# Rio Interpretation Centre – a river of many

Águeda, Portugal
Municipality of Águeda
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Nature & Environment

**Summary of Good Practice Story**

Águeda, a Portuguese municipality crossed by over 1,500 km of waterways, saw residents gradually losing their connection to the river ecosystems that shaped local history and traditions, even as ecological restoration work on the Vouga river basin needed public understanding and support to be lasting. The Municipal Council refurbished a vacant building into the River Interpretation Centre (C-Rio) rather than building new, using natural light and LED accent lighting for energy efficiency, and developed interactive exhibits on aquatic biodiversity, migratory fish, riparian habitats and invasive species alongside school programmes like "My River," "Environmental Twister" and "Eco Kayak Plogging." In its first year, C-Rio welcomed over 3,500 visitors and hosted more than 90 guided tours, strengthening local identity around river heritage while regenerating a derelict building and adding a new tourism attraction linking the two riverbanks through the city centre — with neighbouring municipalities now adopting similar ecosystem conservation policies. The lesson: ecosystem restoration is most lasting when paired with consistent education and community engagement, since interventions in nature deliver longer-term benefit when local residents understand their value and take an active part in protecting them.

**Setting the Scene: Destination & context**

Águeda is located in the central region of Portugal, in the Iberian Peninsula, has an area of approximately 335 km2 and ~47000 inhabitants. Located in the Aveiro region, between the sea and the mountains, has a privileged geographical situation, being served by road and railway easily accessible. The Municipality covers a vast and rich natural heritage and landscape, with 11% of the territory protected by NATURA 2000, a RAMSAR area and more than 1500 kilometers of rivers. It has therefore stood out in the national and international context for its serious commitment and work to promote greater local (and global) sustainability and, as such, a better quality of life and environment for all. Within the DNA of its people there's creativity and a great capacity of entrepreneurship which resulted in a strong business sector, and it's considered one of the most industrial regions of Portugal, but also a green destination and one of the most colorful cities in the world! Águeda promotes the sustainable development of the territory aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

**The Turning Point: Why change was needed**

Águeda is criss-crossed by over 1,500 km of waterways and, for decades, has faced a gradual distancing of its population from the river ecosystems that have shaped its history, traditions and the development of its people. The loss of knowledge about river biodiversity, the diminishing emotional connection of communities to natural resources, and the growing need to promote environmentally responsible behaviour presented significant challenges for the sustainable management of the area.

Furthermore, the ecological restoration of the rivers required not only interventions in habitats but also significant investment in environmental education and awareness-raising, reinforcing the importance of these interventions and promoting their value. It became clear that there was a need to create a space capable of communicating, in an accessible and engaging way, the importance of river ecosystems, migratory species and nature conservation.

Another challenge was to repurpose a vacant building situated in a strategic area of the city, seeking to give it a new function that would simultaneously contribute to urban regeneration, tourism promotion and sustainability. The Municipality of Águeda identified an opportunity to create an innovative facility that would bring together heritage, education, the environment and sustainable tourism in a single space for interpretation and discovery.

**The Vision: What you set out to do**

The solution involved the creation of the River Interpretation Centre (C-Rio), a facility dedicated to promoting the natural and cultural heritage associated with water resources, on the initiative of Águeda Municipal Council. Through the refurbishment of an existing building, a modern, accessible and interactive space was developed, designed to bring citizens and visitors closer to river ecosystems. This is a space for environmental education, awareness-raising and tourism promotion centred on biodiversity and community traditions, which strengthens public participation, promotes more sustainable behaviours and helps to establish Águeda as a destination committed to nature conservation and environmental education.

In this way, a change in behaviour is promoted, leading to the reintegration of humankind into its natural environment. The aim is to create a cohesive community, where residents recognise and identify with their environmental context, aware of their mutual interdependence and the close connection between nature and themselves, and proactively collaborating in the preservation, restoration and wellbeing of the local ecosystems.

**The Journey: How change happened**

The implementation of the River Interpretation Centre was the result of an integrated approach that combined urban regeneration, environmental education, heritage enhancement and the promotion of sustainable tourism.

The first stage involved identifying a vacant building with the potential to house a facility dedicated to the interpretation of river ecosystems. The decision to refurbish rather than build from scratch made it possible to reduce resource consumption, preserve existing heritage and contribute to the urban regeneration of the surrounding area. Energy efficiency was also promoted by prioritising natural light for the workspaces (reception and laboratory) and limiting interior lighting to accent lighting and LEDs.

In a second phase, a museum concept was developed centred on the relationship between the community and waterways. The interpretive content was designed to present, in an accessible and scientific manner, topics such as aquatic biodiversity; migratory fish; riparian habitats; the issue of the introduction of exotic species; memories, history and culture of the river; fishing gear; and the importance of ecosystems.
The space has been equipped with interactive exhibition features, multimedia solutions and communication tools designed to engage visitors of all ages and levels of knowledge. Accessibility has been a guiding principle from the outset of the project, ensuring suitable conditions for all visitors.

The creation of C-Rio was implemented in line with the environmental strategy of the Municipality of Águeda and with various nature conservation initiatives, including the ecological restoration projects carried out in the Vouga river basin. This integration has enabled the centre to become a space for interpreting the results achieved in the region, bringing citizens closer to concrete environmental management actions.

The educational component also played a central role. Specific programmes were developed for schools, families and visitors, including guided tours, awareness-raising activities and opportunities for direct contact with nature. These initiatives (carried out at C-Rio and the surrounding area) promote experiential learning and encourage more active participation in the protection of natural resources.
The involvement of various stakeholders was another key element. The local council worked in collaboration with environmental organisations, universities, schools and local associations,

ensuring the quality of the content and strengthening the link between technical expertise and the community.

Communication and promotion of the project took place across multiple channels, including digital platforms, educational materials and awareness campaigns. This strategy enabled the environmental messages to reach a wider audience and attract a diverse range of people.

As a tool for promoting sustainable tourism, C-Rio was integrated into Águeda's tourism offering, specifically on the town's tourist map, complementing the municipality's other natural, cultural, sporting and recreational resources. In this way, it helps to diversify visitors' experiences, increase the length of stay at the destination and enhance the appreciation of local heritage.

Throughout the entire process, principles aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2030) and the pillars of the National Strategy for Environmental Education (ENEA) were applied, particularly those related to quality education, sustainable cities and communities, climate action, protection of aquatic life, and partnerships for sustainable development.
The result is a multifunctional facility that combines scientific knowledge, environmental education, urban regeneration and tourism development, demonstrating how the interpretation of nature can act as a driving force for regional sustainability.

**The Breakthrough: What you achieved**
The creation of the River Interpretation Centre has yielded significant results in environmental, social, educational and tourism terms.
C-Rio has helped to raise awareness among the local community and visitors regarding the importance of conserving river ecosystems and biodiversity. Through exhibitions and educational activities, it promotes a better understanding of the environmental challenges associated with sustainable water management and adaptation to climate change. In its first year of operation, the centre welcomed over 3,500 visitors and hosted more than 90 guided tours, with educational programmes such as "My River", "Environmental Twister" and "Eco Kayak Plogging" attracting strong participation from schools in the municipality, as well as families, associations and national and international visitors.
C-Rio has also strengthened the connection between citizens and water resources, reviving memories, traditions and knowledge associated with the historical use of river resources. This appreciation of natural and cultural heritage helps to strengthen local identity and the community's sense of belonging.
From an urban perspective, the regeneration of a previously derelict building has brought a new dynamic to the surrounding area, demonstrating the potential of sustainable regeneration as a tool for enhancing the area, linking the two banks of the River Águeda which runs through the city centre.

The centre has also become a key educational resource for schools and organised groups, supporting educational activities. It has become an integral part of the municipality's tourist offering, broadening the range of reasons to visit and reinforcing Águeda's image as a destination committed to sustainability.

**Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn**

One of the key lessons learned from this experience is that nature conservation is most effective when accompanied by consistent processes of education, interpretation and community engagement. Interventions in ecosystems are essential, but their benefits are more lasting when local residents understand their value and play an active part in protecting them.

Another key aspect was the importance of integrating different areas of activity into a single project. The combination of urban regeneration, cultural heritage, sport, environmental education and sustainable tourism enabled the creation of multiple benefits and the reaching of diverse audiences.

The involvement of institutional partners, experts and the local community proved equally essential to ensuring the credibility of the content and a sense of ownership of the project.

As a recommendation for other destinations, the importance of creating interpretive spaces that establish emotional connections between people and the area's natural resources is highlighted. Facilities of this nature can serve as means of learning, participation and heritage appreciation, contributing to more sustainable destination management and to strengthening the environmental awareness of future generations.

**The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact**

There has been a shift in the community's relationship with the river, proving that environmental conservation is a living force. The success of the initial initiatives has encouraged neighbouring municipalities to adopt policies for the conservation of ecosystems, and the site has already been visited by various regional, national and European organisations.

An immersive room will be installed in the space, allowing visitors to 'dive' into the river at the end of their visit and enjoy an innovative experience. New environmental education programmes will enable the development of activities within the space and throughout the surrounding area, which will also be promoted by the future Águeda Environmental Park. This space will be a transformative project, a green corridor, featuring nature-based solutions and walking trails, connecting the city to 'its' river and the floodplain, consolidating a model of territorial development that brings together nature, people and technology, seeking to position itself as a national and European benchmark in urban sustainability: the Águeda + Greener + More Sustainable project.C-Rio reflects a renewed commitment that this river will continue to be, for future generations, a symbol of life, resilience and harmony between humankind and nature.

**Awards or Certifications**

• LIFE Águeda Project and LIFE REVIVE Project – Conservation and restoration of river ecosystems.
• António Almeida Henriques Award for Sustainable and Smart Urban Regeneration.
• Águeda Municipality's Strategy for Sustainability and Nature Conservation.
• Environmental education programmes developed by the Municipality of Águeda.
• Inclusion in the network of municipal facilities for the enhancement of natural and cultural heritage.

In addition to the points mentioned above, it is also worth noting that the Municipality of Águeda has been recognised as a benchmark and role model in the environmental field, having won the European Green Leaf 2026 award. This award, an initiative of the European Commission, recognises the 'greenest' cities in Europe that serve as examples in the approach to and implementation of sustainable measures and policies. With this accolade, various projects and initiatives will be implemented, linked to the following themes: air quality, water, biodiversity, the circular economy and waste, noise, and climate change: mitigation and adaptation, based on a dedicated governance model and communication plan. The Centro do Rio will certainly be at the "centre" of countless activities that will be organised during "Green Year 2026" in Águeda!

**Web Articles**

**Other Relevant Links**

https://centrodorio.agueda.pt/
https://www.facebook.com/centrodorioagueda/

**Quotes or Testimonials**

TESTIMONIALS: VISIT THE RIO INTERPRETATION CENTRE

1. Testimonial from a teacher at an Eco-School in Águeda:

"An excellent guided tour, delivered with great warmth and knowledge. I should also mention the helpfulness and clear communication when booking the tour. Well done, and keep up the good work."

2. Testimonial in connection with the ERASMUS+ Programme:

"The visit to the River Interpretation Centre, organised as part of the Erasmus+ project, was a highly enriching and educational experience for the whole group. This activity proved to be essential in raising awareness of local biodiversity and making participants aware of the importance of conserving native species and riverside ecosystems."

3. Various testimonials from visitors to the venue:

“It is to be commended that such facilities exist in our municipality and that they encourage school visits.”

“The activity was very interesting and well-suited to Year 1 pupils, particularly as it took place during the first week of term. Splitting the group, with the class teachers leading activities in a separate room, was a practical solution to ensure the visit ran smoothly.”

“It was a perfect visit; all the explanations were clear and relevant.”

“Crucial in promoting environmental conservation practices and sustainable behaviour.”