

Portugal's Secretary of State for the Environment has halted the proposed destruction of the Pera Marsh IBA to make way for a golf course and holiday complex. Pera Marsh is better known to birders as Salgados Lagoon (Lagoa dos Salgados). The development has been suspended while a full Environmental Impact Assessment is carried out, which conservationists hope will lead to a permanent reprieve for the site. The Secretary of State acted within hours of receiving a petition signed by almost 21,000 people. The fact that more than half the signatories came from outside Portugal has helped transform a local dispute over the fate of a mismanaged and undervalued wetland on the Algarve coast into what is said to be Portugal's largest environmental campaign in 30 years. The petition was delivered by the Friends of Lagoa dos Salgados, a coalition of NGOs including SPEA, the BirdLife Partner in Portugal. "In ordering the EIA, the Secretary of State has met the first of our requests", said Domingos Leitao, SPEA's Rural Programme Coordinator. "The year has begun well, but if 2013 is to mark a real turning point for Salgados, the Ministry of the Environment must also introduce full protection for the site, and implement the management plan to maintain and enhance its biodiversity." Pera Marsh qualifies as an Important Bird Area because of regionally significant populations of waterbirds considered threatened within the European Union. These include wintering and migrating Spoonbills, breeding Little Bitterns, Purple Herons, Purple Swamphens and Black-winged Stilts, and Portugal's only breeding Ferruginous Ducks. Almost 150 bird species have been recorded at Salgados, which has become one of the prime birding spots in the Algarve, generating hundreds of thousands of euros in ecotourism revenues every year. It is also a regular study site for school and university students from inside and outside Portugal. But Pera Marsh was not assessed as an IBA until 2002, and missed inclusion on the list of Portugal's Special Protection Areas for birds (SPAs), sites which automatically become part of the European Union's Natura 2000 network of protected areas. Governments which have attempted to develop SPAs, or failed to maintain them, have been prosecuted in the European Court. SPEA is confident that as a result of the EIA, the development of Salgados will be thrown out permanently. The project, first approved in 2008, was in breach of newly introduced planning laws for the Algarve, and would not be approved if resubmitted today. SPEA and other Friends of Lagoa dos Salgados now want the government to grant formal protection of the site as a nature reserve, and ideally an SPA. They are also calling for immediate implementation of an already-approved management plan for Salgados. Among other issues, the plan specifies a system of sluices, which would allow the water level to be managed for the mutual benefit of nesting birds and the people who use the land surrounding the marsh. In recent years, the sandbar separating Salgados from the sea has been repeatedly breached by bulldozers when nearby golf courses were threatened with flooding, draining the marsh and leaving nests exposed.