Transboundary management of the lower Neretva valley

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Report on the workshop on the lower Neretva valley, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, March 2002

A workshop on the transboundary management of the lower Neretva valley took place on 7-8 March 2002 in Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Metkovic (Croatia). This was the culminating event of the Ramsar SGF project on "Preparations for a transboundary management plan for the lower Neretva valley" coordinated jointly by Ms Jasminka Radovic of the Croatian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Physical Planning and Mr Jaroslav Vego of the Ministry of Civil Engineering, Physical Planning and Environmental Protection of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

On the technical side, the workshop programme included a presentation of the MedWet database, used to integrate relevant information on the Neretva Delta (the Ramsar Site on the Croatian side) and Hutovo Blato Nature Park (the Ramsar Site in Bosnia-Herzegovina). Briefly, the results of the 1997 MetWet2 project dealing with "socio-economic aspects of the use of the Neretva valley" and the running project to develop a "new management policy for Hutovo Blato" were presented. These two projects benefited from co-funding through the European Union LIFE programme. The number of different projects dealing with this wetland site is proof for its many significant values and functions. An excellent description of them can be found in the attached text, extracted from a draft proposal. In addition, also the forthcoming external support to be provided through the Dutch Institute for Inland Water Management and Waste Water Treatment (better known under its acronym "RIZA") should be mentioned.

In view of the objective to elaborate transboundary management measures, the workshop also covered aspects of a parallel project to increase local capacities at grassroots level. Under the international "Stability Pact", established after the 1999 Kosovo war, a Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) was prepared for southeastern Europe. Within this framework, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (with which the Ramsar Bureau maintains excellent working relations) is financing a project for the "promotion of networks and exchanges" focusing on transboundary areas in the lower Neretva river valley and around lake Skadar (Shkodra), a wetland shared between Montenegro (a Ramsar Site in the Yugoslav Federation) and Albania (a proposed Ramsar Site).

The workshop provided therefore a first opportunity to show synergies, based on the active cooperation between the coordinators of the Ramsar SGF project and the local managers of the REReP project. It became clear that the respective project activities are indeed complementary, and that they should be pursued in an even more collaborative and integrated way.

The workshop was honoured by the participation of the Croatian Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, Mr Bozo Kovacevic. He presented the plans to create a Nature Park covering the lower Neretva floodplain. Thus, the Ramsar workshop served to support the public launch of the local consultation procedure in view of the establishment of this important protected area. The meeting was also attended by several international organisations involved in environmental protection and sustainable development. Besides Ramsar's European and MedWet Coordinator, representatives of UNEP's Mediterranean Action Plan (RAC/SPA) and UNDP took part. It was commonly felt that significant progress has been gained in the case of the Neretva Delta and Hutovo Blato.
In order to secure the effectiveness of further activities, a number of prerequisites must be assured. These include the establishment of a bilateral management committee as a basis for further exchange of expertise and coordination of efforts from the two sides and swift progress with the preparatory work to establish the Nature Park on the Croatian side. Furthermore, the need to address water management issues at catchment level through bilateral cooperation and planning by the two responsible water management agencies, and the need to extend the area of the existing Hutovo Blato Nature Park to include the floodplain where Trebizat and Bregava rivers enter the Neretva and the currently excluded parts of the Prut marsh, to form a continuous transboundary site, were expressed. The activities undertaken to raise public awareness and information were praised. It was stressed that it is essential to continue them to secure the involvement of local people in the sustainable management of the area.

Vice-Minister Vesna Covic of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton opens the workshop in Mostar

Left to right: Ms Radovic, Minister Kovacevic, Mr Vego and a local representative at the headtable in Metkovic
Workshop participants on Narin river in a (modernised) Neretva Lada, the traditional boats in the Neretva Delta.

Next to the remains of the Roman port Narona, local restaurants welcome visitors for a boat trip with an outdoor lunch in the wetland. The workshop participants, too, particularly enjoyed this local form of hospitality.
The reconstruction works of the historical bridge over the Neretva upstream in Mostar, destroyed during the Bosnian civil war in the mid Nineties - an allegory illustrating the need for transboundary confidence building and cooperation -- reported by Tobias Salathé, Ramsar

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