

# EMILIO LAGUNA

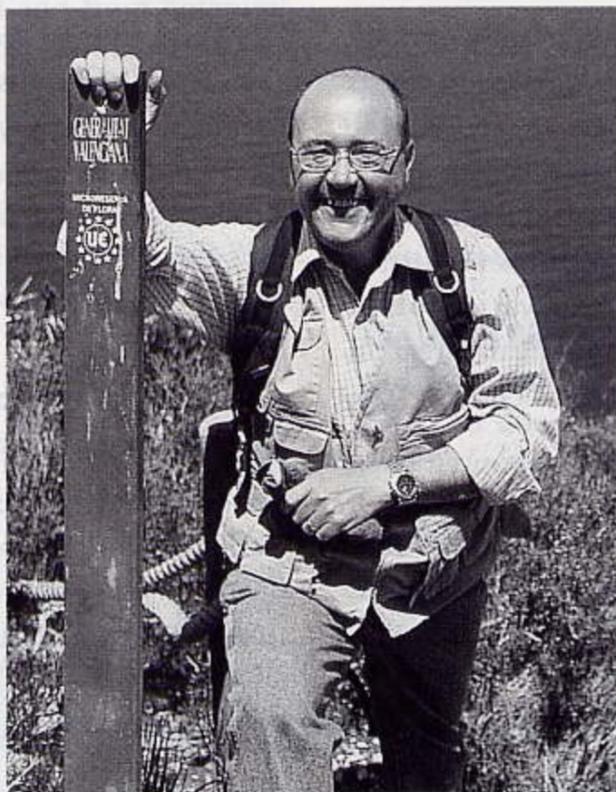
## *Energetic proponent of plant micro-reserves*

*Emilio Laguna is well known as the man who created the network of plant micro-reserves in Valencia, on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, but this is part of a much wider plant conservation agenda that he is tackling.*

The young Laguna grew up on a small self-sufficient farm with pigs, goats and “all kinds of ancient vegetables, most now lost from cultivation in Spain”. Born in his beloved Valencia, his family moved later to Cordoba. As a boy he was first interested in animals but at school his interest shifted to plants. He returned to Valencia, where he did his first degree in biological sciences, followed by a second degree and then a doctorate on the phenology of Mediterranean plants.

It must have been hard work, as for two years he had to visit each of over 40 plots in his transect every two weeks. “Phenology is a great training for a field botanist”, he told me. “I saw how the vegetation responds to disturbance and change, as well as the changing seasons, and how plants develop their competitive traits.” This stimulated his interest in the endemic flora, whose phenology had been very little studied if at all before.

In 1986 this rather well trained field botanist entered the Valencian regional administration. Spain is a strongly decentralized country, and with the exception of national parks, nature conservation is entirely in the hands of the 17 regional governments. Soon afterwards he was appointed director of the Nature Park Font Roja. This comprises a ridge near the town of Alcoi, covered with a magnificent forest of holm oak (*Quercus ilex* subsp. *rotundifolia*) and a host of other species. Protected since 1332, it is the most ancient forest in the region. This was Laguna’s first experience of practical conservation. He encouraged local people to participate, a revolutionary



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approach in Spain at that time, and worked to regenerate the forest. “My first years there were really amazing,” he told me, “as we were working with shepherds and hunters”.

In 1990 he returned to an office job in the city of Valencia, and was appointed head of the section on protection of flora and fauna in the Environment Department. In 1997 he was promoted to a senior, more political position, but missed the field work and in 2001 returned to his earlier post. He is now to be head of a new section devoted to his real love, plant conservation.

Studying the flora he had been struck by how most of the endemic plants were in ecosystems that occupied only very small areas. From this insight he developed the concept of plant micro-reserves (see PLANT TALK 14, pp. 20–23, 33), as a way of protecting a large number of endemic plant sites. This must be one of the first conservation designations designed specifically for plants. With help from the EU LIFE Fund and substantial support from the Valencian administration, his department has now established 188 micro-reserves, all protected by a special Valencian law and covering a vast range of plant sites.

Laguna is one of nature’s enthusiasts and has a great talent for working with others. He has a dedicated team of about nine botanists working for him, and he takes every opportunity to develop allies from a wide range of other bodies as part of his approach: a field visit to a micro-reserve may include a visit to the Mayor’s office in the local village or a generous lunch may be hosted at a local inn for participants after a day’s field work – at 3 or even 4 pm as is the Spanish custom! Laguna is keen to promote plant conservation as part of a wider cultural agenda, especially in the mountain villages that desperately need investment in tourism.

Micro-reserves are only part of the picture. Laguna’s vision is for plant conservation in the widest sense. He is presently directing another EU-funded project, from 1999 to 2003, to restore vegetation in experimental plots across the region. Some 150 terrestrial species and 60 aquatics are being reintroduced in 280 different plots, covering the full range of vegetation types. Again he has involved universities, local people and local administrations, sub-contracting work to local botanists and so helping to create a professional cadre of those with skills for plant conservation. When this is complete, he hopes it can be scaled up, so as to restore some of the vegetation lost in recent years. And his next challenge? How to strengthen and recover the ancient links between people and vegetation, and to generate new economic opportunities based on the native flora.

Here is a man who has a vision of how plants should be conserved across a whole region and who, through hard work and enthusiasm, has turned much of that vision into reality. It would be hard to find another part of Europe where this has happened. And it is even more remarkable considering that this has all been accomplished within a decade. 🍀

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