Protecting the wetland treasures of the Dinaric karst poljes

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Albania
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Croatia
Serbia
Slovenia
North Macedonia

In Southeastern Europe, large agricultural basins surrounded by dry mountains fill up at regular intervals with water and become huge water lands. There are around 140 such karst poljes in the Dinaric region, stretching from Slovenia to Albania, including parts of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, parts of Serbia, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Karst poljes extend up to several hundred square kilometers. Water percolates through soluble limestone rocks into groundwater aquifers underneath. As the aquifers, often stretching across national borders fill up, groundwater flows horizontally and resurges, covering entire landscapes during particular seasons.

In many places karst areas are still only little understood, but they provide excellent opportunities to demonstrate the regulatory role of wetlands in storing, releasing and providing precious water resources to humans and other life.

Dry season view of the Livanjsko Polje Ramsar Site in Bosnia and Herzegovina - one of the largest karst poljes in the world.

The rural and urban communities in the Dinaric karst poljes depend directly on the maintenance and sustainable management of these water flows. Receding above-ground water levels free up land for land uses such as grazing, vegetable farming and cereal crops. Underground water reservoirs and flows provide water for irrigation, domestic use and hydropower generation, including during dry seasons.

Karst areas are very vulnerable and it is important to understand and protect these complex hydrological systems.
Because of their dual wet and dry nature, karst poljes harbour a specific and particularly rich biodiversity. Extremely adapted invertebrates and amphibians, such as the enigmatic olm Proteus anguinus, live in the underground wetland ecosystems. Aboveground, karst poljes are home to many “endemic” plants and animals that can only be found in a defined geographic region, particularly fish living in a single karst river basin. Furthermore, the Ramsar Sites Livanjsko and Petersko polje, Cerknica and Skadar lakes provide important stop-over, wintering and breeding sites for migrating birds using the Adriatic Flyway.

The first international workshop on karst polje wetlands was held in Livno from 30 September to 2 October 2013, organised by the Bosnian NGOs Naše Ptice (Our Birds) and Naše Baština (Our Heritage) with help from Euronatur and financial support from the MAVA Foundation. It brought together about 70 experts to highlight the ecosystem values and services of the Dinaric karst poljes. Their presentations have been published online, and the forthcoming proceedings will aim at raising awareness and support to maintain, restore and manage sustainably karst wetland ecosystems, particularly after the damage inflicted during the periods of centrally-planned economies and armed conflict in the last century.
planned for 11-15 June 2014 in Trebinje (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Dubrovnik (Croatia), will provide an opportunity to present the biodiversity knowledge compiled during the Livno workshop to specialists focusing on groundwater protection and related socio-economical and environmental implications. All Ramsar focal points and wetlands experts in the region and beyond are warmly invited to contribute their knowledge and expertise to this conference.

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