

The « mizottes » : an area protected, shared and managed

As part of the management of the Baie de l'Aiguillon Nature reserve (extending in both Vendée & Charente-Maritime departments), the NR managers Réserve (ONCFS & LPO), together with the Marine Hunting Reserve manager and that of the properties of the National Foundation for the Protection of Wild Fauna Habitats (FDC 85) identified the importance of salt marshes (locally called « mizottes ») for water birds feeding, and especially for herbivorous ducks, Greylag Goose and Wigeon.

These salt marshes are a difficult geographical sectors, being submitted to climatic variations and tidal dynamics. Therefore, the haying of « mizottes » (cf. photo n°1), and principally of *Puccinellia maritima*, can only be carried out during summer, when silts are dry and plant reached maturity. Moreover, *Salicornia* habitats (photo 3) also need to be preserved because of their specificity for other birds like *Anas crecca*.

The hayed *Puccinellia* is the main food source for herbivorous ducks. This created an interest's convergence between farmers who collect the hay, and the NR which wants to insure birds' occurrence and food for water birds.



Photo 1 : Farmers



Photo 2 : general view of the salt marsh

Today's situation should not however mask past difficulties : only 2 farmers remained in 1999 to hay the mizottes of Triaize, whereas there are 11 today ! This absence of management resulted in the closing of the vegetation habitats colonised by *Aster tripolium* for instance, and a resulting reduction in NR capacity for wintering birds (photo 3).

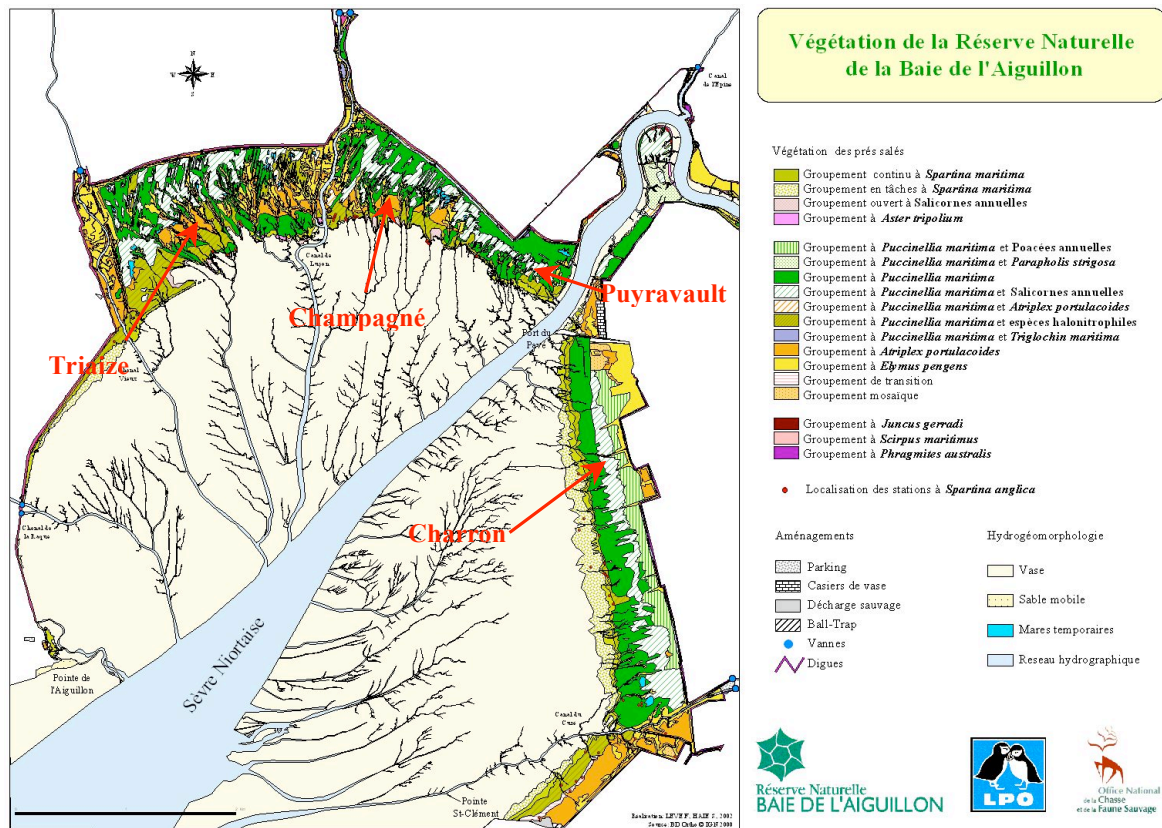


Figure 1 : Vegetation map and studies' points localisation

A 1st boosting took place at the end of 2001, impulsed by ONCFS & Agriculture Chambre of Vendée. A long term strategy was developped for the mizottes, financed by FEDER, Ministry of Environment, ONCFS & Agriculture Chambre of Vendée. It resulted in the implementation of Agri-environment measures specific to « Mizottes ». It was then possible to scourge land abandonment and to allow the reconquest of abandoned surfaces. But, to allow this project to function weel in the future, an first expérimental management and environmental evaluation stage was necessary as a prior state to the implementation of new farmers on not yet used surfaces, and/or on surfaces of high biological value (incompatible with the maintenance of human activities).



Photo 3 : sector colonised by par Aster

Implementation of the agro-environmental project

So as to identify real and future-standing actions for the mizottes, a working group was proposed in 2000 and effectively created in 2001 to answer the following questions :

- ✗ **How to better promote mizottes ?**
- ✗ **What evolution for this territory ?**

Scenarios were developed to be a future guidance for the NR managers, and actions were completed.

This working group is still at present time, constituted by representatives of farmers, landowners, Agriculture Chambre (17 & 85), ADASEA (17 & 85), National Office of Hunting and Wild Fauna (ONCFS), Hunters' Departmental Federation of Vendée, Ligue for the Protection of Birds (LPO), and representatives of local communes concerned with the perimeter (Charron, Puyravault, Champagné-les-Marais, Triaize). The baie de l'Aiguillon being separated in 2 distinct administrative authorities, 2 working groups were created : one for Charente-Maritime department, and one for the Vendée department. All the decisions taken on this territory thus result from a concertation and shared approach between users (farmers or managers).

Two important actions were completed by this working group : **the first is the repartition of mizottes surfaces between farmers ; the second one was the implementation of a unique Prescription Chart.**

the repartition of mizottes surfaces between farmers had to be just and fair, and need to take into account the use of the hay being cut. This was done so as to integrate the long-way work conducted by local farmers, and to confort farming economical systems. Thus, criterias were as such :

- ✗ the **disponibility** of mizottes' surfaces,
- ✗ the farmer's individual **history**,
- ✗ the **use** of the hay (the farmer having sheep or not),
- ✗ The **town** where the farm is localised,
- ✗ **Installation** of a young farmer,
- ✗ The **max. exploitation surface** fixed at 25 % of the exploitable surface of the sector concerned, mizottes' lots being « uncuttable ».

As soon as the potential mizottes' surfaces were sufficient, attribution criterias were prioritized as follows :

- 1. Preference given to the farmer having his farm in the commune concerned,**
- 2. Preference given to cattle farmers,**
- 3. Installation of a young cattle farmer,**
- 4. Cattle farmer already in place and having a good knowledge of mizottes,**
- 5. Cattle farmer already in place having no knowledge of the mizottes.**

In a second phase, a **Prescription Chart for the mizottes management** was developed. It is compulsory on the totality of the mizottes. The contents of the agro-environmental measures was copied from this chart.. It concerns haying as well as grazing activities :

- ✗ Haying between 1st June & 30 August

- ✗ Sheep grazing proposed on certain sites in agreement with the NR managers, from beginning of april to mid-september
- ✗ Instant charge 0,6 à 0,8 UGB
- ✗ Mechanical clearing of the tertiary ditches allowed with a proper machine between 1st June & 15 sept.
- ✗ Maintenance of pastoral equipments
- ✗ Possible protection, in agreement with the managers, using mobile filets of high biological interest végétation
- ✗ Keeping of certain flooded depressions, in agreement with the managers

If, for different reasons (meteorology, personal reasons...) the farmer cannot implement the Prescription Chart, the working group « mizottes » may give certain derogations.

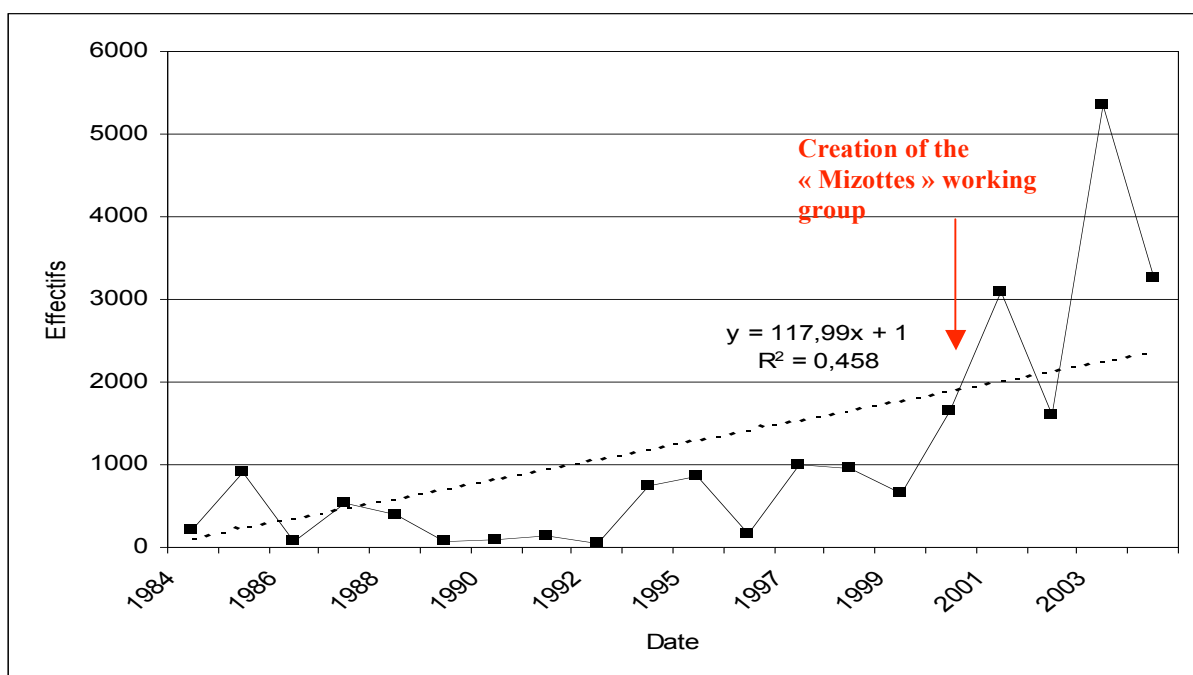
The Programm's objectives are not to establish a « *Puccinellia* field », but to allow an agricultural maintenance system while taking into account the salt marshes habitats' complex mosaic.

An agricultural and birds' success

The implementation of this voluntarist strategy thus resulted in the re-dynamisation of farming, as shows the today's integration (and financing) of all measures developed in the ESA scheme (contract of 3rd level).

Today, the salt marshes are used by 40 farmers (10 in Charente-Maritime, 30 in Vendée) from different communes : Charron(17), Puyravault (85), Champagné-les-Marais (85) et Triaize (85) (figure 1). Out of the 1100 ha of salt marshes, 600 ha are regularly farmed. The progress is enormous : In Triaize for instance, there were only 2 farmers left in 1998. Today, there are 11. There is no more vegetation closing down in the farmed sectors, and fauna reacted promptly.

Geese, having also a positive population dynamic, rapidly used these sectors, bringing Baie de l'Aiguillon to the 1st french rank for this species' wintering.



- The creation of the « Mizottes » working group allowed to maintain and develop environmental favorable agricultural practices, through the creation of a territory dynamic.
- The « opening » of the habitat created by the renewal of agriocultural activity contributed to the increase of geese populations, Baie de l'Aiguillon becoming the 1st french site for this species in 2003 et 2004.
- This concertation and mutual comprehension approach allowed to insure a sustainable use of this exceptionnal territory.