

# URDAIBAI RED ALERT



P R E S S   K I T



Mediterranean Alliance for Wetlands  
May 2025





© Mikel Martinez De Osaba

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Biosphere Reserve

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# SUMMARY

## URDAIBAI

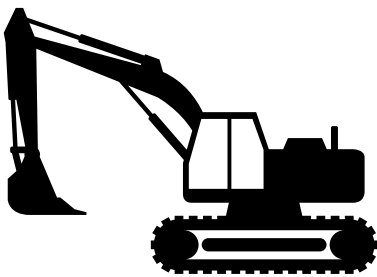
*A protected wetland  
with multiple designations*

- [Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve](#)
- [Ramsar](#)
- [Natura 2000](#)
- [Important Bird Area \(IBA\)](#)
- [Key Biodiversity Area \(KBA\)](#)
- International agreements: [Bern Convention](#), [AEWA](#), [Convention of Migratory Species](#).



Threatened by an  
**extension of the  
Guggenheim Museum**

in two towns in the Urdaibai reserve,  
Gernika and Murueta, connecting both  
locations "through a green path". The  
extension would be based in the core zone  
of the protected area.



**40 Million €**

The project has been on the drawing board since 2009, but in July 2023, the **Spanish Ministry and the Bizkaia province** signed an agreement mentioning this

amount for the execution of the extension project. However, the project has not been officially approved.

Source: UNESCO. Comité Español del Programa MaB, 2006. Instituto Geográfico Nacional

### Platform Guggenheim Urdaibai STOP

This is the organisation that triggered the red alert.

<https://guggenheimurdaibaistop.info/es/>

### An important civil society movement

This project lacks transparency and involvement of civil society.

In February 2023, "Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop" was constituted. They organised protest, petitions, campaigns.





# MAP OF THE URDAIBAI BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Basque Country, Spain.



-  Zona núcleo
-  Zona tampón
-  Zona de transición
-  Elevaciones
-  Núcleos de población
-  Marismas
-  Carreteras



NB : The Alliance uses the same definition as Medwet to define the Mediterranean. It is the totality of all countries in the Mediterranean basin (27 countries), including Spain.





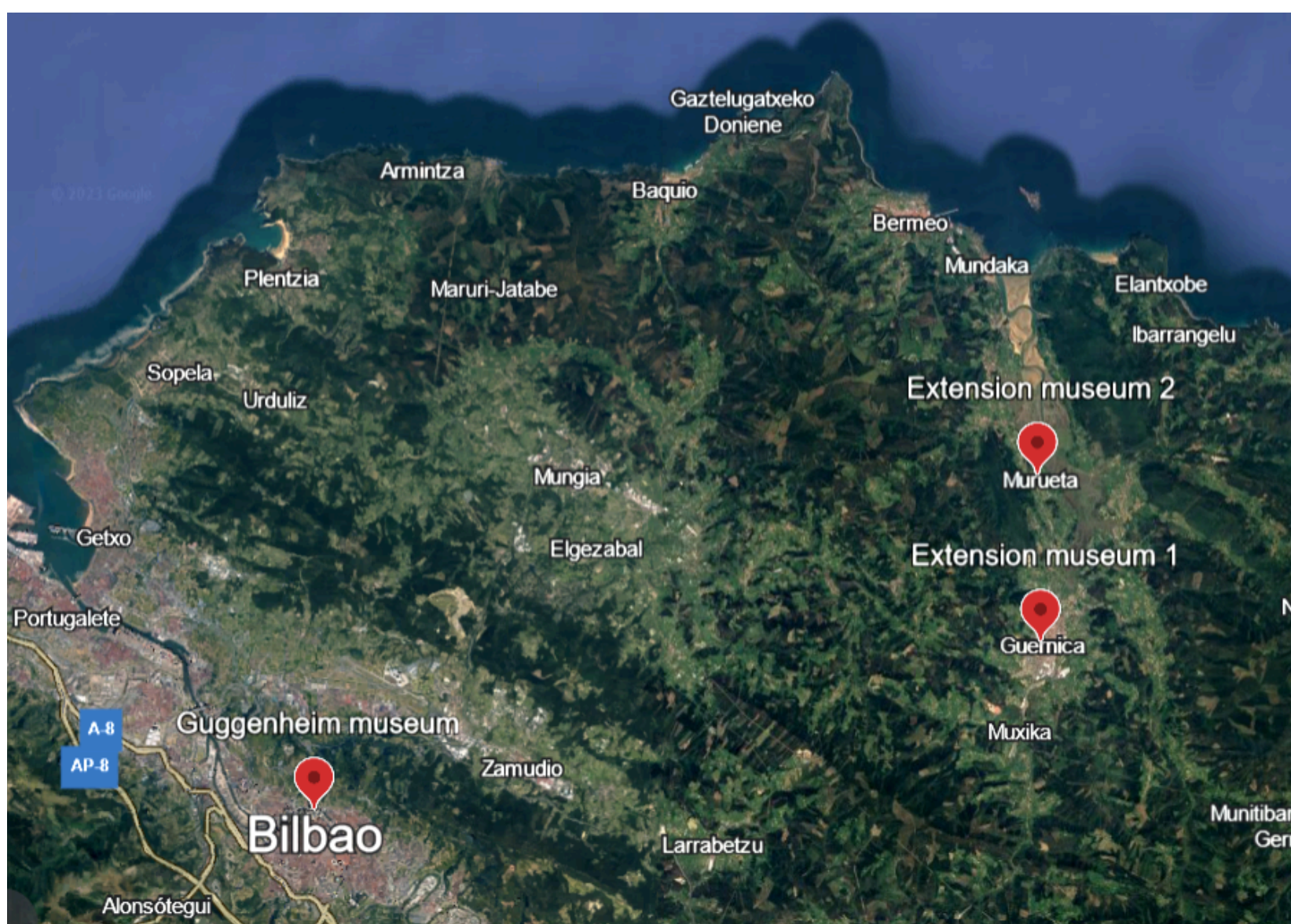


## THE PROJECT

The project threatening the Urdaibai estuary in the Basque Country is the **expansion of the Guggenheim museum Bilbao**.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is a museum of modern and contemporary art designed by the architect Frank Gehry, and located in Bilbao, in the Basque Country. The museum was inaugurated in 1997.

The expansion of the museum would take place in the Urdaibai estuary in the Basque Country.







# THE PROJECT



The expansion of the Guggenheim Bilbao in Urdaibai consists of two sites:

- One in **Gernika** at the Fábrica de Dalia (an old cutlery factory)
- And another in **Murueta** at Los Astilleros de Murueta (a shipyard), both connected by a "green path".



:: GRÁFICO G.H.





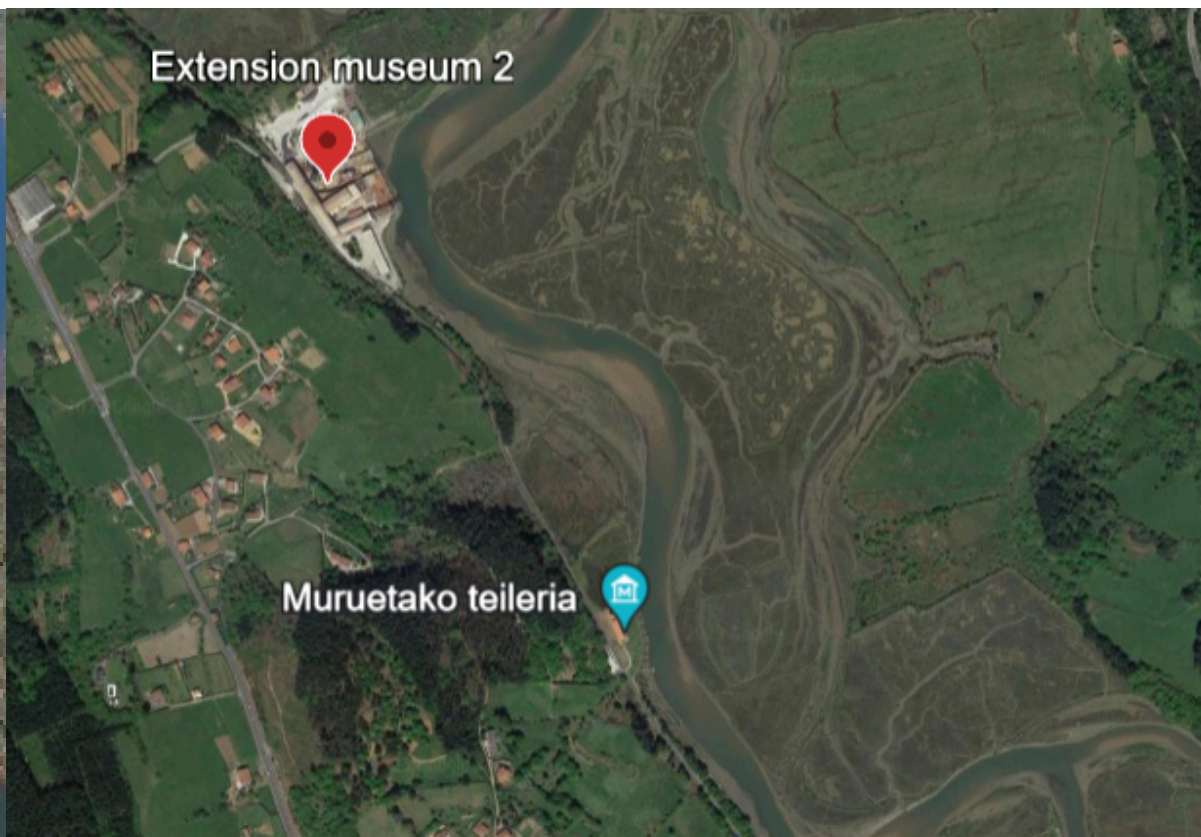


# THE PROJECT

The Gernika site is in an urban area, while the Murueta site is in a natural area, **in the heart of** the Urdaibai estuary.

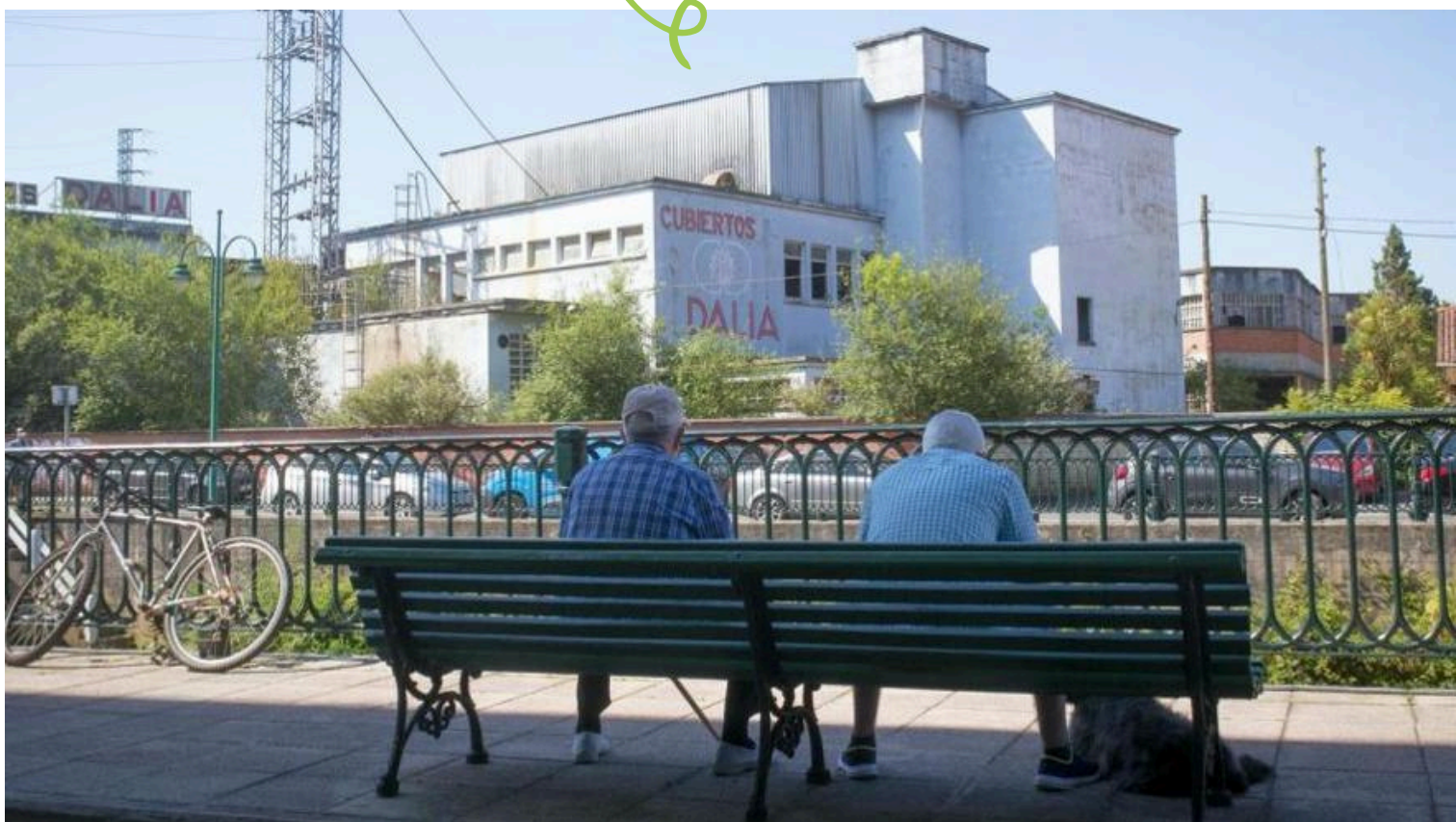


Detail of shipyard - Astillero de Murueta



Location extension museum 2 - Astillero de Murueta

Green path



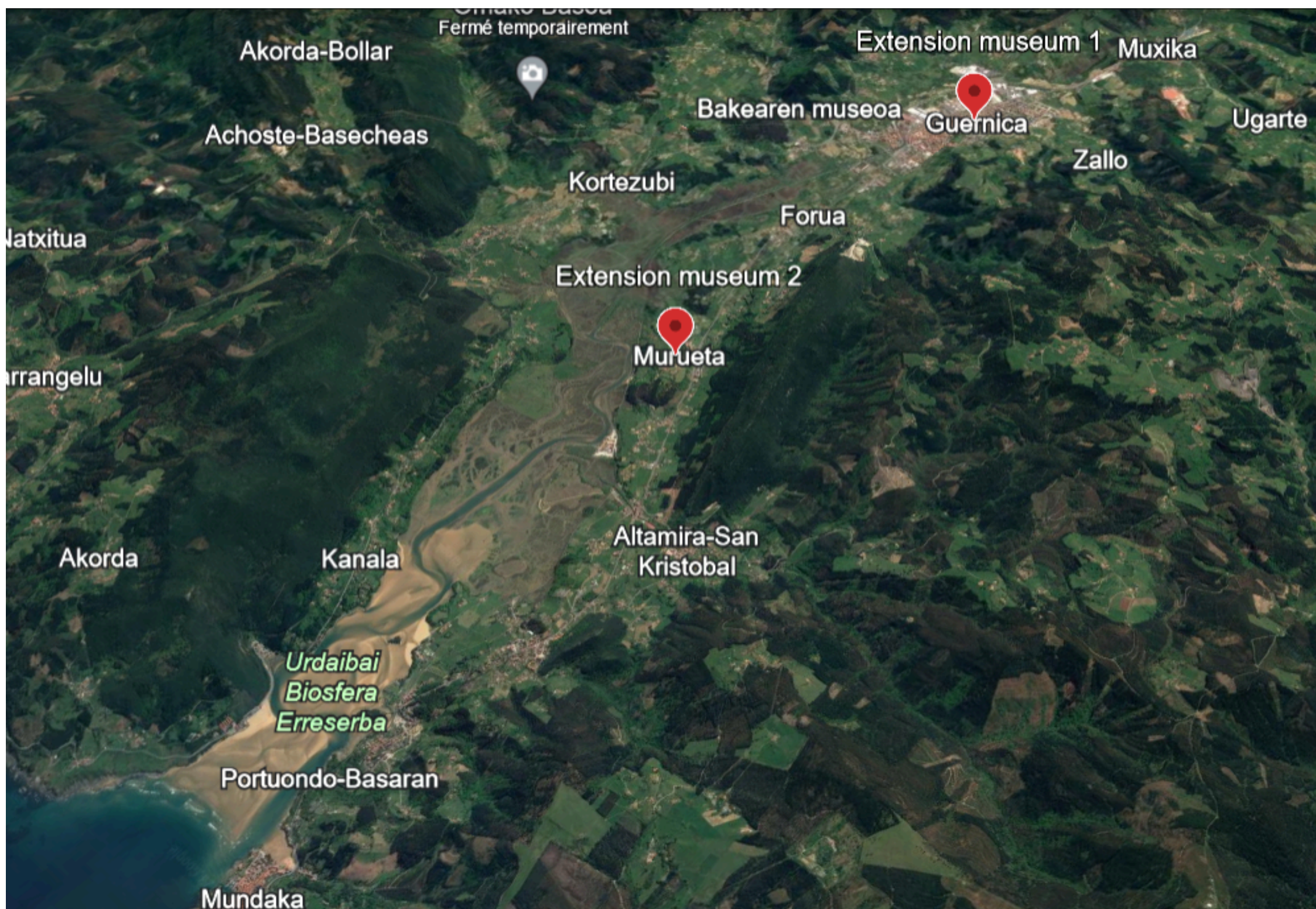
**View of the now demolished Dalia factory**, Gernika - Site extension museum 1





# THE PROJECT

The project **would take place** in a recognised area of natural beauty with a number of **designations**.





# TIMELINE

NEWS RELEASE

PRELIMINARY STUDIES ON THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM BILBAO EXPANSION PROJECT IN URDAIBAI ARE PRESENTED TO THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION BOARD OF TRUSTEES

(NEW YORK, NY – December 16, 2009) – The results of preliminary studies

2008

The initiative is launched with the support of the Provincial Council. - the year of the financial and **brick** crisis

2009

Creation of the Platform Guggenheim Urdaibai STOP

February 2023

Local elections

May 2023

July 2023

Agreement State/Province



Large demonstration

28 october 2023

Para la financiación de otras actuaciones destinadas a la ejecución del proyecto de ampliación discontinua del Museo Guggenheim Bilbao en Urdaibai, la DFB destinará 40.000.000,00 € adicionales.

November 2023

Reduction of shoreline protection from 100m to 20m. Modification of “**Coastal Law**”

Basque regional election

April 2024

May 2024

Administrative appeal against the Ministerial Decree authorising the reduction of the easement for the protection of the public maritime and terrestrial public domain in Murueta.

Second massive demonstration of around 10,000 people in Gernika against the project, the largest seen in the area.

October 2024

The Basque government announces that there will be “an Active Listening Process” on the Guggenheim museum project for Urdaibai.

February 2025

The GUS platform hands a letter over to Mariët Westermann, head of the NY Guggenheim museum, ahead of this meeting to ensure that she is informed of the reality of the opposition to the Urdaibai project.

March 2025

GUS activists displayed an enormous 26m X 3m banner across La Salve bridge in the proximity of the museum to say that Urdaibai is not for sale.

April 2025







# DESIGNATIONS



Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve (1984)



Ramsar (1993)



Natura 2000 (1994)



Key Biodiversity Area (KBA)

Important Bird Area (IBA)



International agreement :  
Bern Convention, AEW, Convention of Migratory Species.

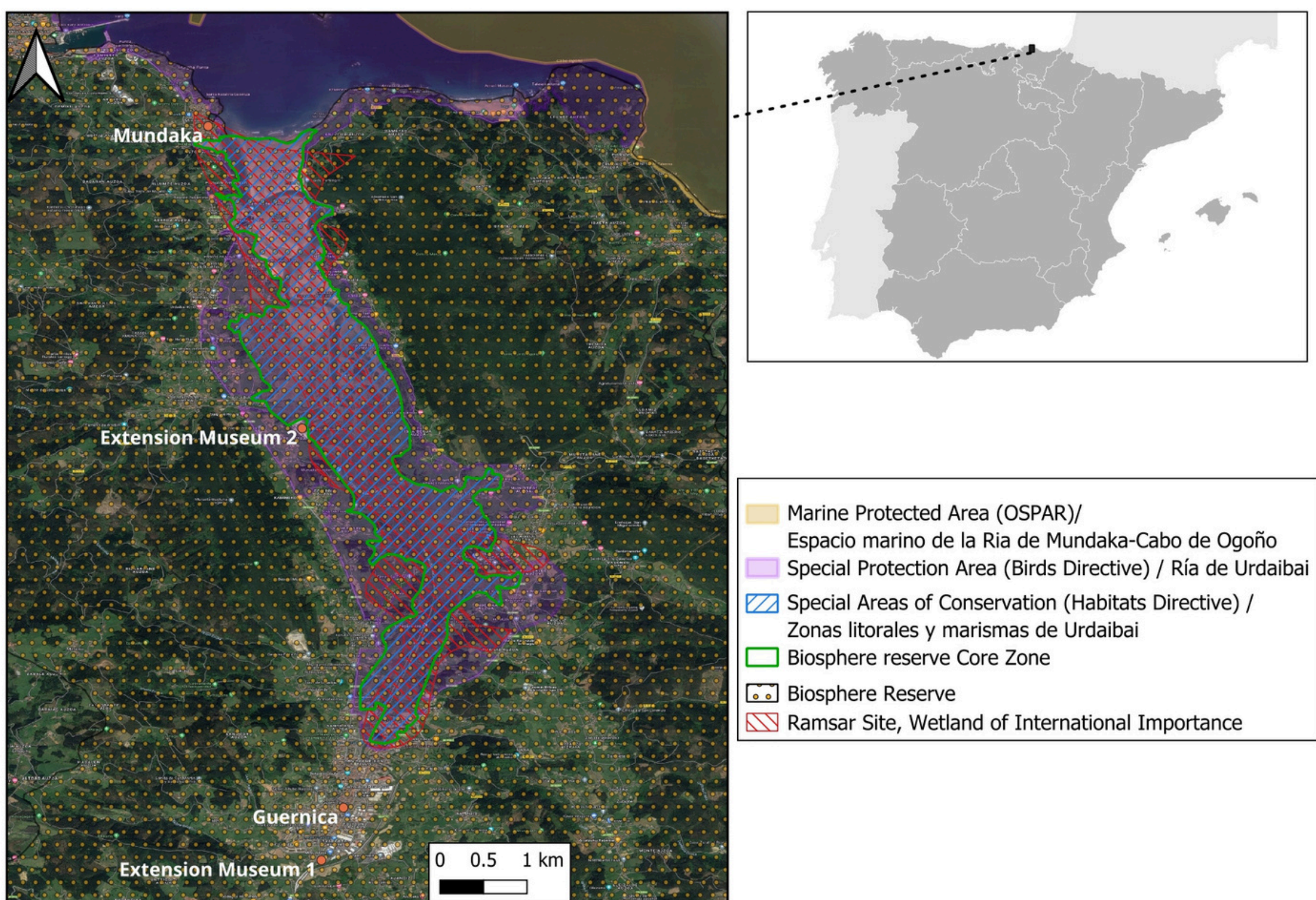




# DESIGNATIONS

**Ramsar site description** : “A coastal wetland complex near the mouth and lower reaches of the Gernika and Mundaka rivers. The site includes **beaches**, regularly and **intermittently inundated salt marshes** supporting salt-resistant vegetation, **intertidal mud and sand flats with Zostera beds**, and **small sedge and reedbeds**.

The area is notable for its rich fauna, which includes a diversity of amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Various species of waterbirds use the site for nesting, staging, or wintering. Significantly, it is **the second most important staging area in Spain for the Dutch breeding population of the Eurasian spoonbill, *Platalea leucorodia***. Presently, increasing tourism and shellfish, crustacean, and annelid worm harvesting are major human activities.”





# BIODIVERSITY

Urdaibai is a reserve of great natural richness (Biosfere reserve site):

- **729** species of fauna
- **821** species of flora
- **86 habitats** (including 26 habitats of Community interest, protected by European directives)
- **52 sites** of geological interest.

These sources are from [the Urdaibaiko itsasadarra / Ría de Urdaibai Natura 2000 site list \(ES0000144\)](#) and the IUCN World Red List.



Typology of the IUCN Red List.



## CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

*Mustela lutreola*

The European Mink

© Bas Kerss

## ENDANGERED

*Austropotamobius pallipes*

The white-clawed crayfish



© Chucholl, Ch.



## VULNERABLE

*Miniopterus schreibersii*

The Common bent-wing bat

© Steve Bourne

## VULNERABLE

*Cerambyx cerdo*

The great capricorn beetle



© Tony Ernsts





# BIODIVERSITY



## VULNERABLE

*Parachondrostoma toxostoma*  
South-west European nase

## VULNERABLE

*Mauremys leprosa*  
The Iberian pond turtle



©



## VULNERABLE

*Coenagrion mercuriale*  
The southern damselfly

© Charles J Sharp

## NEAR THREATENED

*Lucanus cervus*  
The European stag beetle



© Ben Sale



## NEAR THREATENED

*Rhinolophus euryale*  
The Mediterranean horseshoe bat

© Thomas Cuypers





# BIODIVERSITY



## NEAR THREATENED

*Emys orbicularis*

The European pond turtle

## NEAR THREATENED

*Lacerta schreiberi*

The Schreiber's green lizard



© Carminda Santos



## ENDEMIC SPECIES

*Armeria euscadiensis*

El armeria vasca





## BIRD FOCUS

Located on the migratory route, the Urdaibai marshes are home to a remarkable diversity and abundance of birds each season. Various species of waterbirds use the site for nesting, staging or wintering. Regarding the **diversity of bird species**: over 250 species have been recorded, 215 of which are covered by European bird directives.

[The complete list of species of the Natura 2000 site Urdaibaiko itsasadarra / Ría de Urdaibai can be found here.](#)



Urdaibai is a crucial staging area in Spain for the Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*). In 2011, 1454 spoonbills have been recorded (Garaita and Larabide 2013), coming from the north western Europe (The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany and England). There is now a project to encourage spoonbill breeding

### ENDANGERED

The Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is a breeding species in the Biosphere Reserve.



© TtJ.







## BIRD FOCUS

© Tina Nord

Significant Osprey  
Populations (*Pandion  
haliaetus*)



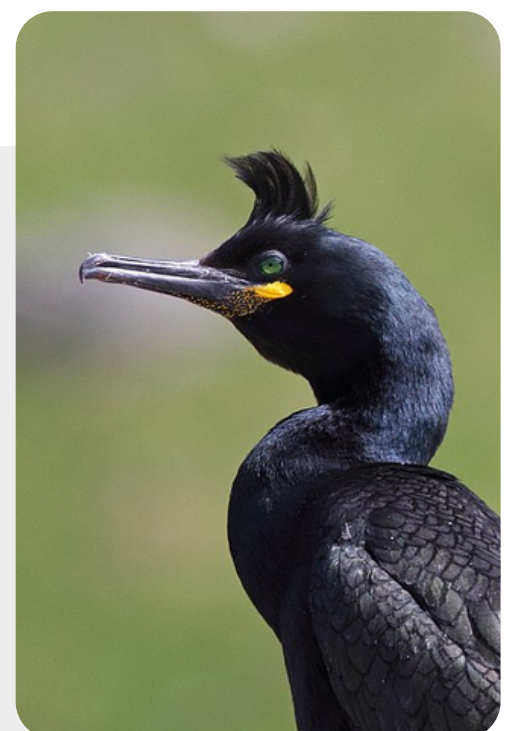
In addition to being a key area in the migration corridor, the site is also an important nesting area for certain species of sea birds.



© Alexandre Roux

Up to **600 pairs** of  
European storm petrel  
(*Hydrobates pelagicus*)

Up to **70 pairs** of  
Shags  
(*Phalacrocorax  
aristotelis*)







# RISKS

## Biodiversity

- Urdaibai is a protected Biosphere Reserve with rich biodiversity, recognized by international conventions such as Ramsar and Natura 2000. It is legally protected by the Basque Government and serves as a key breeding and conservation area for the endangered European mink.
- The estuary also plays a crucial role as a resting site for migratory birds, including the Eurasian spoonbill, whose stay is increasingly shortened by human disturbance. The spoonbill is currently the focus of a Recovery Project at the Urdaibai Bird Center.



© Aitor Galarza

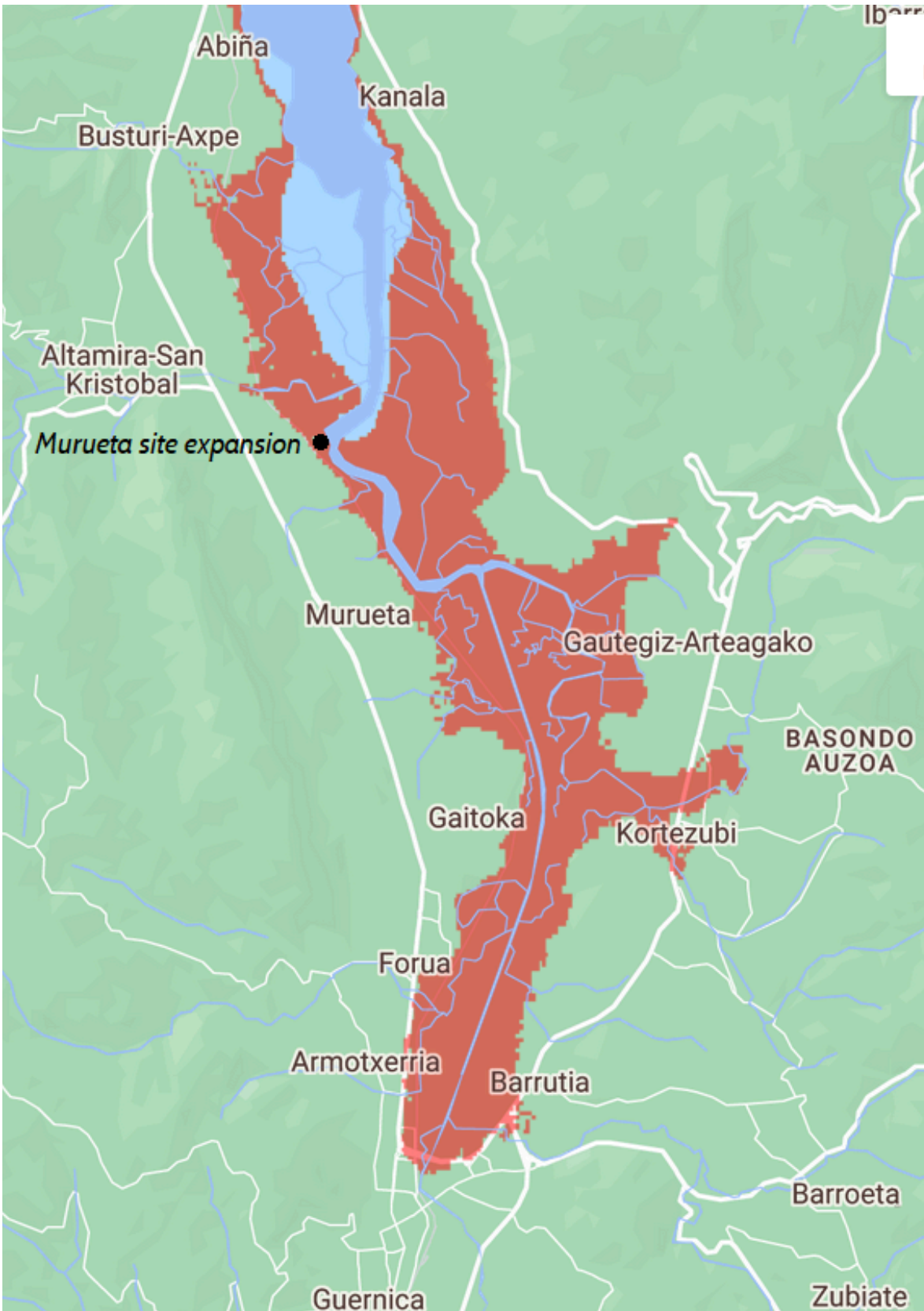




# SEA LEVEL RISE

With a sea level rise of only 60cm (optimistic scenario), the Murueta site is vulnerable to floods. The Basque Water Agency (URA) has informed the Basque Parliament of the "significant risk situation" of flooding of the chosen site in Gernika for the project. In fact, just recently the easement zone in nearby Teileria has been ajusted by “Costas” almost right up to the railway line ([More info here](#))

<https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/costas/participacion-publica/48-des01-00-48-0005-des07-01.html>



COASTAL RISK SCREENING TOOL

## LAND BELOW 0.6 METERS OF WATER

A water level of 0.6 meters above the high tide line could be reached through combinations of sea level rise, tides, and storm surge.

[DETAILS AND LIMITATIONS](#)

WATER LEVEL

0.6 m



Meters ☒ Feet

Below water level



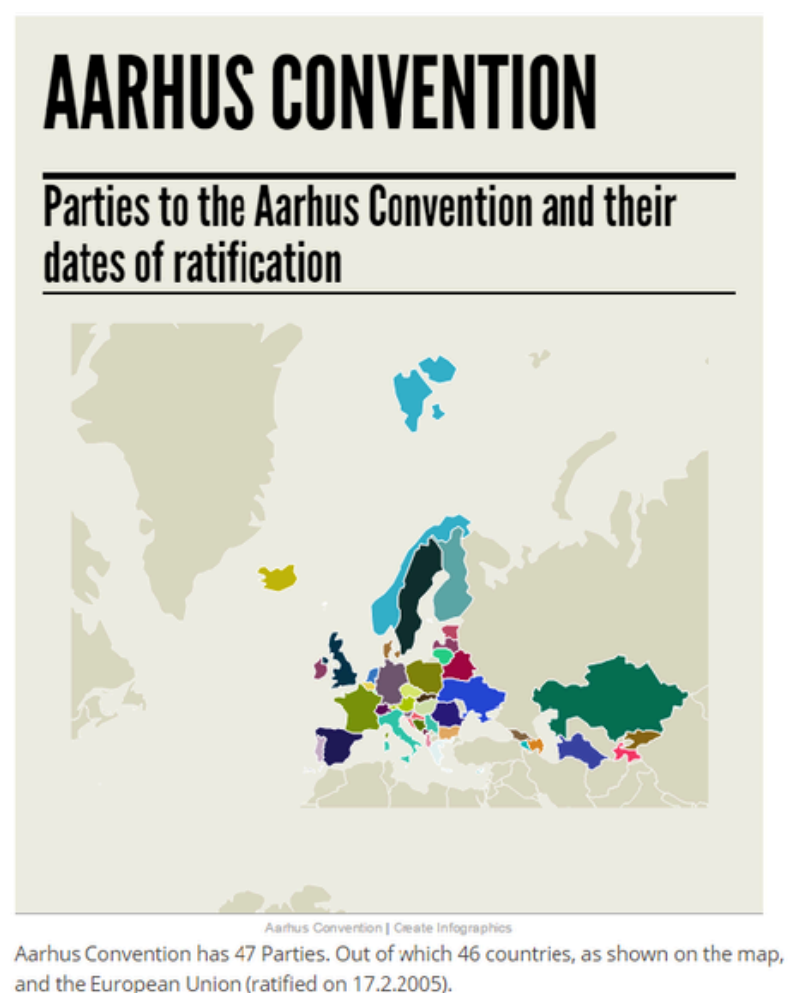




# IRREGULARITIES

## Lack of information and Aarhus Convention

- The **Guggenheim Urdaibai project** raises concerns regarding **compliance with the Aarhus Convention** - which Spain is party to-, particularly on **access to environmental information**. Limited and unofficial information has been made available to the public. This may hinder **meaningful public participation** in the decision-making process.
- Due to **potential non-compliance with the Aarhus Convention**, a complaint has been submitted to the **Secretariat of the Convention's Compliance Committee** in Switzerland.



## Allegations Regarding Modifications to Murueta's Urban Plans

- **Legal allegations** have been submitted in response to the **proposed reduction of the shoreline protection zone (easement area) in the shipyard sector**.
- An additional allegation concerns the decision to **significantly increase the easement zone in the Teileria area, extending it nearly to the railway line**. This allegation does not oppose the increase itself but **calls for the same level of protection to be applied uniformly, including the shipyard area**.





# IRREGULARITIES

## Dalia Factory (expansion site 1)

- [The factory was part of the industrial heritage of this country](#), and more of it could have been preserved.
- The Agreement signed between the Provincial Council of Bizkaia and the Spanish Ministry of Ecological Transition includes the cleaning of the contaminated ground with heavy metals but does not include the cleaning of the aquifers below the surface
- [The area where Dalia is sited is susceptible to flooding](#)
- There is **no Environmental Impact Assessment** or any other assessment of the impact of a museum in this place







# IRREGULARITIES

## The Murueta Shipyard (expansion site 2)

- In 1943, permission was given by the Spanish government for a shipyard to be built in Murueta. In 2018, it should have closed, and in line with the terms of the [Concession \(final page of the document\)](#), the land should have been returned to its original state. In 2024 a ship was built, another one is presently being built, and another is planned.
- Over the years the shipyard has been responsible for dredging the river on four occasions with the corresponding impact on the ecosystem as well as [affecting the famous Left Wave for surfers in Mundaka](#).
- As part of an agreement between the Provincial Council of Bizkaia and the Spanish **Ministry of Ecological Transition, the State—not the shipyard**—will cover the cleanup costs for land contaminated with asbestos and heavy metals next to the shipyard.
- In line with the [European Law on Restoration of Nature](#) the shipyard land should be returned to nature rather than be used for a museum.



© Aitor Galarza







# IRREGULARITIES

## The “Green Pathway”

- This wooden pathway is, in reality, a pathway of enormous proportions and with a clear visibility impact.
- Ancient oak trees would have to be cut down to make way for the lorries and machinery to install the pathway.
- Facilitating access to so many people will have a negative impact on birdlife in what is supposed to be an area of special protection for them.
- Although the project was rejected, there is no guarantee that it won't be presented again

## Supramunicipal Agreement

- The Murueta, Forua, and Gernika town councils have signed an agreement that will allow the Provincial Council of Bizkaia to manage urban planning decisions regarding the future Guggenheim museum.
- This agreement will help to speed up the planning process and reduce the number of legal recourses against the project.







# IRREGULARITIES

## Changes to the Partial Territorial Plan of Gernika-Markina

- [This plan](#) will be changed to take into account the plan for the museums in Gernika and Murueta
- Modification of the Uses and Management Master Plan of the Biosphere Reserve to allow bars, restaurants, hotels, etc., to increase their surface by 15%
- There is no official project, so no Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out.

## ‘Active listening’ process

- The public has been invited to give opinions on a project that has not been clearly or officially presented. Moreover, there is no indication that the outcomes of the consultation will have any impact on the direction taken by the institutions promoting the project.
- While the Active Listening Process is being implemented with the support of neutral entities such as the Agirre Lehendakaria Center and Columbia University, it was initiated by political institutions, raising questions about its neutrality.





# IRREGULARITIES

## Project Funding

- The Guggenheim R. Foundation has not committed any money to this project.
- The only money that has been promised for this project has been public money from the Provincial Council of Bizkaia and the Spanish Ministry of Ecological Transition
- The only document providing a first idea of the total cost of the project is “Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Expansion Project - Project Needs Analysis Report” by Cooper Robertson in December 2023.





## THE LOCAL ORGANISATION

# GUGGENHEIM URDAIBAI



A collective of citizens committed to raising their voices against the Guggenheim expansion project. They are very active (protests, petition, communication campaigns, etc.) and mobilise a lot of people and organisations.

Here is the website of the platform, with their position and information on the project: <https://guggenheimurdaibaistop.info>







# THE MOBILISATION

## GUS / local communities (SEO Birdlife + GUS petition)

- Many articles in the press and appearances on the radio, television, etc.
- Banners on many balconies of houses in the area
- Various protests outside the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Provincial Assembly of Bizkaia
- Meetings with political leaders, trade union activists, and environmental groups.
- Two major demonstrations in Gernika with hundreds of [video support](#) messages from all sectors of society
- Around 100 talks were given all over the Basque Country
- Visits from schools, universities, and groups such as Surfrider Foundation, Greenpeace, Ocean Clean, etc.

## International mobilisation

- Questions asked in Europe about the project ([Bildu](#), [Podemos](#))
- MAW (letters, PR, mass emailing, researcher manifesto)







# ADVOCACY & COMMUNICATION MATERIAL

Letters sent to:



Press release:

- English
- Spanish
- French
- Basque

1

### Press Release

*International community calls for a viable solution to save the Urdaibai Biosphere*

*The Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve is under threat from a surge in mass tourism, driven by the planned expansion of a Guggenheim Museum. International organizations have warned that this could cause irreversible damage to the reserve.*

Arles, 18 May 2025

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Link to Press kit (ENGLISH)

**Press Contact:**  
David Henderson  
Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop Platform  
guggenheimurdaibaistop@gmail.com

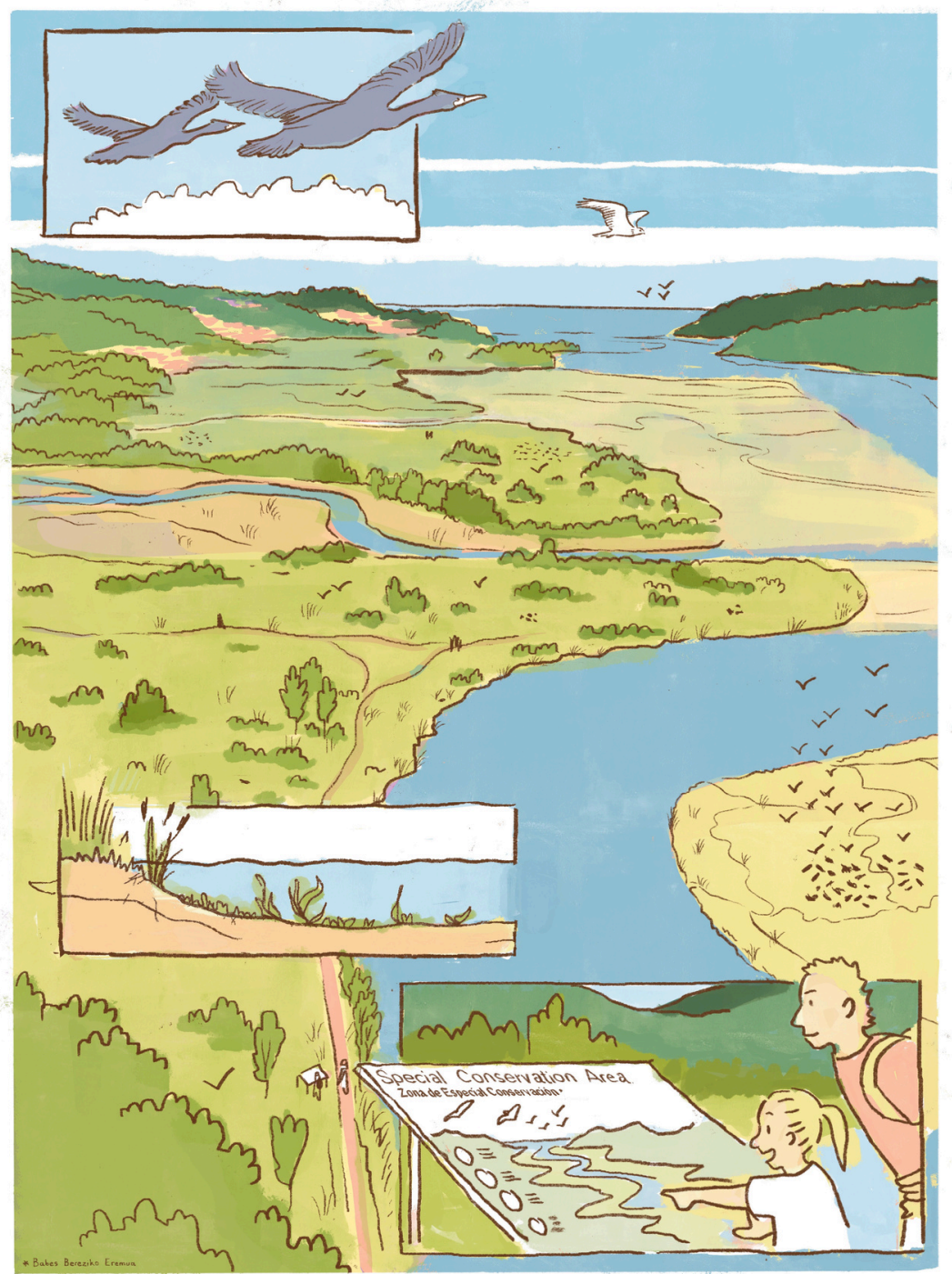
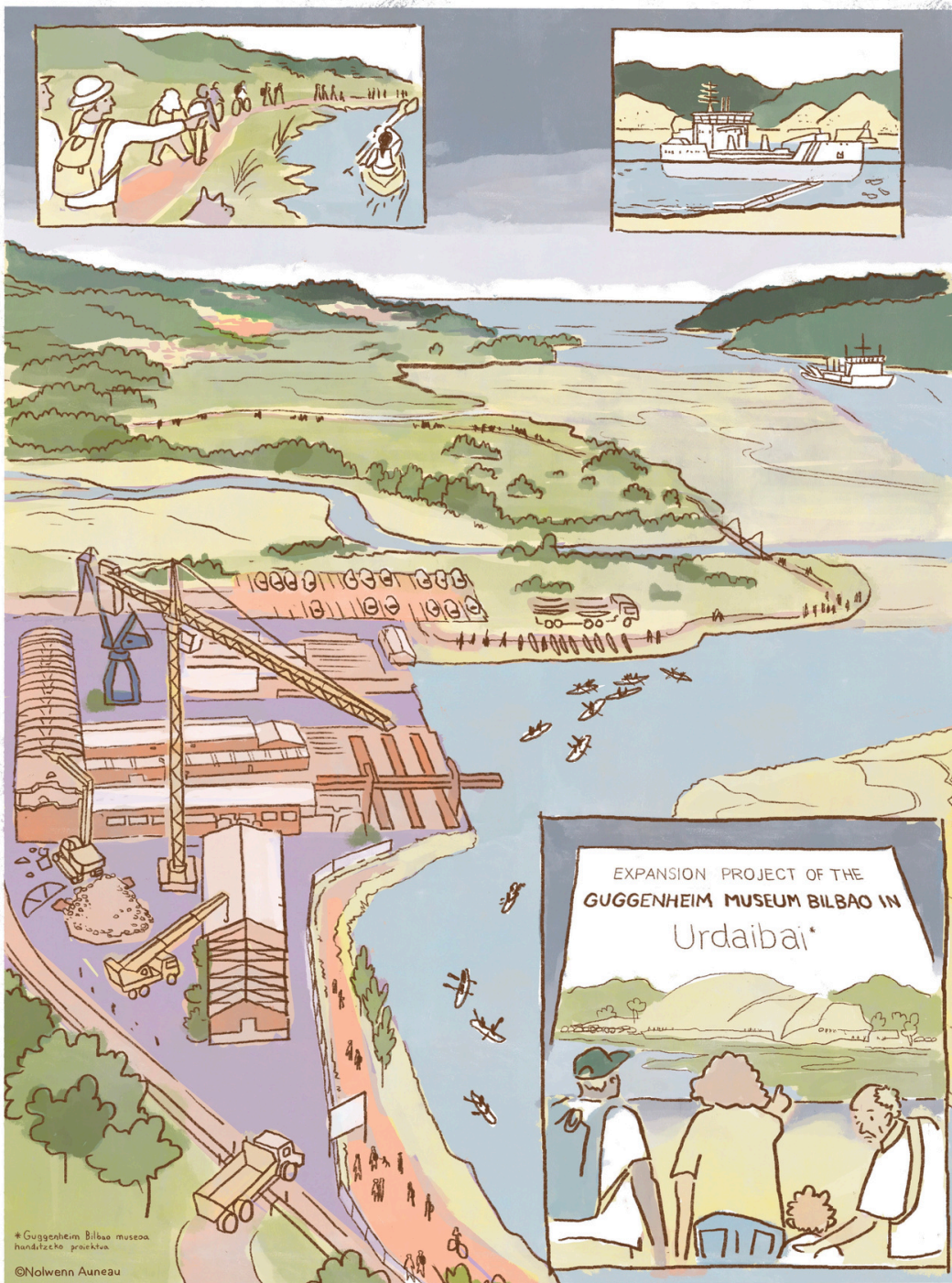
Mediterranean Alliance for Wetlands  
contact@medallianceforwetlands.org





# ADVOCACY & COMMUNICATION MATERIAL

Illustration:



*Illustrated by Nolwenn Auneau*





## CONTACT

**For press inquiries and interview requests, please contact:**

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David Henderson, Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop Platform

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