

Battle of the Tagus: Citizens of Spain and Portugal unite to save their greatest river

20th June 2009 - Demonstration in Talavera de la Reina

River Tagus: Fact and Fiction

All Spanish and Portuguese children are taught that the Tagus, the longest river in the Iberian Peninsula, has its source in the Albarracín Mountains of Spain and runs westwards for over 1000 km, before flowing into the Atlantic next to the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. Sadly this schoolbook statement is currently fiction or, to be exact, only 20% true. The fact is 80% of the Tagus is siphoned off to fuel industrial agriculture and urban development in the Spanish Mediterranean. What remains of the natural mid and lower reaches of the Tagus are a shadow of their former selves, heavily polluted, and, in places, little more than open sewers.

Yesterday's dream

The transfer of water from the Tagus was devised in the late 60's, during times of dictatorship in Spain and Portugal, as a means of promoting economic growth in Spain's arid and then depressed provinces of Alicante and Murcia. The actual transfer started in 1979, via giant pipes installed in the Bolarque reservoir before Madrid and has so far pumped away over 10 km³ from the Tagus to the Mediterranean (equivalent to a seven-year water supply for a city like New York).

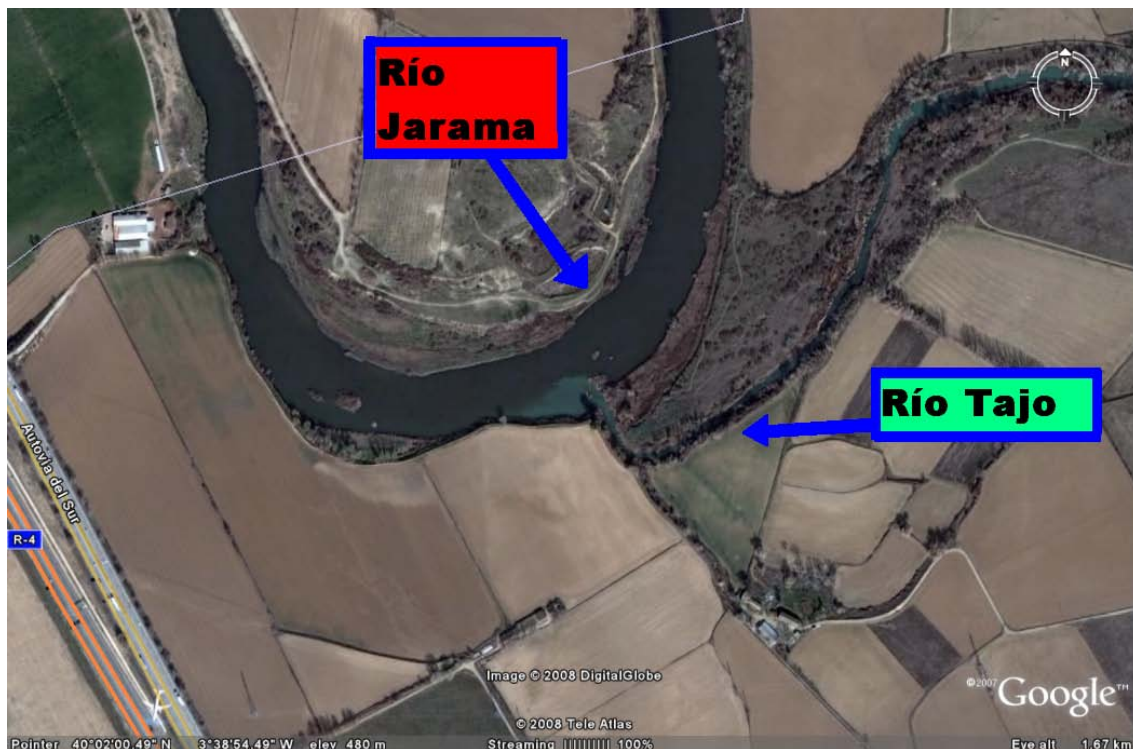


Giant pipes pump away the Tagus at Bolarque reservoir. "Our Rivers, Our Future: No More Water Transfers"

Today's disaster

The plan, as devised by Franco's engineers, was to divert a "surplus" of 600 hm³/year, roughly half the total flow of the Tagus as measured in 1967.

Nowadays decreased rainfall and growth of human population have reduced the total headwater flow by half again, but the authorised diverted volume has been kept more or less constant, at 300-600 hm³/year. So, in effect, the transfer now accounts for 80% of the headwaters and the middle Tagus becomes almost dry until it meets the river Jarama, a tributary heavily polluted by 6 million people in the Madrid conurbation. Satellite photos clearly show a thin trickle of "white" Tagus flowing into a broad ribbon of "black" Jarama downstream of Madrid.



Depleted Tagus joins "black" Jarama near Madrid

The river that stops

Thus the middle Tagus, as it meanders around the historic city of Toledo and past the town of Talavera de la Reina is now little more than a sluggish stream made up of greater Madrid's poorly processed waste-waters. Here flow is much reduced and sometimes, as in Talavera during August 2007, the river actually dries up altogether. In addition the riverine forests have been much depleted and natural ecosystems are fast disappearing.

Two countries, one river

What is left of the Tagus as it eventually reaches Lisbon is shrinking in quantity and quality every year. This is a source of friction between Spain and Portugal and an issue which is likely to become more acute in the future. The Tagus Network was created by concerned citizens from both countries as a response

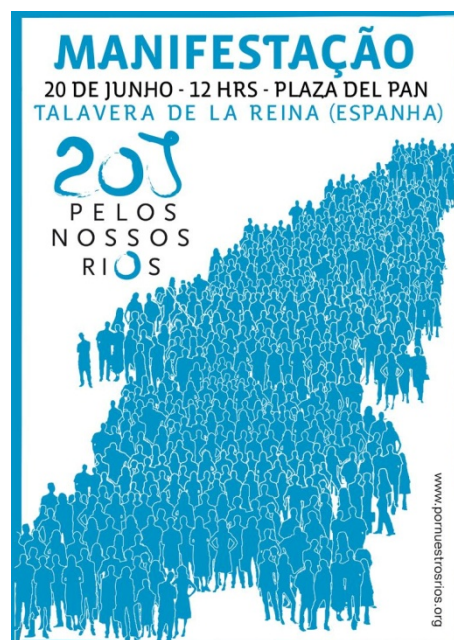
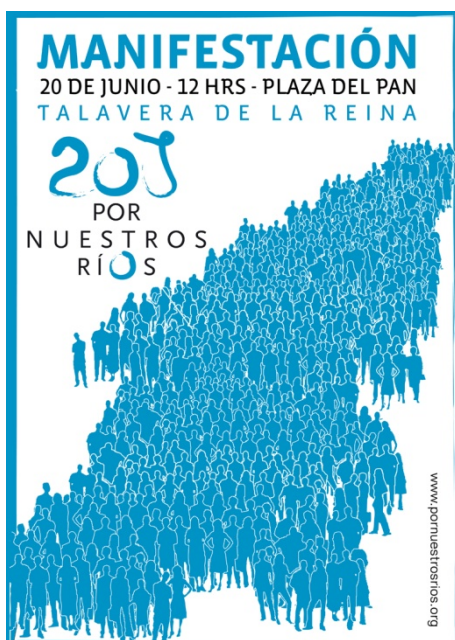
to the perceived passivity of governments and politicians. The stated aim of the Network is bring back the lost biodiversity of the Tagus and restore the historic river which connects Toledo and Lisbon, source of inspiration to so many poets and travellers, to its former glory.



Tagus Network sympathisers in Vila Nova da Barquinha, Portugal

20th June 2009 - Demonstration in Talavera

The first public demonstration will take place on 20th June in Talavera de la Reina, the most populous city on the Spanish Tagus. Ironically Talavera is the very same site where Spain and Portugal joined forces in the Peninsular War against Napoleon exactly 200 years ago. This time there are no invaders to oust, just a great river to save.



More information:

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