Hungary names its 29th Ramsar Site during the European Union Presidency

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Mr Zoltán Illés, the Hungarian Minister of State for Environmental Affairs (in the Ministry of Rural Development), invited the Ramsar Secretariat to the meeting of the European Union Nature Directors, held on 7-9 June 2011 in the historical town of Balatonfüred, a traditional tourist destination at the shores of Lake Balaton, Hungary’s largest Ramsar Site (59,800 ha, designated in 1989). Around 60 participants from the high-level nature conservation administrations in the 27 EU member states, from the European Commission and a few international NGOs made good use of their biannual meeting to discuss the latest developments regarding the new EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (available here).

The conservation experts focused much on synergies between ecosystem services, biodiversity and habitat conservation, and in particular on the valuation of wetland ecosystem services and green infrastructures to enhance connectivity in the landscape. During an afternoon, they took a boat across lake Balaton to reach Tihany peninsula, formed long time ago by volcanic activities, and becoming in 1952 Hungary’s first protected landscape. Tihany is now part of the EU Natura 2000 network of protected areas for species and natural habitats, because of its geyser cones and other volcanic remnants, its Pannonian woodlands, dry grasslands, rare sub-mediterranean plants and insects and a reintroduced population of European ground squirrels, thriving on grassland managed by Hungarian Grey Cattle. The Tihany peninsula also features a former caldera lake (Belső-tó, Inner Lake) and an extensive reed marsh (Külső-tó, Outer Lake) with rich bird life and other biodiversity. Like Lake Balaton, the peninsula is managed by the Balaton Uplands National Park Directorate. Thus, it would make sense to extend the Balaton Lake Ramsar Site to include the unique Tihany peninsula, harbouring also a 11th century monastery and the brand-new Lavender House national park visitor centre, a place the EU meeting participants were among the first to visit.
To celebrate Ramsar’s 40th anniversary with the Hungarian EU Presidency, the Ramsar Secretariat was invited to present a short review of the Convention’s achievements. Reference was made to the 1962 MAR Conference in the French Rhone river delta that triggered the preparations for the Convention, but also for the EU Wild Birds Directive, adopted in 1972, using similar quantitative criteria for bird populations for the designation of Special Protection Areas that constitute a substantial part of the Natura 2000 network and the currently 770 Ramsar Sites in the EU countries. This was also the occasion to celebrate the designation of Hungary’s 29th Ramsar Site, the Fishponds and marshlands south of lake Balaton (Dél-Balatoni Halastavak és Berkek) - see site description here - also under the management of the Balaton Uplands National Park.

Shortly after the Hungarian meeting in Brussels on 21 June, the European Council formally endorsed the EU Biodiversity Strategy and its focus on ecosystems services within, but also beyond, protected areas and its focus on cost-effective restoration of ecosystems to ensure the continued provision of ecosystem services, in particular given the climate change mitigation and adaptation benefits of many ecosystems and the relevance for human wellbeing. The Council encourages member States to integrate the Strategy into their national plans, programmes and/or strategies, highlighting the need to develop and implement a methodology to assess the impact of all relevant EU-funded projects, plans and programmes on biodiversity and ecosystems. The Council also points to the need to identify, reform, reorient and/or eliminate subsidies harmful to biodiversity, and welcomes the Commission’s commitment to develop a EU strategy on invasive alien species (including a dedicated legislative instrument) by 2012. The Council emphasizes that the role of the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in supporting a transition towards a green and resource-efficient economy should be fully reflected at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, or Rio+20).
At the same meeting, the European Council also adopted conclusions on the protection of water resources and integrated sustainable water management. They stressed that water concerns must be mainstreamed into relevant EU policies. Moreover, extreme weather events should be handled in an integrated way by policies dealing with land use and planning, agriculture, nature, and infrastructures.

Report and summary prepared by Ramsar's European team. Photo courtesy: Hungarian Ministry of Rural Development.

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