“Lake of Apples” summarizes more than 15 years of concentrated work to reverse pollution in one of the oldest freshwater ecosystems on earth, the Prespa Lakes, a Balkan biodiversity hotspot. The film will be officially released on 24 March by Helen Clark, the head of the UN Development Programme, in the capital Skopje of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. After the official launch the film will be available on the internet.

On World Wetlands Day (2 February) in the year 2000, the Prime Ministers of the three countries sharing the Prespa Lakes catchment basin (Albania, Greece and the former YR of Macedonia) triggered a major transboundary cooperation programme with their declaration of the creation of the Prespa Park. A trilateral coordination committee was subsequently set up, preparing a GEF-funded project to develop the baseline regulations for integrated ecosystem management in the Prespa Lakes basin. And since the end of this project in 2012, follow-up projects on the Albanian and Greek sides, with German (KfW), EU, Greek public and NGO support (by the Society for the Protection of Prespa), and a six-year project by UNDP and the Municipality of Resen (supported by the Swiss Development Cooperation SDC), focus on the implementation of the Watershed Management Plan adopted by the three Environment Ministers at World Wetlands Day in 2010, recently also ratified by Greece.

After the screening of the “Lake of Apples”, the UNDP Prespa Programme Manager, Dimitrija Sekovski, Georgette Buchez of SDC, and Ramsar’s Tobias Salathé highlighted the progress made in a difficult transboundary context,
where overcoming historical, political and environmental obstacles was a regular challenge. Together with the audience that included many representatives of Diplomatic Missions to the UN and International Organisations in Geneva, and notably the Chargé d’Affaires of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ljupco Gjorgjinski, the panel discussed the lessons learnt during these years of intersectoral cooperation and the potential for replicating them elsewhere. Maria Luisa Silva, the UNDP Geneva director, stressed that good water and ecosystem management practices are at the core of peaceful social and economic development, as aimed for by the Sustainable Development Goal number 6 on sustainable water management and sanitation. Involving and assuring the commitment of the local stakeholders, such as those featured in the documentary film (fishermen, farmers, educators) through the project was considered essential to achieve lasting progress towards sustainability. And the audience acknowledged the pioneering role played by the Ramsar Convention since the turn of the century to facilitate transboundary cooperation in this iconic wetland basin and thanked the donor countries and international community for their support. As a next step, it is hoped that the three countries declare their respective nationally designated areas as part of a trilateral Transboundary Ramsar Site.

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