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Regulating access to protected natural areas using shuttle buses

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Regulating access to protected natural areas using shuttle buses

The project to control access to protected natural areas by means of shuttle buses, specifically the beaches at Calblanque in the Calblanque, Monte de las Cenizas and Peña del Águila Regional Park, is put forward as an example of best practice within the Murcia Region's 2014-2020 ERDF Operating Programme.

The Regional Park of Calblanque, Monte de las Cenizas and Peña del Águila boasts 17 types of priority habitats: littoral salt steppes (*Limnietalia*) and areas of pseudo-steppe featuring grasses and annuals (*Thero-brachypodietea*), the most characteristic plant communities being *Chamaerops*, thorny scrub and *Periploca laevigata*, copses of *Tetraclinis articulata* and enclaves of thermophilic holm oaks. There are numerous endemic and Ibero-African species. As far as the fauna is concerned, the park's outstanding species include the Spanish toothcarp (*Aphanius iberus*), which is listed as a priority species in annex II of Directive 92/43/EEC¹, and other species with a limited distribution in the region such as the natterjack toad, found in scrublands, and Bedriaga's skink, found on beaches and sand dunes. This area was declared a Regional Park by [Law 4/1992, Planning and Protection of the Murcia Region's Territory](#) and its Natural Resources Planning Programme was passed by [Decree in 1995](#). The entire Regional Park is a **Site of Community Importance** and the Rasall salt beds are also included in the Mar Menor **Special Protection Area for Wild Birds** and the Mar Menor **RAMSAR Wetlands of International Importance**.



¹ Annex II of [Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora](#)

The coast at Calblanque gives on to a broad coastal depression, with sandy beaches and a belt of sand and fossil dunes. These natural beaches, which constitute a significant attraction to tourism, are susceptible to deterioration owing to the sustained impact of recreational activities.



This is why it has been deemed necessary, via the Natural Resources Planning Programme, to put conservation measures in place involving restrictions on motorised access during the period of greatest influx of visitors, which are justified not only by the need to ensure the conservation of the flora and fauna next to the paths and the surrounding areas, but also in terms of the demands of public use exerted on this zone, given that visitors' satisfaction levels are dependent on the occupation density of the beaches.



The Regional Park of Calblanque, Monte de las Cenizas and Peña del Águila Natural Resources Planning Programme establishes that public access to the park's Mediterranean coast may be restricted, within the framework of the current Coast Law, in the sectors and periods that are deemed appropriate for the adequate protection of natural resources, and envisages the possibility of carrying out the temporary or permanent closure of paths in the locality of the protected space

and of restricting access to the coast; such measures are geared towards helping to protect these areas against the mass influx of visitors in the summer season.



Making use of this facility, the Murcia Region began in **2010** and during the summer period to restrict motor vehicle access and parking in this natural space, with the aim of minimising the impact on coastal habitats.

Between **2010 and 2013** restrictions were placed on access to car parks so that on weekdays vehicular access to the car parks was permitted until they became full, while at weekends visitors were able to gain access only by means of a free bus service, with access by motor vehicle being prohibited on such days. The outcome was an enhancement in the state of conservation of the habitats, thanks to the restriction on the movement of vehicles and visitors.

In **2015** a new system to regulate access was introduced that extended throughout the entire summer period and limited access by motor vehicle until the maximum capacity of the parking areas (466 vehicles) was reached.

In **2016**, the Water, Agriculture and Environment Department, working through the Socioeconomic Development of the Environment Office, in collaboration with the Council of Cartagena and with the agreement of the Governing Council of the Regional Park, put in place a new Model for Regulating Access to the Beaches of the Calblanque SCI and Regional Park.

This system for regulating access is as follows:

- Regulation period: **from 25 June to 4 September** inclusive. 72 days in total.
- Scope of application: main access points to the Regional Park's beach areas (RM-12 and the Camino de Los Belones) and the access points to the Larga, Negrete, Calblanque, Arturo, Magre and Atochar beach areas.
- Hours when the measures apply: 09:30 – 20:30.
- Operational details:

- a) Motor vehicle access is not permitted to the beach areas from 09:30. After this time visitors who request it and have paid the appropriate fare are offered a bus service to access the beaches in the Regional Park, departing from the village of Belones and also picking up passengers at the park-and-ride carpark located at the entrance to the Regional Park.
- b) The restriction on motor vehicles is enforced by barriers operated by the personnel appointed to control them at the two main entrances to the beaches of the Regional Park (RM-12 and the Camino de Los Belones), and at the two secondary entrances of Cobaticas and Camino de las Salinas.
- c) Outside the hours when access is restricted, from 20:30 to 9:30 the following day, motor vehicle access and parking is only permitted in the area of El Atochar. To this end and within these hours, the Socioeconomic Development of the Environment Office has secondary access control points to prevent vehicles entering the areas of Larga-Negrete and Arturo and Magre in Calblanque.
- d) The access restrictions do not apply in any way to the owners of land holdings, holders of rights pertaining to their use, people with a certified motor disability, those responsible for providing municipal maintenance or security services, people taking part in other work explicitly authorised by the Socioeconomic Development of the Environment Office or those appropriately authorised by the Socioeconomic Development of the Environment Office, who will have free access to the Regional Park to carry out the permitted activities.

- Establishment of a *Car-free Mondays* initiative, run every Monday throughout September. This initiative, as well as completely avoiding motor vehicles entering the beach area on the four Mondays of September, endeavours to convert these days into environmental awareness and volunteering days, with activities organised for all those who want to come and enjoy the Park using alternative means of transport.

In order to apply these measures, the following services have been put in place:

- Security guard and information service at the access points to the Regional Park. This involved a contract for the “Service of protection of the biodiversity of the Calblanque SCI during the summer of 2016 by regulating the access of visitors and providing environmental information”.
- Bus service to the beaches of Calblanque Regional Park, under the management of the TRAGSA municipal corporation.
- Publicity campaign to raise awareness of the new system regulating access to the Calblanque beaches.

In light of the encouraging results obtained in 2016 (45,000 people used the bus service and the entry of more than 30,000 vehicles was avoided over the 72 days of operation), [the arrangements for regulating access](#) were repeated for the summer of **2017** and new measures introduced:

Nocturnal closure of the beaches was added: between 20:30 and 07:30 the following day it is not permitted to enter the Park by car;

The complete closure of the Negrete sector was also established;

[New reductions](#) in the price charged to the public were introduced;

An anti-cigarette butt campaign was launched to prevent littering the beaches.



Evidence of the enhancement of the Park is provided by the nesting attempts made by loggerhead sea turtles, a very rare occurrence in Spain. The experts of the DG believe that the nocturnal closure has had a bearing on this phenomenon, although this cannot be proved. What is beyond doubt is that night time closure is fundamental to creating the conditions of tranquillity and the absence of lighting on beaches that this endangered species needs to nest, something that is very infrequently found on the rest of the coast.

Among other activities the following have been carried out, all linked to the project in question:

Working meetings with the Public Use Committee of the Governing Council of the Calblanque Regional Park and other interested public and private participants.

Activities to regulate the impact on natural habitats stemming from the surrounding traffic and the improvement of habitats in the Calblanque Regional Park by reducing dust from public footpaths;

Tasks involving regulating visitor access and providing environmental information and monitoring of beaches;

Information and environmental awareness campaign: design and activation of public awareness initiatives publicising the system regulating access, the design and publication of information literature and the production of information videos;

Improvement of the public infrastructure and facilities: installation of gates, improvement of paths and signage and works to restore roadside drainage;

Follow-up, analysis, reports and conclusions drawn from the data collected at the access and environmental information points during summer 2016 in the Calblanque Regional Park.

In 2016, the eligible cost of the initiatives carried out totalled €119,532, with funding from the ERDF for €95,625.60.

The impact of this operation translates into:

- **A reduction in the number of vehicles entering the park, falling from 35,799 in 2015 to 4,730 in 2016.**
- **More than 45,000 people took advantage of the *Calblanque 4:40* service, the majority of them Spanish or foreign tourists. Thanks to this system for gaining access to the Regional Park and the publicity materials designed and adapted to the needs of different audiences, visitors to the Regional Park were successfully made aware of the fact that *it is possible to reconcile sustainable tourism policies with protection of the environment.***

Verification of the criteria for the selection of the project as an example of good practice:

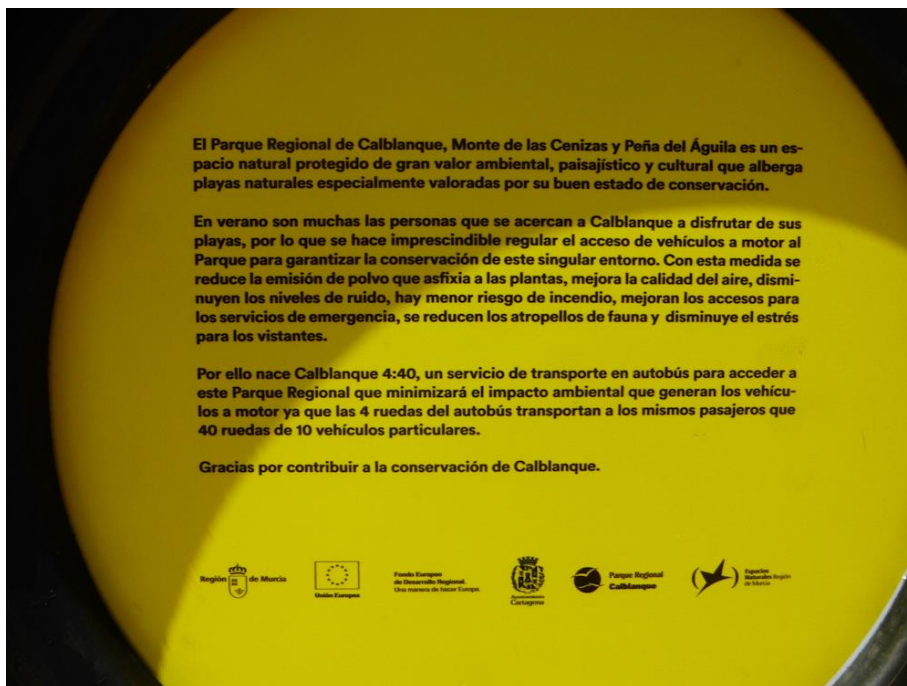
1. The project has been appropriately publicised among beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries and the general public.

Given the novelty of the system for regulating access introduced in 2016, and in order to ensure that the new access system should yield good results and become well known, accepted and approved by the general public, and particularly by the beach-users and the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, a series of awareness-raising and communication activities was designed.

Prior to the launch of the *Calblanque 4:40* service, various publicity activities were carried out and these were reinforced once the service was up and running. It was decided to dub the campaign Calblanque 4:40 in reference to the idea that “four wheels are better than forty”, the argument being that “the four wheels of the bus are capable of carrying the same number of passengers as forty wheels of private vehicles”

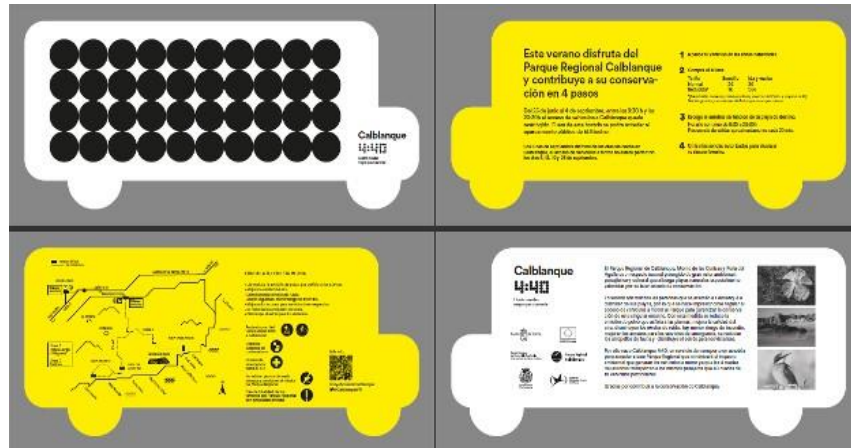
As part of the preparatory work it is worth highlighting the design of the campaign; this involved carrying out a study and adopting a communications strategy for the launch of the initiative to raise awareness of the access-regulation system with the creation of various elements of communication:

- Three words representing the main values of the Regional Park were chosen: “**Flora**”, “**Fauna**” and “**Playa**” (**Beach**). These three words were constructed using old and recyclable tyres on a portable structure that was sited in highly visible locations in Cartagena, Cabo de Palos, the entrance of the Regional Park and Murcia. It also accompanied the relevant presentations made to the news media.



- Information panels: the aforementioned structure was used to display photographs of the landscapes, fauna and flora of the park and information panels setting out the reasons for the access-regulation initiative and how the system was going to work.
- Design of signage, bus decals, uniforms, graphic customisation of ticket booths, bus stops, passes for residents and owners, bus tickets and other elements.

- Design and production of leaflets and a flyer explaining the reasons behind access regulation and how the system would work.

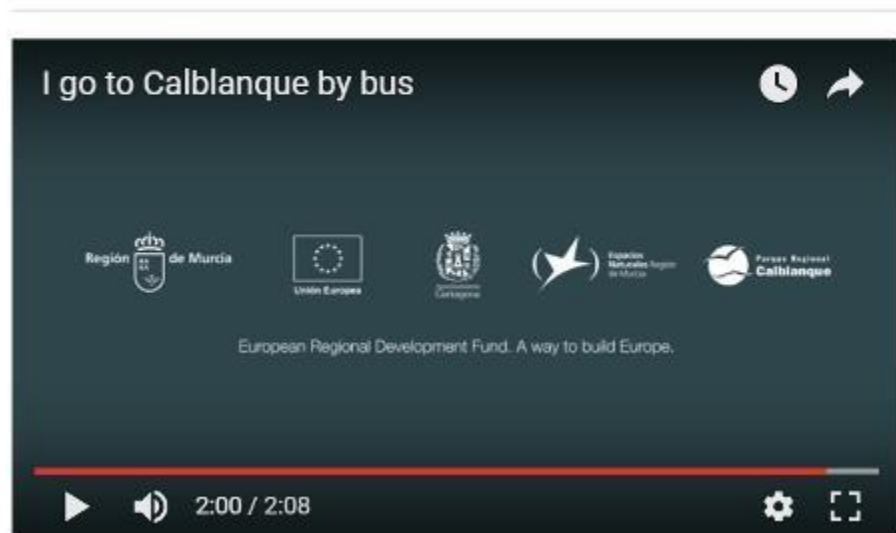


- Direct distribution of the leaflet with a more direct explanation aimed at the residents of the surrounding villages and settlements (Los Belones, Cabo de Palos, the area south of La Manga, areas close to the villages around the Mar Menor lagoon, etc.).
- A video for the campaign was designed and produced in both Spanish and English (“Yo a Calblanque en bus”, “I go to Calblanque by bus”) and another educational video making reference to the geography (“Yo en Calblanque por la senda señalizada”, “In Calblanque, I use the indicated path”).

[2016 Yo a Calblanque en bus](#) (English-language version: [2016 I go to Calblanque by bus](#))

[2016 Yo en Calblanque por la senda señalizada](#) (English-language version: [2016 In Calblanque, I use the indicated path](#))

I go to Calblanque by bus



- Basic communication training was given to the team.
- Together with the drafting of press releases and various other technical elements aimed at assisting the Park management in the communication field.

Among the efforts made to reinforce the communication during the period of access-regulation, mainly aimed at strengthening the image and the user-friendliness of the service, encouraging participation and user-loyalty and consolidating the institutional and administrative image of the system, it is worth highlighting the following:

- The Twitter account @CalblanquePR: account activity was frenetic; it was initiated two weeks before the launch of the *Calblanque 4:40* service, acquiring in almost two and a half months, as at 20 September 2016, 730 followers and 942 likes. 1,248 tweets and 555 photos and videos were published.

- The video “Calblanque desde el aire” (“Calblanque from the air”) was created using a drone
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1uyEPELSo8>)
- An announcement for the buses was created in Spanish and English.

2.- The project incorporates innovative elements.

This project features various innovative elements:

- Collaboration between public administrations for the attainment of a shared goal, as manifested by the agreement signed with the Cartagena Town Hall
<http://www.borm.es/borm/documento?obj=anu&id=747368>
- Regulation of public use through the prohibition of motor vehicle access, facilitating access by public transport.
- Raising public awareness by means of a wide-ranging publicity campaign. This campaign has contributed to the success of the initiative.
- Social participation: The measures introduced to regulate access to the Calblanque Regional Park in 2016 were submitted and agreed at the meeting held on 12 April of the Governing Council of the Park; this is the protected area’s main participatory body and includes representative of landowners, residents, universities, NGOs, farming organisations and the various government authorities.
 - Volunteers: The “Car-free Mondays” initiative encourages sustainable mobility in the Park and the running of conservation and awareness-raising activities with various associations of volunteers. The programmed activities included a guided walk to the Cala de las Mulas, organised by the Calblanque Association, the cleaning of areas of special environmental importance carried out by the Cobaticas-La Jordana Residents’ Association and the environmental restoration of farming areas in the inner part of the Regional Park organised by the Association of South East Naturalists (ANSE) within the framework of the LIFE-Tetraclinis-Europa project, with the sponsorship of Gas Natural Fenosa and the support of the Southern Arc Community of Irrigators. As the finale of the campaign, the Ecologists in Action Association organised an activity to clean up the waste from the northern flank of the Calblanque Regional Park.
- Sources of sustainable energy: installation at the access control points of barriers with solar panels.
- Intensive use of social media: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) as a means of communicating with the target audience.



3.- The results obtained with the project meet the goals that were set.

The data showing the number of vehicles that entered Calblanque in the period from 15 July to 31 August in recent years:

- 2014: 28,000
- 2015: 35,799
- 2016: 4,730

confirm the very significant fall there has been thanks to the new access regime introduced in 2016 and the consequent protection afforded to the Regional Park from potential threats.

4.- Contributes to resolving a regional problem or weakness

Securing a car-free Calblanque has been a longstanding demand both of residents living near the park and of ecology groups, which had for some time been reporting the damage to the flora and fauna caused by the continuous circulation of motorised vehicles to and from the beach.

On the one hand, an attempt was made to ensure the conservation of the flora and fauna near the footpaths and the surrounding areas, given that the beaches at the Calblanque Regional Park are encircled by highly fragile and important sand dune systems that need to be conserved as sites of considerable natural interest, and on the other hand to satisfy visitors, by regulating the use of those looking for natural spaces with low-density occupation.

5.- It has a high degree of impact on the target audience

It directly affects all visitors to the Calblanque beaches, as well as landowners in the area.

6.- Horizontal equal opportunity and environmental sustainability criteria have been taken into account

The tendering process linked to this project respected the principle of equal opportunities at all times.

It is worth emphasising, as a positive discrimination measure, that the access restrictions will under no circumstances affect people with a certified motor disability and that when setting prices for the public, reductions for reasons of disability were taken into account.

As far as environmental sustainability is concerned, the project is founded on this principle.

7. Synergies with other public policies and instruments

An agreement (<http://www.borm.es/borm/documento?obj=anu&id=747368>) was signed with Cartagena Town Hall to ensure that the regulation of public use became a reality; this document states the local authority's commitments in accordance with its competences.

A public budget has been drawn up and established covering the cost of providing the service in accordance with Legislative Decree 1/2004, dated 9 July, whereby the Merged Text of the Law of Taxes, Public Prices and Special Contributions was approved.