscape and environmental protection of the territory and the monitoring of the ecosystems to ensure their conservation. On the other hand, there are objectives that we can define as strategic: their aim is to identify shared priorities for a cross-border strategy for wetland management that can be adopted by all partners.

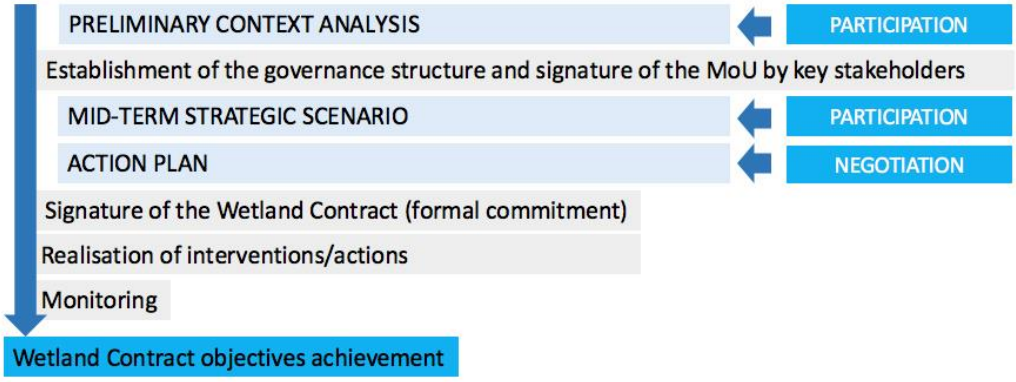

Figure 1. Within the broader process leading to the signing of a Wetland Contract, the article proposes a comparative critical reading of the Action Plans implemented for the 7 CREW Interreg target areas in order to identify commonalities and trends.

The specific objectives of the CREW project are as follows:

1. To protect the biodiversity of Italian and Croatian coastal wetlands through the implementation of a coordinated methodology for wetland management (Wetland Contract). By enhancing the implementation of an integrated tool, the project ensures greater coordination between stakeholders and decision-makers, limiting and reducing the occurrence of conflicts between conservation issues and economic activities, and favouring the achievement of long-term sustainable results;
2. To improve awareness of the value of wetland ecosystems among policymakers, managers, professionals and the general public, and to strengthen their active engagement in territorial governance;
3. To share a cross-border wetland management strategy to strengthen synergies between Italian and Croatian coastal wetlands;
4. To create a cross-border Observatory to monitor best practices and data on Italian and Croatian coastal wetlands.

4. The Partnership and Target Areas

The CREW project partners were carefully selected to include representatives of the main authorities and stakeholders working in the field of environmental protection in Italy and Croatia (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pilot areas and partners: 1—Università Iuav di Venezia (VL); 2—Comunità Riviera Friulana (ML); 3—Patto Territoriale Nord Barese Ofantino (OR); 4—Comune di San Benedetto del Tronto (SR); 5—Natura Histrica. Public Institution for the Management of Protected Areas in Istria County (RP); 6—Natura Jadera. Public Institution for the Management of Protected Areas in Zadar County (VM); 7—Public Institution for the Management of Protected Natural Areas of Dubrovnik—Neretva County (DN); 8—Università degli Studi di Camerino.

In particular, the CREW partnership included three Croatian public institutions responsible for the protection and management of protected areas (Natura Histrica in Istria County; Natura Jadera in Zadar County and Natural Areas of Dubrovnik in Neretva County). The partnership also included three Italian local authorities belonging to different geographical scales (Comunità Riviera Friulana; Municipality of San Benedetto del Tronto; Patto Territoriale Nord Barese Ofantino); two university institutions (Università Iuav di Venezia; Università degli Studi di Camerino). All partners, with the exception of the University of Camerino, identified a coastal wetland area of their interest and competence as a pilot area for the experimentation of participatory processes that should have led to the signing of Wetland Area Contracts.

The varied and articulated composition of the partnership asked for a continuous exchange of information, as each partner brought its own national regulations, stakeholders and expertise to the project: the academic partners contributed to the construction and monitoring of the shared methodology, thanks also to the involvement of external experts in participatory processes, and the reference to territorial governance tools such as River Contracts; the Italian partners guided the institutional procedures and provided useful indications in terms of coordination among the different institutional levels variously involved in the management of wetlands and protected areas; the Croatian partners, bearers of direct experience in the management and promotion of protected areas, contributed to

the construction of methodologies and procedures suitable for the involvement of local communities and active citizenship, the main users of the areas in question [21].

The wetlands considered by the CREW project are very diverse in terms of size, morphology and function. They are all vulnerable and fragile areas in need of protection at different levels: biodiversity, water quality, ecosystem services, etc. These areas are characterised not only by biodiversity and the presence of diverse flora and fauna habitats, but also by the combination of natural heritage with the presence of a stratified social and economic culture that has deposited artefacts, food culture, skills and practices over the centuries. As a double frontier of water and land, these territories are subject to formal and informal practices and are therefore highly regulated.

There are seven Pilot Areas represented in the CREW project, four in Italy and three in Croatia, referred to here as follows:

1. VL—Northern Lagoon of Venice (Iuav University);
2. ML—Lagoon of Marano (Comunità Riviera Friulana);
3. OR—Ofanto River (Patto Territoriale Nord Barese Ofantino);
4. SR—Natural Regional Reserve of Sentina (Comune di San Benedetto del Tronto);
5. RP—Special Ornithological Reserve of Palud (Natura Histrica);
6. VM—Veliko i Malo blato (Natura Jadera);
7. DN—Protected Natural Areas of Dubrovnik-Neretva (Dubrovnik-Neretva County).

4.1. Geo-Morphology, Natural and Cultural Heritages

The different wetlands share many of the typical morphological characteristics typical of these environments: they are coastal stretches of water of moderate depth, with brackish waters whose salinity varies with the tides and which, in recent years, have suffered from erosion and degradation phenomena due partly to anthropic pressures and partly to the effects of climate change [22,23]. Beyond these geo-morphological characteristics, however, the seven target areas of the CREW project differ profoundly, especially in terms of recent transformations, governance tools, bodies in charge of their care and accessibility to the public.

In order of size, LV, DN and ML, the lagoons and the river delta are the largest pilot areas: LV is about 220 km^2, DN 200 km^2, and ML 160 km^2. OR is 967.40 km^2, a river basin, with an interregional dimension. Then, there are the protected areas as bird reserves, VM of 4.61 km^2 and RP of 2.26 km^2. The smallest area is the SR of 1.77 km^2 linked to the environment of the Tronto estuary. Its importance is linked to the fact that it is the only remaining wetland area in the vast stretch of Adriatic coastline, over 400 km long, between the Comacchio Valleys and the lagoons of Lesina and Varano.

From a morphological point of view, LV and ML share a history of canal excavation that has modified the hydraulic dynamics and has kept the overall morphology sufficiently unchanged, with a good level of meanders that guarantee the correct exchange between fresh and salt water (Figure 3). The geo-morphological characteristics of the areas have been largely modified by the action of man, who has progressively reclaimed, through reclamation for agricultural or industrial use, environments that were previously characterised by marshes that acted as a link between the land and the sea. The balance of transformations of the salt marshes, a historical economic activity common to LV and ML, is negative in the most recent period, with accentuated erosion phenomena. Among these, the main cause seems to be subsidence (resulting from the compaction of clay sediments and peat), followed by the transit of boats and natural wave motion.

The OR territory has been the subject, in the last decades, of several River Contracts, developed along various parts of its course; within CREW, this pilot area has tried to coordinate the different experiences and related instruments to build a sort of 'contract of contracts'. Its peculiarity is that there are significant differences between the mouth of the Ofanto River and its Valley, which determine different needs and priorities. Consequently, most of the activities outlined in the Action Plan have a single geographical target, namely the mouth.

Figure 3. An aerial view of the northern Lagoon of Venice. Coastal wetlands are characterised by particular morphologies, such as salt marshes and mudflats, that thrive in balanced conditions related to water salinity and temperature, wind direction and strength, and the presence and development of hygrophilous vegetation.

The SR presents relict ecological conditions in an almost completely anthropised territory. It currently presents unique floristic characteristics and, above all, from a faunistic point of view, plays a decisive role for migratory avifauna, thus representing a strategic element for the ecological network, even in a vast area.

The RP is basically a shallow brackish wetland with highly variable ecological conditions (temperature, salinity, oxygen levels). Approximately 240 bird species have been recorded over the years, and in recent years, some threatened and strictly protected species (Himantopus himantopus (VU), Tadorna tadorna) have begun to nest.

The VM reserve is unique in its area, characterised by a karst landscape; the wetland is surrounded by reed beds and offers an enormous variety of accessible food resources for birds in transit.

As for the DN pilot area, the Neretva Delta is the largest river mouth in Croatia, consisting of remnants of Mediterranean wetlands with preserved coastal lagoons. Particularly important are the reed beds where many endangered animal species live. In the Neretva Delta area, six geographically defined areas with a total area of 1624 hectares are protected by a Nature Protection Act.

4.2. Conventions and Protection Areas

All pilot areas were selected for various relevant aspects of natural and cultural heritage. UNESCO declared Venice and its lagoon a World Heritage Site in 1987, recognising the presence of a widespread and diverse heritage: environmental and landscape, archaeological, historical, architectural and ethnological.

The DN delta has been declared a Natura 2000 Special Protection Area and Site of Community Importance, with a total surface area of approximately 23,800 hectares. DN is also a POP (areas of importance for the conservation and exploitation of the favourable status of wild birds of interest to the European Union, as well as their habitats and areas of importance for the conservation of migratory bird species, especially wetlands of international importance) and RAMSAR AREA—wetland habitats are included in the list of Wetlands of International Importance (Convention on Wetlands, 1971). The RP was proclaimed a Special Bird Reserve in 2001 and the VM in 1989.

4.3. Critical Issues in Governance Processes

Critical issues are specific to each area and were addressed, within the participatory processes that led to the signing of the Contracts, with different tools and approaches.

For LV, the most difficult aspect to manage was the active involvement and continuous participation of local administrations, which did not proceed in a united and collaborative manner with each other. Moreover, during the project funding period, different territo-

rial administrative configurations followed one another, which constituted moments of suspension of the process.

The RS, managed by the Municipality of San Benedetto del Tronto, immediately initiated a highly institutionalised process, proceeding more swiftly than others in the various phases of participation.

In the case of OR, the main objective was to integrate the already existing government and governance tools, reconnecting the different administrative parts, local and regional, that make up the river territory.

For the RP, also characterised by highly variable ecological conditions, the main effort has been to build a community around the wetland area, even before the Contract. The VM's efforts focused on discussing management tools with local communities. In the case of the ND, the aspect of securing and management of unauthorised access within the wetland area was the main critical issue to be addressed during the process (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Ornithological Reserve Veliko i Malo blato, Croatia.

5. Methods and Results

In relation to the purpose of the article, which aims to analyse the shaping of governance tools in different contexts, the comparative analysis method was chosen as the most appropriate for investigating case studies rather than individual reference products, and to understand the overall context rather than specific variables.

The aim is to understand, on the one hand, how the different Contracts responded to a shared agenda based on European requirements, and thus to observe how the individual Actions were able to specify general intentions. Different geographies, political background and social conditions implied different participatory paths, tailor-made to suit each context, producing, at the end of the project, a rich catalogue of Actions.

On the other hand, the aim is to bring similar experiences together in order to assess their overall potential on an international scale. In this regard, the fragility of the ecological environment common to all wetland sites has allowed the construction of a truly shared approach to protection, responding to common themes. This has matured and thickened over time a wide range of shared intents and tools. This reading, which is both vertical and horizontal, makes it possible to observe the Action Plans of the 7 Contracts and to measure commonalities and trends in relation to the strategic objectives of the CREW Interreg project.

There are two criteria for comparing the Action Plans proposed by the different Wetland Contracts.

The first criterion for comparison is based on the "Environmental Components and Indicators" linked to the EU call and considered fundamental reference points for the definition of any Action regarding protection and safeguarding. These are as follows: a. Biodiversity; b. Water quality; c. Ecosystem services; d. Protection level; e. Other (Table 1). Each Wetland Contract, in defining its own Action Plan, had to respond to these

specific points. A horizontal comparison of the Actions associated with each environmental indicator is proposed here: after a summary description, a number of Actions are described, purely by way of example, to specify how the main themes have been punctually addressed by the various Wetland Contracts. It should not be surprising that many Actions overlap and the margins between one indicator and another are often very thin. Neither should the heterogeneity of the solutions be surprising, since the environments under study are very different in terms of morphology, size and ecosystem function.

Table 1. Number of Actions per environmental component. The sum indicates the total number of Actions relating to a specific component or indicator. Note that a single Action may relate to more than one environmental component.

Environmental Components	Number of Actions							TOT
	LV	ML	OR	SR	RP	DN	VM	
a. Biodiversity	9	6	3	13	8	13	-	40
b. Water quality	8	11	1	11	6	5	-	37
c. Ecosystem services	8	4	4	7	6	6	-	29
d. Protection level	7	4	1	7	14	13	2	35
e. Other	15	18	1	7	0	0	2	43

The second criterion for comparison relates to the type of Action implemented to meet the above-mentioned criteria (Table 2): some are concrete projects, others remain collaborative intentions, and still others concern studies and projects that can raise awareness and provide available data. These can be described as follows: a. Concrete Actions, i.e., existing or planned physical projects; b. Monitoring and Survey Activities; c. Studies and Projects; d. Communication and Education Actions; and finally, e. Governance Activities. At the end of the comparative reading related to environmental components and type of Action, some highlights are discussed, providing a further synthesis of the values that guided the definition of the 7 Wetland Contracts.

Table 2. Main types of Action.

Actions	Number of Actions							TOT
	LV	ML	OR	SR	RP	DN	VM	
Concrete Actions	14	11	4	5	5	27	-	66
Monitoring Activities and Surveys	25	1	3	2	4	5	1	41
Studies and Projects	39	2	3	2	2	1	-	49
Communication and Education Actions	37	9	2	1	4	41	3	97
Governance Activities	24	3	4	4	2	2	1	40

5.1. A horizontal Comparison of Action Plans

5.1.1. Environmental Components and Indicators

a. Biodiversity

The most common Actions shared by partners include the observation and restoration of wetlands, the implementation of available data to monitor local biodiversity, and the regulation of water flow into and out of the wetland. In almost all Wetland Contracts, Actions aimed at protecting, restoring and monitoring biodiversity have been accompanied by environmental education and awareness-raising activities.

The various Contracts addressed the issue of biodiversity in different ways. The ML Contract promoted the shared implementation of the Management Plan for the defence of the local habitat, raising awareness among boaters and other users. The reduction of anthropic disturbance, also through the use of a trail network compatible with protected areas, is in fact considered essential for the restoration of habitats important for birdlife. Other Contracts aligned with these Actions, such as the OR Contract, which proposed the

restoration of the river through the remodelling of the floodplain near the mouth, as well as the construction of islands connected to the riverbed in order to safeguard the coexistence of the animal and plant species that make up its ecosystem. In addition to the floodplain cleaning activities, which included the elimination of invasive exotic plant and animal species, the SR Contract proposed the elaboration of a specialised study for the analysis of coastal erosion processes that could support the restoration of wetlands and collector ditches. The same Contract envisaged the creation of tree belts along the paths, useful for a more pleasant enjoyment of the area but also for the recovery of the ancient agrarian landscape. Similar research activities were central to the RP Contract. Also, in this case, it was important to take care of the edges of the wetland in order to observe the evolution of morphological characteristics and flows in relation to biological diversity. The VL Contract, on the other hand, proposed activities to protect the lagoon's innermost sandbanks and marshes from erosion, also through the continuation of European projects such as LIFE VIMINE for the protection of salt marshes [24]. Some of the Actions committed to this are the enhancement of nature trails to increase knowledge of amphibian areas in sustainable tourism circuits, and the establishment of a nature oasis in Campalto. In addition to these practical operations, there are coordination initiatives between research groups aimed at the participatory definition of a statute of places in the northern Venetian lagoon.

b. Water quality

A number of recurring Actions relate to the hydromorphological rebalancing of the wetland, the monitoring and care of the drainage network, the analysis of the hydrological state, the cleaning of the waters to ensure a hospitable environment for the local flora and fauna, as well as a high degree of environmental healthiness. The VL Contract, in particular, proposed initiatives for the morphological rebalancing of the northern lagoon of Venice and maintenance interventions for the vivification of the 'dead lagoon' in order to favour the healthiness of the lagoon ecosystem. In this regard, the reactivation of the hydraulic eaves connection, the restoration of vivification canals, initiatives for the integrated management of the drainage network of the lagoon watershed, and the hydraulic-environmental re-qualification of a portion of the minor reticulum in the Municipality of Cavallino-Treporti were envisaged. The ML Contract proposed to integrate the geomorphological study of the Marano lagoon with the characterisation and sedimentological and geochemical analysis in order to define homogeneous areas of intervention that could serve as a pre-characterisation for the reconstruction of the salt marshes, while the OR Contract proposed river restoration interventions through the realisation of islands connected to the riverbed. The SR Contract, on the other hand, provided for the implementation of wastewater reuse systems and water quality control of the local sewage treatment plant, as well as more extensive measures for the conservation of the existing marine SIC. Concerning the awareness-raising activities shared by several Contracts, water quality (related to beach and marine litter and wetlands discharges) is mainly mentioned (ML, SR). For ML, communication and awareness-raising on the effects of discharges in tributaries and on the effects in the lagoon are mainly aimed at mitigating the effects of spreading livestock effluents (slurry/manure) and sewage sludge in agriculture. Special attention is paid to "plastic free" initiatives (ML, SR) and to the impact of exhausted oils from boats in the lagoon environment related to inland waterways (VL), a cause of heavy pollution (RP). Other awareness-raising Actions include the implementation of "Good rules in the lagoon" and monitoring and reporting on the correct application of rules of conduct for environmental protection in the lagoon and connected rivers (ML). Connected to these initiatives is the need for integration and sharing of good practices among Contracts, in the awareness that observation must be extended to the various drainage basins of reference and therefore connected to the inland territories, as well as to the coastal areas (ML, VL, RP).

c. Ecosystem services

In the case of ecosystem services, Contracts also focus on coordination between the entities and actors involved. The focus is often on how territorial practices can contribute

to the smooth functioning of ecosystem services. This is done, for example, through the protection and naturalistic enhancement of drainage sites, the promotion of community farming (VL) and the implementation of water reuse systems (SR). In all these cases, the focus on local action and renewed community leadership was central, as it has enabled tailor-made solutions. These include rethinking access and ways of traversing the landscape, which, if rethought, can enable the preservation of ecosystems. The promotion of slow and eco-sustainable use of the territory has in fact occupied a central place in many Contracts, which propose investing in new cycle paths (ML, VL, OR) and in internal mobility (RP) and increasing the accessibility of public spaces along the lagoon embankment (VL), creating green infrastructures to support mobility (SR) and integrating new circuits with existing ones. The reflection that combines ecosystem protection and fruition extends to the activation of sustainable mobility coordination tables through wide area planning tools (ML, VL) that promote, for example, the ML river park system. Navigation modes, both in the lagoon and in the rivers, were also rethought from a multi/intermodal perspective, creating a 'network of continuity' within the territory (ML). It was proposed to limit nautical traffic in terms of quantity and speed, to disseminate rules of behaviour and navigation and to raise user awareness of this issue (VL, ML). Consistent with this projection, the tourist offer was conceived in an eco-sustainable, integrated and organised way: experiencing the lagoon environment means guaranteeing respect for its integrally protected parts through a "gentle" tourism, capable of integrating the environment, typical products and small-scale hospitality, and allowing the creation of new forms of economy. Use has therefore been imagined in relation to the environmental and natural enhancement of the valuable areas, and commensurate with their estimated carrying capacity. For this reason, several Contracts envisage the constant monitoring of ecosystem services against their partial remodelling and utilisation (ML, SR, RP). Even more, in the case of Venice, these interventions were conceived within a joint climate change adaptation plan as priorities defined in the PAESC of the 22 municipalities of the Eastern Veneto Region for the five year period 2021–2025.

d. Protection level

The theme of protection certainly occupies a prominent place in all the Contracts and concerns both physical components and cultural aspects. Safeguarding and protecting the territorial heritage, as the projects for the 7 target areas made clear, includes natural and built landscapes but also intangible aspects of local culture, repositories of knowledge and traditions [25]. This included Actions for the restoration and maintenance of the built environment, initiatives for the hydromorphological rebalancing of the area and for wildlife protection (VM).

Specifically, the ML Contract included Actions to safeguard lagoon dynamics and ecological connections. The same Contract also acted to preserve the morphology of protected areas and barrier islands, the reconstruction of tidal flats and salt marshes. Similarly, the VL Contract proposed to protect the landscape from a naturalistic point of view by recognising its fragility, including an integrated approach based on the protection of salt marshes from erosion. In addition, importance was given to the built heritage, through cultural and environmental enhancement and protection projects, or to cultural aspects, including craftsmanship tradition, lagoon fishing and local gastronomy. The cultural richness of the wetlands and related communities was also recognised by the RP Contract, which proposed the valorisation of cultural heritage and the possibility of managing it in a sustainable manner. This includes the identification and assessment of the state of the historical and cultural heritage in relation to protection and restoration actions, as well as the resolution of problems of ownership, squatting and other illegal activities that may put pressure on the Palud Reserve.

Actions related to the sustainable management of the asset, monitoring and surveillance in collaboration between organisations and associations proved to be central in all the Contracts (SR, OR, VL, ML, RP, VM, DN). The synergy between subjects, the constant exchange for the transmission and sharing of information concerning a shared asset

are indeed characteristic elements of the governance model proposed by the Wetlands Contracts.

e. Other

This group is the most heterogeneous because it includes Actions that do not strictly relate to individual environmental components but, in many cases, are transversal. Of all of them, governance Actions represent the largest group. These are negotiating, agreements, opportunities to thicken the network of partners and initiatives to support the Actions promoted by the Contract. This component is particularly significant because it highlights the need for legislative and regulatory support for the Actions promoted [26]: the involvement of local actors and their assumption of responsibility only make sense if adequately supported by institutions. We will see later, specifically, the role of governance Actions within the different Wetland Contracts.

5.1.2. Type of Actions

a. Concrete Actions

Concrete Actions mostly concerned the rehabilitation of river basins, the preservation of lagoon morphologies and the implementation of protection measures; thus, they are the ones most easily referable to the environmental indicators expressed by the European Community. They range from the follow-up of European projects aimed at restoring salt marshes, to very specific measures pursued by individual municipalities to contrast climate change and restore the hydraulic functions of the landscape. Examples include: the completion and integration of equipment to serve the cycle–pedestrian paths included in the target area, the design and construction of new observation platforms in the lagoon-gutter interface area, maintenance work on salt marshes and paths, maintenance work for the vivification of the lagoon 'dead lagoon' and low environmental impact naturalistic engineering work. As far as financial resources are concerned, it can be noted that the largest sum is allocated to Concrete Actions (for a total of EUR 7,235,433). This figure confirms the operational nature of the Contract, one of whose main purposes is to propose the implementation of small concrete projects in the short to medium term (2–3 years). In the case of CREW, a slight slippage applies to this time horizon due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, which have affected the way activities were conducted. For this reason, the proposed Actions tend to stretch towards a total duration of 5 or even 6 years.

b. Monitoring and Survey activities

The Concrete Actions are complemented by Monitoring and Survey activities, which mainly concerned the monitoring of environmental indicators of biodiversity, water quality and ecosystem services. Their main purpose was to observe trends and collect data to guide possible concrete actions. The aim was to ensure the protection of wetlands and regulate the impact of activities and practices that take place there, including fishing, hunting, agriculture, but also mobility. Examples include censuses, data collection campaigns and in-depth studies of specific characteristics of the target area. Also included are research activities on ecosystem services in relation to the state of conservation of the salt marshes, the drafting of an annual report on the frequentation of the Venice lagoon and its impacts and a feasibility study for the realisation of punctual interventions aimed at strengthening water transport systems with electric propulsion.

c. Studies and Projects

Studies and Projects moved in this same direction. They included future and ongoing projects for the protection and promotion of the territory. The census of latent potentials and opportunities, the mapping of coastal routes, in-depth studies on productivity factors and competitiveness of traditional activities are some examples belonging to this group. The activities do not necessarily have an operational impact but aim to increase the material available for understanding the area. At the same time, all partners proposed environmental

education and awareness-raising activities aimed at a broad spectrum of users: citizens, policymakers, students, experts in the field, tourists and local guides.

Other examples include mapping of the accessibility of public spaces along the eaves and lagoon, identification of interruptions in the continuity of the route network, organisation of bicycle sports activities for families, young people and adults in order to promote slow mobility along the lagoon's eaves and digitalisation of existing routes and itineraries.

d. Communication and Education Actions

Communication and Education Actions included the activation of thematic tables on the topic and consultancy activities, as well as the identification of local heritages to be protected (both built and cultural), the organisation of periodic events (festivals) and extensive dissemination activities. Among the different types of Actions, it is important to emphasise the large majority of Communication and Education Actions. This is due to three reasons in particular. The first is that, given the large number of actors involved and the widespread difficulty in raising funds, it was easier for the partners to deal with Actions requiring a smaller budget. The second is that these same Actions usually involve rapid implementation and offer the opportunity to evaluate results immediately. In the context of a 2–3 year project, it was important to count the activities that could be started quickly. Finally, all projects identified dissemination and awareness-raising activities as one of the cornerstones of Actions related to environmental protection and conservation. Communication and Education Actions would, in this sense, be an essential prerequisite to ensure the involvement of local communities and key stakeholders. Some examples are formation of a "statute of good practices" for the use of the lagoon, organisation of initiatives and information materials linked to the statute, organisation of annual information and awareness-raising events on the issues and criticalities of the lagoon, preparation of a dedicated brochure and environmental education campaign accompanied by the installation of posters. Additional examples are the creation of a dedicated website and a pocket guide.

e. Governance Activities

Finally, Governance Activities constitute perhaps the most relevant group from the point of view of the outcomes in relation to the objectives of the Interreg Project. They deserve in-depth consideration.

Within the broader framework of the Interreg-CREW Project, the Governance Activities are aimed at the definition and activation of an inclusive model of land management and transformation which envisages the presence and consultation of institutional and non-institutional stakeholders [27,28]. Among the proposed activities, there was, in fact, the activation of workshops, permanent tables and discussion groups aimed at debating in a horizontal way relevant issues related to the protection of wetlands and the promotion of local economies. Thus, subjects were created that are able to support the evaluation and monitoring of the territory over time, but also to give continuity to previously approved Plans, as well as to support some specific legislative provisions with an inclusive perspective of communities [29].

For instance, the OR Contract envisaged the configuration of a governing body that constitutes a decision-making hub for the area, able to provide vision and expertise to local initiatives. Its activities can rely on an up-to-date and accessible database for projects in the Ofanto cluster. This highlights the close relationship between Governance Activities and Monitoring and Survey Actions and the importance of these being resources that are always accessible to all. Similarly, the ML Contract proposed the creation of a steering committee for the sharing and transfer of knowledge related to the CREW experience. This entity is meant to supervise and coordinate the River Contracts present on the regional territory and contribute to the definition of the governance model for the continuation of activities after the conclusion of the Interreg Project. The RS Contract also envisaged interaction between institutions and the formation of a negotiating table involving the area's managers and owners. In addition to the interaction between institutions, there is also the interaction with the Basin Assembly, which is foreseen for the interregional extension of the Contract

for the Tronto River. The Basin Assembly has the task of contributing to the construction of knowledge, the identification of problems, the definition of possible solutions and the approval of choices. Its contribution, alongside that of the institutional bodies, is central to the process of mutual learning and representation promoted by the latest generation of Wetland Contracts. These, more than in previous years, aim at a more extended concept of agency that goes beyond direct institutional action, and which wants to account for the reasons of minor subjects but also of objects (or 'differently animated' subjects, such as flora or fauna). In this sense, the nascent Wetland Contracts wanted to intercept more explicitly the places of all stakeholders considered for the complex system of relations that binds them to a particular geographical, economic or social environment [30].

In this regard, the VL Contract envisaged the activation of a workshop for the definition of a local statute of places, including human, animal and plant stakeholders. Other alliances include the activation of a permanent coordination table, the creation of a public–private research group, the launch of a Council for sustainable mobility and tourism in the Eastern Veneto Region and the foundation of a working group for the agri-environmental and tourist enhancement of the area between the northern lagoon of Venice and the old Piave River.

These examples show how the scales at which governance is rethought are multiple: from regional coordination to specific intervention [31]. The role of private subjects and associations, of non-institutional and minor subjects, is here central and finds in its chorality an opportunity for encounter and debate. Despite the imbalance highlighted by the data (in the 7 target areas, the total number of stakeholders is 1133, of which 363 are private and 770 public), it is important to emphasise that private stakeholders, although fewer in number, proved to be fundamental in the process of implementing the Contracts (Table 3). In particular, local associations and organisations enriched the process with notions and knowledge that the public side alone (Ministry, Regions, Provinces, Municipalities, other Territorial Institutions, Universities, schools) struggles to fully convey. In this regard, the Territorial Institutions that guided the Contracts of the Croatian partners (Natura Histrica, Natura Jadera and the Dubrovnik-Neretva County Public Authority for the Management of Protected Natural Areas) had to modify their typically top-down management model, envisaging the inclusion of the specific competences of other actors within a governance process that respected specificities and autonomies through a flexible approach. This is important because it allows for the transfer of knowledge between parties and for actors of different sizes to take charge of the territory. More and more, in fact, minor actors are being recognised as having knowledge, including technical knowledge, which is no longer the prerogative of institutional actors alone and which is complementary to the skills associated with frequentation, daily practices and local knowledge.

Table 3. Involvement of public and private actors by type of Action. July 2021. The budgets are only indicative and do not include the contribution of Comunità Riviera Friulana. In some cases, budget items are incomplete because they depend on the type of interventions that will be discussed and approved during the Laguna Assembly.

Actions	Private Subject	Public Subject	Total Budget (EUR)
Concrete Actions	63	180	7.235.433
Monitoring Activities and Surveys	45	100	940.333
Studies and Projects	68	123	1.122.567
Communication and Education	109	225	930.999
Governance Activities	78	142	332.000

In all cases, it has been a matter of imagining extended and horizontal interactions, capable of coordinating interventions at different scales for the protection of the environment, the protection of water resources, the valorisation of the territory and the prevention of hydrogeological risk, combining skills and optimising resources.

5.2. Highlights

The horizontal reading of the Action Plans provided essential information on some of the most relevant aspects of the entire process, which we indicate here as highlights. These are the co-presence of the following: a. Safeguard and Valorisation activities; b. the importance of supporting Integrated Governance and the constant presence of the following: c. Awareness-raising and Learning activities. Their centrality was reaffirmed unilaterally by all partners as they describe fundamental principles for the achievement of the different Contracts, which included multiple objectives in different contexts.

a. Safeguard and Valorisation

In addition to preservation and protection, all the Wetland Contracts have highlighted how promotion, valorisation and development Actions, which for a long time have often been carried out in opposition to protection Actions, must be rethought in the light of environmental sustainability [32]. This means systematising effective solutions for the improvement and protection of wetlands, watercourses and related territories, taking into account public interests, economic repercussions and the social values that characterise them. Also, it means considering promotional Actions that support the same protection Actions, capable, for example, of enhancing the ecosystem characteristics and local activities at the same time; it means promoting the accessibility of lagoon environments through slow and conscious mobility, as well as their recreational, naturalistic and cultural usability; it means imagining a sustainable integration between economy and uses, enhancing identity elements and traditions [26,33].

b. Integrated Governance

The role of governance processes is a central topic of discussion for all projects and is articulated through a number of shared requirements. First of all, there is the need for a political stance that takes charge of territorial resources through care operations and that takes place within unambiguous administrative and regulatory choices. This is perhaps the first step towards a desired cooperation between different sectors (public–private). Moreover, bringing institutional and non-institutional actors into communication can represent a resource capable of supporting Actions that are truly understood and shared by local communities [25,34–36]. The Wetland Contract and the Assembly connected to it constitute, in this regard, a powerful decision-making node that, it is hoped, can give continuity and meaning to desired or existing plans and projects that respond to the territory's protection and enhancement needs [26].

It is worth emphasising the need, highlighted by several partners, to carry out coordinated Actions to extend and integrate the influence of the Contract with adjacent areas, in order to strengthen its effectiveness. This can be done both on a local scale, for example, by extending the Wetland Contract and integrating it with the River Contracts of the tributaries of the catchment area, and on a supra-regional and supra-national scale through contact and comparison with other Wetland Contracts of the North Adriatic coast.

c. Awareness-raising and Learning

Among the Actions to which the projects gave most emphasis were those dedicated to awareness-rising, dissemination and learning (see d. Communication and Education). Indeed, each experience found that, at the basis of all other Actions, there must be awareness of the role and importance of wetlands [37] both locally and globally. The partners sought to increase public perception of the value of wetland ecosystems among policymakers, but also among a wider group of users and inhabitants. As highlighted in the previous chapter, several Actions were implemented by the various Contracts in order to improve the sense of belonging to a unique natural-anthropic system, the sense of care and affection, and the importance of education and training activities. The role of local guides, specially trained to convey the values of the area, is seen as an opportunity to disseminate specific knowledge about wetlands in a professional and organised manner [38,39]. For all the Contracts, this has meant recognising a set of territorial values that go beyond the technical qualities

defined by the environmental components. These values respond more spontaneously to the feeling of the inhabitants and take into account the sense of care and affection that guides the lives and activities of those who inhabit wetlands and their margins.

6. Conclusions

The parallel process of development and construction of the Wetland Contracts has been particularly useful for each partner, as the carrying out of similar participatory processes favoured comparison throughout the whole process and made the constant exchange of experiences possible.

With reference to the strategic objectives presented in Section 3, it is possible to assess the experiences gained within CREW, and to highlight the potential of this partnership and the Contract tool.

- The collaboration between stakeholders and decision-makers, initiated in the target areas, has made it possible to build knowledge frameworks capable of integrating technical-scientific know-how and practical situated knowledge. These integrated knowledge frameworks constitute an indispensable reference for the protection of biodiversity (Objective 1).
- The Action Plans defined thanks to the participatory processes developed in the seven target areas provide for the proposed actions to be taken on board not only by institutional actors, but rather stimulate the assumption of responsibility by all signatories. This made it possible to increase the awareness of the various parts of society regarding the values at stake and the commitment of the various actors (Objective 2).
- The constant exchange between CREW partners and the continuous updating with respect to ongoing activities, methodologies, solutions and ideas proposed in the different target areas strengthened the synergy between Italian and Croatian partners and favoured the construction of a shared cross-border strategy for the governance of wetlands (Objective 3).
- The three principles that emerged as most relevant to the whole process in all the target areas (safeguard and valorisation; integrated governance; awareness-raising and learning) were the basis for the construction of the Observatory, aimed at monitoring not only the data collected, but also the best practices identified and able to guide the formation of other Actions (Objective 4).

The comparative analysis of the Action Plans allowed us to highlight the points of contact and common strategies implemented by the different Contracts. The Actions analysed do not only meet the strategic objectives of the Interreg project, but also constitute a broader and more valuable repository of good practices that can be used by each partner to cope with the difficulties involved in any participatory process.

In particular:

- It is not always possible to overcome certain internal contrasts between stakeholders, public/private bodies and organisations in the participation phases, due to inherent incompatibilities between the stakes involved;
- Not all parts of society are interested in or willing to dialogue and negotiate with the rest of the community, e.g., certain economic sectors, so that in some cases it may be difficult to broaden the map of stakeholders;
- Some actors, particularly small associations, struggle to get involved and take charge of the Actions included in the Action Plan;
- Lack of funds and the difficulty of finding economic resources may jeopardise the implementation of Actions, projects and initiatives, slowing down the progress of the Action Plan;
- Changes in local governments can sometimes represent an interruption in the implementation of the Action Plan, and the succession of different political expressions can sometimes cause suspensions in the activities carried out by local authorities.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the impact of cross-border exchange on the parallel processes of the Wetland Contracts [40]. Indeed, the continuous exchange of experiences between the partners has first of all strengthened cross-border relations, not only in terms of sharing methodologies and strategies useful for the process, but also in terms of mutual support and help in the most delicate phases of the development of the Contracts. These strengthened and consolidated relationships will be crucial in the next phase of implementation of both the Contracts and the Action Plans. It will be important to maintain and nurture these cross-border relationships to ensure continuity of the CREW project's objectives and the individual participatory processes that have been carried out. The present and future impacts of the Wetlands Contracts are related to the strength of the built network that binds the stakeholders, as well as to the ability of the actors to take advocacy on the use and management of the territory.

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