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Workshop D Introduction

**Shared catchments and wetlands – increasing
transboundary cooperation**

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NOTE: The following text is a working document for further development. Please send your corrections, additions and comments to thymiop@med-ina.org, so that I may improve it within the next few weeks.

Introduction

Continuity of natural systems

Borders, especially national ones, have been determined by historical processes, often through armed conflict and peace negotiations. In some cases, natural features (such as mountain ridges, rivers and lakes) have been taken into account, but mainly in the sense of providing barriers. National borders can range from virtual divisions of space, not expressed physically on the ground, to clear physical separations marked by fencing, constructions and --rarely in our times-- minefields¹.

Natural systems, however, maintain continuity and are not easily constrained by administrative divisions. Space and ecosystems extend over frontiers uninterrupted, except in the case of heavily fortified borders. The water cycle totally disregards them. Migratory species as well move easily over such divisions of space; large mammals especially need broad areas and thus cross frontiers frequently.

In Europe, progress in the establishment of the Union has resulted in a weakening of the role of internal frontiers. A positive side effect has been the availability of new natural areas along the borders, free from human pressures. Combined with an increased interest in the conservation of Europe's natural heritage, they provide opportunities for new protected areas and a strong incentive to transboundary co-operation. On the other hand, the Schengen agreement has led to a 'hardening' of the frontiers around the \European Union territory with multiple negative effects on nature conservation.

Sharing assets and problems

The above considerations are particularly pertinent to wetlands. Water and wetlands are becoming recognised as invaluable assets both for nature and for human beings. As they are often shared by neighbouring countries, they require joint efforts of equitable and wise

¹ It is unfortunately the case of the border between Greece and Turkey along the Evros / Meriç River, with frequent fatal accidents among illegal migrants.

use. Problems associated with them (such as pollution, excessive water abstraction, aquifer depletion, etc.) transcend frontiers and require joint solutions. Traditionally, the resolution of these problems was the *ad hoc* object of bilateral negotiations and official agreements. Nowadays, it becomes more and more obvious that such problems require a longer term co-operation, developing on many levels, and thus involving not only national authorities, but also local communities and the non-governmental and academic sectors. Such systematic and broad co-operation leads to the establishment of transboundary wetland initiatives.

A typology of transboundary wetlands

IUCN has used the following definition for transboundary protected areas:

‘An area of land and/or sea that straddles one or more borders between states, sub-national units such as provinces and regions, autonomous areas and/or areas beyond the limit of national sovereignty or jurisdiction, whose constituent parts are especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed cooperatively through legal or other effective means’.

This definition could be adapted to transboundary wetlands by retaining its main elements, which are:

- transcending administrative boundaries, and in particular national² borders between sovereign states;
- dedication to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage;
- co-operative and effective management.

From the perspective of the Convention on Wetlands, the following additional aspect should be considered:

- taking into account equitably the needs and wellbeing of people on both sides of the frontier.

Typology is usually a pedantic scientific approach, which may not always have a practical dimension. In the case of transboundary wetlands, however, it is perhaps useful to group them in certain categories in order to facilitate analysis, monitoring and the exchange of experience. Certain initial considerations must be assessed at this point.

For both substantial and pragmatic reasons, transboundary wetlands should be defined at the broader possible scale, preferably the scale of their hydrological basin. This may be obvious for rivers, but it is equally advisable for lakes and other similar wetlands. In certain cases, this approach may not be directly applicable, as hydrological basins of certain rivers (such as the Rhine or the Danube) are vast. Yet, the recent transboundary initiative for the Dniester River Basin, from the Carpathian Mountains to the Black Sea, involving Moldova, Poland and the Ukraine, indicates that such an approach may be feasible³. In

² In view of the increasing power devolved to the sub-national (regional) level of government in various countries in Europe (such as the autonomous regions of Italy and Spain), their borders should also be taken into account, but in this case co-operation would be much easier.

³ A workshop on the ‘Integrated Management of Natural Resources in the Transboundary Dniester River Basin’ was held in Chisinau (Moldova) on 16-17 September 2004 (see www.ramsar.org).

any case, it could give rise to regional co-operation initiatives⁴. In other cases, two hydrological basins may be treated together, if they are related by significant ecological or social factors. (This could be the case of the Ohrid and Prespa Lakes.)

The impact of the European Union 'Water Framework Directive' (October 2000) in encouraging collaboration on the catchment basin scale should not be overlooked.

Declaration of Ramsar sites across borders –although highly recommended– may not always be possible, as certain sites might not fulfil in themselves the specific criteria required for designation. On the other hand, they are part of an ecological entity and their joint management would be necessary for the part that is already a Ramsar site. Thus, the Albanian side of Prespa, if viewed separately, may not satisfy Ramsar designation criteria, but is critical for the two Ramsar sites in Greece and the FYR of Macedonia⁵, as it shares the same lakes and is part of the same entity. In any case, the Ramsar Convention is about all wetlands.

Taking into account these considerations, a practical categorisation of transboundary wetlands is proposed below.

Wetlands divided by borders

This would be the case of wetland sites that are cut in parts by one or more national borders. Perhaps in Europe the largest number of countries sharing a common site is four⁶. This category could be subdivided into:

- inland sites, such as Lake Fertö (Hungary) / Neusiedler See (Austria)⁷ and Ohrid Lake (shared by Albania and the FYR of Macedonia)
- coastal sites, such as the Wadden Sea (shared by Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands).

Special wetland sites

As countries designate Ramsar sites with particular characteristics, quite a few of them are found across borders. These may include:

- peatbogs, water-logged forests and wet meadows, such as Polesie (Poland, Belarus and Ukraine), with the Bug and Prypiat river valleys, which includes many bogs, wet grasslands and forests (Ramsar Sites in part).;
- transboundary underground water systems in karst areas, such as the Scocjan Caves⁸ (Slovenia) and the Reka River (Italy). Of great interest also is the cave system consisting of Aggletek Biosphere Reserve (Hungary) and the Slovensky Kras (Slovakia).

⁴ It is interesting to note here that in Africa the nine countries sharing the Niger River have just signed an agreement establishing such a regional initiative, NigerWet, based on the MedWet model.

⁵ Lake Mcri Prespa and Lake Prespa respectively.

⁶ In the particular case of Lake Constance, shared by Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland,

⁷ Both Biosphere Reserves include Ramsar sites.

⁸ One of the first underground wetlands declared as Ramsar site

Linked wetlands in proximity

In certain cases, wetland sites are not contiguous, but they are in proximity and bound by ecological links. These may be hydrological functions or the sharing of migratory species. Thus, the Neretva River Delta (Croatia) and Hutovo Blato (Bosnia and Herzegovina) are two Ramsar sites that are related by the flow of the Neretva River, but at a certain distance from each other.

Shared river basins

River basins can be shared in segments perpendicular to their flow, in which case the question of the equitable management of water resources between upstream and downstream countries is vital. Here, frontier problems are lesser, but the need of common management of the flow of such rivers (for ecological, navigation, pollution, water abstraction and other purposes) is very high.

Rivers can also constitute borders between countries, with their basins divided parallel to their flow. Such rivers may present at times difficult political and administrative problems, especially when the borders in question are between EU and non-EU countries (further complicated by the Schengen Agreement), as in the cases of Evros / Maritsa / Meriç River and stretches of the Danube, as well as the border between Belarus and Lithuania.

Regional / sub-regional wetland collaborations

In certain cases, broader collaborations on the conservation and wise use of wetlands can be considered as an extension of transboundary co-operation, although they do not concern contiguous sites. Such initiatives involve a number of countries (6-13 in Europe) and require official governmental agreement. Unfortunately, with the exception of MedWet, which is well-established since 1991 and widely recognised, the other four are in various stages of development, but with no concrete results to show yet.

Although they concern more international collaboration, such regional initiatives may prepare the ground and greatly facilitate transboundary efforts.

Types of co-operation

The type of co-operation on shared sites or catchments may vary considerably on the basis of a number of parameters, which include political, administrative and substantial aspects. In addition, co-operation initiatives are usually dynamic and evolve with time. A few of them never acquire sufficient momentum and wither, but many mature and tend to become more legally binding, to develop the necessary co-operation mechanisms and to carry out gradually substantial joint work. Thus the parameters mentioned below must be considered as processes with an important temporal dimension. They can prove useful in monitoring the evolution of each transboundary wetland co-operation initiative.

Current regional wetland initiatives in Europe

	Initial date	No of countries involved	Present status
BaltWet	2001	9	Started under the Helsinki Convention, with the co-ordination of WWF Denmark, but without results.
BlackSeaWet	1994	6	The countries involved have decided to proceed ⁹ , but no concrete steps taken as yet.
Carpathian Wetland Initiative	2004	7	Recent workshop held on its establishment ¹⁰ .
MedWet	1991	13 ¹¹	In full operation, with a Co-ordination Unit in Athens.
NorWet	2004	10	Being considered, with Norway leading.

Formalities

Transboundary co-operation cannot develop without – at least tacit – governmental approval. In many cases though, it starts with catalytic initiatives either by the NGO sector or by local authorities. A good example is the trilateral Ramsar Platform established formally after former NGO cooperation in the Morava-Dyje floodplains of Austria, Czechia and Slovakia. These initiatives are invaluable both in ensuring the support of local communities and in dealing with delicate situations, in which political relations between neighbouring states are not ideal. As collaboration matures, it becomes more formal and can lead to official agreements between sovereign states. Thus, transboundary initiatives may vary from a completely informal understanding at the level of civic society to inter-governmental treaties, as described below.

Informal collaboration, usually promoted by the NGO sector

Such efforts focus mainly on the exchange and harmonisation of information, for example bird counts or water quality data. They sometime lead to international scientific conferences. This is the current situation with the Evros / Maritsa / Meriç River¹², where WWF Greece and WWF Turkey are working together and planning a conference in early 2005.

Co-operation agreed at the local or regional authority level

Local authorities tend to develop contacts with their counterparts across national borders. Initially, these are directed towards cultural matters and tourism exchanges. Eventually,

⁹ During the Ramsar European Regional meeting in Bled (Slovenia), 14-17 October 2001.

¹⁰ Held in Brezovica, Oravsky dvor (Slovakia), on 28-30 April 2004, at the invitation of the Minister of Environment of the Slovak Republic.

¹¹ MedWet includes also 12 North African and Middle Eastern countries, as well as 3 international conventions, the European Commission and UNDP, and 7 international NGOs and wetland centres.

¹² Only the Greek part has been designated as a Ramsar site.

they start focusing on environmental issues, especially in the case of shared sensitive sites. Usually, these contacts are *ad hoc* and presuppose governmental blessing. A characteristic case is the Pasvik Nature Reserve, shared by Norway and Russia, where the co-operation was initiated by the local authorities, but obtained approval by central government and military authorities.

Inter-governmental agreement

The next level is the expression of political will by the governments involved, and at various levels. Thus the Trilateral Wadden Sea Co-operation was officially initiated in Copenhagen in 1982 through a Joint Declaration of the governments of Denmark, Germany and The Netherlands¹³. The Prespa Park as well was established by a Joint Declaration of the prime ministers of Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia¹⁴. The co-operation on the Lower Neretva River was started with a memorandum of understanding between the appropriate ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia¹⁵. It should be noted here that such agreements belong to the domain of 'soft' law and can be easily recalled or rendered inoperative, but they carry considerable weight as they express in official form political will.

Formal inter-governmental treaty

Finally, the most developed form of co-operation consists of a bilateral treaty, which becomes a legally binding document between sovereign states. Such an instrument may be necessary for the development of joint management structures. A binding document of this type establishing the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS) has been signed in The Hague by the three countries involved as early as 1985.

Administration

As transboundary co-operation is a process, it requires some level of administration, except if it is limited to simple exchanges between NGOs. This administration may take various forms, from loose collaboration between responsible authorities to the establishment of a joint management body.

Collaboration of responsible services

These can be either at the local / regional or central government level. They are usually limited to *ad hoc* issues or to periodic consultation and do not involve the establishment of a common organ.

Active participation of local authorities

Sometimes co-operation is limited to the ministerial level, ignoring local communities. Yet, their informed involvement in the transboundary process is a necessary factor for

¹³ Although exchanges had started with the 1st Wadden Sea Conference in the Hague in 1978 and continued with the 2nd in Bonn in 1980.

¹⁴ Signed in the village of Aghios Germanos (Greece) on 2 February 2000.

¹⁵ Signed in Zadar (Croatia) on 6 June 2003, and co-signed by the representatives of the Principality of Monaco and MedWet.

success. Thus, the active participation of local authorities is a step forward and helps in the deepening of collaboration.

Joint co-ordination structure

As the process evolves, the existence of a joint structure to co-ordinate activities becomes imperative. Thus, in both the cases of Prespa and the Neretva, Co-ordination Committees have been established by ministerial decision, and they consist of representatives of the central environmental agency, the local authorities and the academic / NGO community¹⁶, to co-ordinate planning and activities. This is also the role of the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, though it does not have executive and enforcement power, retained by the national management bodies.

Joint management structure

Establishing a truly bilateral management body with full powers is a difficult step to be implemented, as it implies a serious limitation of national sovereignty and it is doubtful whether such a body in its pure form exists¹⁷. Yet, such an organ would be appropriate in order to carry out joint activities in an integrated manner. Various intermediate solutions have been found, as in the case of the Mercantour National Park (France) and of the Alpe Marittimi Park (Italy), where the staff are undertaking since 1987 specific management tasks jointly or in a shared way, without the establishment of a joint management authority.

Substance

The depth of co-operation can also vary from a simple exchange of information on issues of common interest to the joint management of a shared wetland or a hydrological basin.

Exchange of information

As already noted, this early phase of co-operation concerns usually scientific parameters and is innocuous. It can become politically sensitive if these parameters concern delicate issues, such as water extraction or land uses in frontier areas.

Sporadic consultation

Exchange of views on key issues of common concern can happen at both the central and the local level. For example, there can be periodic discussions between the responsible services on the prevention of forest fires or the curbing of pollution incidents or flood phenomena.

Systematic consultation process

Such discussions may lead, as they mature, to more systematic consultation, usually associated with the establishment of a permanent co-operation structure. Transparency here is a key consideration, as full information on issues that may have transborder impacts must

¹⁶ In both committees, Ramsar / MedWet is a permanent member with an observer status.

¹⁷ With the exception perhaps of the Wadden Sea collaboration.

be made available to all sides. In the case of Dojran Lake (shared by Greece and the FYR of Macedonia) such systematic consultation has focused on the continuing drop of the level of the lake, the hydrological problems associated with it and the measures necessary to resolve them.

Some common activities

Consultation can lead to joint activities, including the development of projects for the entire transboundary site. A characteristic case is the collaboration of Portugal and Spain in the areas of Algarve and Huelva, through a series of projects funded by the European Union. They include a project for the joint management of the estuary of the Guadiana River and other related wetlands.

Joint planning and programming

It is more important, however, to develop a common vision for the entire area, a difficult process that requires scientific inputs, but also a slow process of public awareness and consultation. This vision, once formulated and accepted, can be expressed in more concrete terms through the preparation of a Strategic Action Plan for the whole area, which will guide future activities, as in the case of Prespa¹⁸. As a next step it may include a joint management plan for the transboundary site or at least the harmonisation of separate existing management plans. Such is the case of the Northern Bogs (*Ziemelu purvi*) in Latvia and the Nigula Nature Reserve in Estonia, where a joint management plan for this transboundary wetland is being prepared.

Joint management actions

Finally, the joint execution of an integrated management plan expresses the most profound and substantial bilateral co-operation, and is, therefore, quite difficult to achieve. One of the few examples in Europe is that of the German-Luxembourg Nature Park.

Costs and benefits

Transboundary co-operation provides in general significant benefits, because of its positive outputs, and especially the adoption of common solutions. It also entails costs, in the form of difficulties and constraints, particularly in an initial phase, and inertia to be overcome. It is important to have a clear and objective understanding of both before launching such initiatives, in order to avoid excessive expectations and unjustified discouragement.

Benefits from transboundary co-operation

Although the benefits of co-operation are quite obvious, it is not useless to summarise them as follows:

¹⁸ The Strategic Action Plan for the Prespa Park has been prepared by scientists from the three countries, has gone through a lengthy consultation process and was approved by the Co-ordination Committee. It serves as guidance for all current activities, including a large GEF project in development.

Pooling of scientific resources

Knowledge is necessary for the effective and sustainable management of wetlands and other resources. Pooling of scientific knowledge and experience is thus highly desirable. Combining applied research facilities not only increases the capacity for producing knowledge, but can also create complementarity with different areas of specialisation on each side.

Joint management of resources

Managing jointly shared natural resources is beneficial in avoiding conflicts of interest and duplication of efforts. This is particularly pertinent in the case of water and of migratory species that are not constrained by frontiers. In Prespa, for example, during 2004, the three countries involved agreed on a common no-fishing measure during the fish spawning period.

Conservation of biodiversity

Migratory species in particular benefit from a joint approach. Large mammals migrate across frontiers. Waterbird species, such as Dalmatian Pelicans, may nest in one area, but feed in another. Fish have their own movement patterns. Concerted action across borders will favour the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity.

Better implementation of management measures

The implementation of jointly agreed management measures may be facilitated by cross-border co-operation, especially in zones adjoining the national frontiers.

Platform for resolving conflicts

Transboundary co-operation in a mature stage and its related structures can provide a platform for resolving conflicts both in the use of resources and in the mitigation of threats. This is particularly applicable to water sharing disputes, such as in the case of the excessive use for irrigation by the Greek side in Dojran Lake (Greece and the FYR of Macedonia).

Raising the awareness of issues

Lifting issues at the international co-operation level, and involving high governmental authorities, raises their prominence both locally and nationally, thus facilitating their resolution. On a broader level, the recognition of a transboundary site through Ramsar designation creates international prominence, as in the case of the Danube Delta.

Increased fundraising capacity and potential

Collaboration may increase the capacity to develop effectively project proposals. In addition, international donors seem to appreciate highly efforts of bilateral collaboration, especially in politically sensitive zones, as in the case of SE Europe. Thus, the starting co-operation in Neretva has attracted the interest of the World Bank, the Swiss Agency for

Development Co-operation and the Principality of Monaco, while in Prespa UNDP, KfW and GTZ are involved.

Increased visitors potential

A transboundary protected area, rich in biodiversity and cultural values, has a higher potential for attracting visitors and in this way benefiting local economies.

Social, cultural and political benefits

Exchanges across borders have also important side benefits in creating trust and friendship among neighbouring communities, cultivating peaceful exchanges related to culture, education, sports and entertainment, minimising thus the possibility of political or religious conflicts.

Difficulties and constraints

There are also some difficulties to be faced. Without exaggerating their importance, they are perhaps the reason why so many efforts at transboundary co-operation have remained stagnant.

Political tensions and mistrust

It is interesting to note –but difficult to state openly– that such tensions may reside either at the government or the local level. For example, in the case of Evros / Maritsa / Meriç River, local populations across the border are friendly, but there is reservation at the government level, especially the military authorities; while between Albania and Macedonia the situation might be quite the reverse. These tensions can be compounded by heavy bureaucratic procedures, especially in countries of the ex-Eastern Bloc, and by corruption in certain cases that tends to distort the objective assessment of issues. In addition, unresolved border disputes (as in the case of Kopacki Rit between Croatia and Serbia) do exist and make transboundary collaboration almost impossible.

Economic, legal and administrative disparities

Such disparities are common in cases of neighbouring countries with different historical backgrounds, and in particular members and non-members of the European Union, rendering the implementation of common measures difficult. Thus co-operation must focus on facilitating the decrease of such disparities through appropriate development and social interventions. Naturally, it entails special responsibilities of the more affluent partner country.

Different concepts of nature conservation

Not all countries have the same understanding of nature conservation. The view of nature conservation integrated with a sustainable use of resources, the concept of joint management of the natural and cultural heritage, the continuity of space and the need of intervention at the catchment basin scale are not always fully understood. In some countries, the sectoral view of nature consisting of isolated protected areas still prevails.

Language and cultural differences

The ability to communicate directly and at all levels of the society is an essential prerequisite for transboundary co-operation. This can be hindered by language differences. Thus in the case of Prespa, every document has to be translated in four languages –Albanian, English, Greek and Macedonian– and simultaneous translation is required at every meeting, causing delays, costs and at times misunderstandings. Using English as a *lingua franca* is not always a viable or an acceptable solution.

Frontiers

In some cases, crossing of frontiers is a difficult, time-consuming and sometime costly process. It makes physical contacts between staff working on different sides very difficult and has an additional impact on joint public awareness and education activities. Solutions can be found on the local level, but this may be impossible in the case of the outer frontiers of the European Union, and regulations resulting from the Schengen Agreement. Thus a ‘hardening’ of the frontiers –presumably for the control of terrorism– disrupts current co-operation patterns, as in the case of the Neusiedler See. The physical infrastructure required (and being currently constructed in various places, will hinder species migrations and have a negative impact on biodiversity.

Depopulation

Especially in mountainous areas, strong depopulation phenomena are current, due to both financial and social reasons. This weakens local communities and makes jointly agreed management measures difficult to implement, due to loss of local human capacity. On the other hand, a programme of co-operative efforts at sustainable development across borders, and the interest it generates, may provide new employment opportunities and become an attraction element for the maintenance of population and the eventual reversal of demographic trends.

Lack of funds

Transboundary co-operation requires funds, especially at its initial phases, to provide funds for the organisation of meetings, ensuring secretarial services and covering modest preliminary activities, until major projects are launched. Funds are also required for the long-term operation and maintenance of management structures, which are not easy to find from international donors. Thus, the corresponding public sectors must be able to provide the necessary financial resources, which will remain modest if good use is made of existing national structures.

Strengthening transboundary co-operation

The benefits of transboundary co-operation briefly mentioned above exceed by far the corresponding ‘costs’, especially as the latter can be reduced through knowledge, sensitivity and good planning. Thus, the efforts to strengthen transboundary efforts are fully justified. Ongoing activities in this area provide useful lessons, which in turn lead to concrete suggestions for new initiatives, while international organisations may provide encouragement and support.

Lessons learned

An analysis of certain successful transboundary co-operation initiatives in Europe provides certain key lessons, which can be useful for the future.

Setting goals

It is important to agree from the very beginning on certain common goals, which must be clear, modest and attainable. Lack of goals or divergence may lead to confusion and loss of direction, while overambitious objectives will cause discouragement and may encourage inertia. Dojran Lake for example is an important tourist destination for Macedonians, while for Greeks a degraded and isolated area, suitable only for intensive agriculture; consequently, developing a common vision for it is far from simple.

Obtaining political support

Transboundary efforts require strong political support and commitment at the highest level, if possible by the prime ministers or the councils of ministers, and not only by the national environmental authorities. The involvement of parliaments is also useful or at least of those of their members that come from the area in question.

Developing local understanding and participation

It is very important to avoid the perception that transboundary co-operation is imposed by the central authorities, without the consent of local inhabitants across borders. That is why systematic efforts are needed from the very beginning to implicate in the process the local political authorities, but also civic society, through NGOs, the academic sector and the wider public. Thus, public awareness must be a continuous component of all co-operation activities and sizeable funds must be allocated for it.

Building trust

Trust is an essential element in all forms of co-operation, and especially in transboundary initiatives, which must overcome in certain cases suspicion and distrust built up over lengthy periods of time. Building trust among both individuals and institutions is a complex and sensitive process. Clarity in all communications is a requirement. Transparency and the wide dissemination of pertinent information can contribute greatly to building trust. Equitable handling of all sides involved, irrespectively of their status of economic development and of their potential contribution, is also a key element.

Concrete measures for new transboundary initiatives

Based on the experience gained, some concrete advice can be provided for new initiatives.

Preparing the ground

Before starting major efforts, a small initial project to identify issues and opportunities and to initiate the process is extremely useful. This can be covered by an NGO contribu-

tion, by multilateral assistance or by the Ramsar Small Grants Fund, as in the case of the Neretva River¹⁹.

Obtaining authorisations

As soon as prospects appear positive, the local and national authorities on both sides of the frontier must be informed and their agreement obtained. Often this is not an easy step, as political and / or financial considerations may make governments sceptical of such transboundary initiatives. In such difficult cases, having obtained strong political support at the local level may help in convincing the national authorities and in obtaining their involvement in the process.

Gradual development of structures

Care should be given to avoid creating at an early stage cumbersome and complicated structures. First, they are difficult to finance, as donors are usually reluctant to cover administrative costs. In addition, they may be inefficient and antagonise existing mechanisms. Thus, it is better to start modestly with simple co-ordination structures, consisting of individuals *ex officio*, attempt to ensure secretarial services from an existing institution or organisation and start establishing other mechanisms only when the co-operation process has matured and funds are available.

The contribution of international organisations

A number of inter-governmental conventions --and especially the CBD-- encourage co-operation among countries in the case of shared protected areas and natural resources. In the case of wetlands, the Ramsar Convention plays a primary and complementary role and has supported actively transboundary efforts.

The UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme (MAB) is also focusing on and promoting transboundary Biosphere Reserves, a formal, specific type of BR. It supports the establishment of bi / trilateral expert committees from an early stage, already to agree on the extent of Biosphere Reserves and their different zones, as in the case of Polesie, shared by Poland, Belarus and Ukraine.

In addition, international non-governmental organisations, such as IUCN²⁰ and WWF International have been concerned with this issue and have contributed significantly to the launching of various transboundary initiatives. In particular, Wetlands International has carried out in 1999 an inventory of transboundary co-operation efforts in Europe (unpublished), which needs revision. Such international institutions and organisations can help in a number of ways.

Providing a legal framework

The Convention on Wetlands, for example, incorporates such a framework of co-operation in its basic documents. Thus, the Preamble of the Convention states:

¹⁹ The project, initiated in 2002, concerns the 'Transboundary management plan for the Lower Neretva Valley'.

²⁰ Especially through its World Commission on Protected Areas.

*'Being confident that the conservation of wetlands and their flora and fauna can be ensured by combining far-sighted national policies with **co-ordinated international action**..'*

while Article 5 is as follows:

*'Being confident that the conservation of wetlands and their flora and fauna can be ensured by combining far-sighted national policies with **co-ordinated international action**..'*

Offering concrete advice

The Convention on Wetlands also offers concrete guidance through Resolution VII.19 and Handbook 9 on 'Guidelines for international co-operation under the Ramsar Convention'. This guidance focuses especially on the obligation of contracting parties of the Convention to consult with each other in the case of wetlands and river basins that cross international borders, as well as migratory wetland-dependent species.

Identifying opportunities for transboundary co-operation

The various regional meetings of international bodies – such as the Ramsar one in Yerevan (Armenia) in December 2004 – are an appropriate venue for identifying promising cases for transboundary co-operation. Recently, in a UNESCO-ROSTE / IUCN meeting²¹, the participants identified 23 cases of such co-operation initiatives in South-eastern Europe alone. In addition, data kept on designated sites, such as the Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS), often include valuable data that may indicate the need and opportunities for transboundary co-operation. They could be made more explicit on the future.

Catalytic interventions

The intervention of an international organisation –and particularly the Ramsar Convention– may break existing barriers and distrust and act catalytically in promoting collaboration. This has happened with the MedWet Initiative²² in the cases of both Prespa and Neretva, where the first meetings of their Co-ordination Committees were convened and chaired the former by the Ramsar Secretary General and the latter by the MedWet Co-ordinator.

Support during the initial phase

In some cases, assisting on various levels in the launching process, before co-ordination mechanisms have been established, is requested from international bodies. This may include the preparation of working documents in draft form for the operation of a co-ordination committee and / or secretariat, such as their terms of reference and rules of procedure.

Involvement in the co-operation process

Especially in regional or sub-regional initiatives, the sporadic or permanent participation of the Ramsar Bureau is required²³, as specified in Resolution VIII.30 on 'International

²¹ Held in Belgrade and the Tara Mountain, on 14-17 June 2004.

²² Through the MedWet Co-ordination Unit, which is an outposted office of the Ramsar Bureau.

²³ The Ramsar Secretary General chairs MedWet/Com.

co-operation²⁴. This also may happen at the level of specific sites (such as Prespa and the Neretva²⁴), but the capacity of the Bureau is rather limited and such requests should be evaluated with great caution.

Conclusions

A general conclusion that can be drawn is that transboundary co-operation efforts related to natural and rural areas, in spite of certain difficulties and constraints, are multiplying and deepening throughout Europe. This is a positive trend on both ecological and political grounds.

To respond to this trend, the international organisations concerned have the possibility to assist substantially within the limits of their capacity (in human and financial resources). These organisations may include international conventions, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and in particular the Convention on Wetlands and its international partner organisations, in the case of shared wetlands and catchments.

Of course, financial resources are needed to facilitate the process of co-operation and to make possible joint interventions across borders. The role of knowledge, however, should not be underestimated. Sharing knowledge, experience and methods, not only within the Old Continent but also with the other regions of the world, can be a powerful tool for progress. This should be a process in which those that are directly involved in transboundary co-operation initiatives will have a key role to play. In addition, the Ramsar Bureau and its partners can gather information and prepare relevant advice for the Contracting Parties of the Convention.

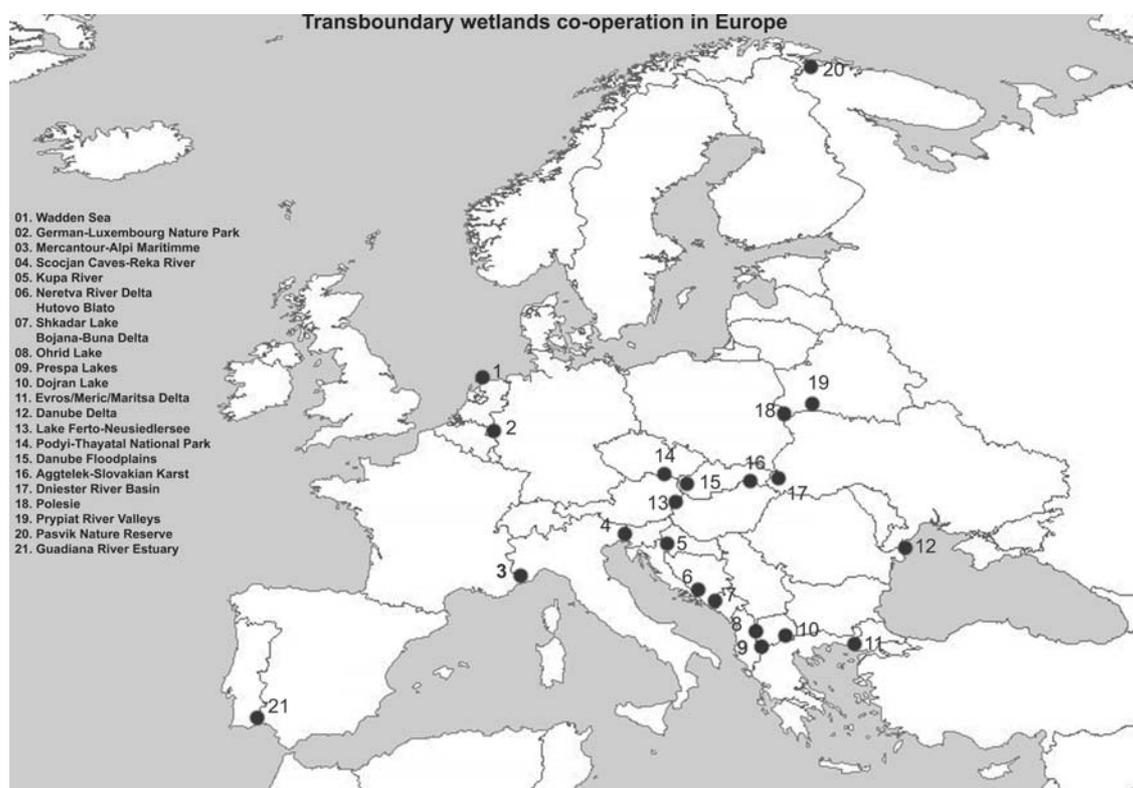
Let us hope that in the coming years national borders will play a decreasing role in connection with the sustainable management and use of wetland and water resources, turning from hurdles into opportunities.

²⁴ MedWet participates as a permanent member of the Prespa Park Co-ordination Committee, with an observer status. Probably the same will be required for the Neretva Co-ordination Committee.

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Appendix I: Characteristic cases of transboundary co-operation in Europe



Wadden Sea

In the beginning of the 1970s environmental scientists argued that the ecosystems of Wadden Sea could not be divided according to national borders and that they form, from an ecological point of view, one system. Thus, in 1975, the first trilateral governmental conference was held in The Hague and in 1982, during the 3rd Conference in Copenhagen, a Joint Declaration was agreed upon by the three countries. According to it, the parties declared their intention to co-ordinate their activities and measures in order to implement a number of international legal instruments in the field of natural environmental protection, amongst others the Ramsar Convention and the EC Bird Directive, for a comprehensive protection of the Wadden Sea region as a whole, including its flora and fauna.

In 1987, in Wilhelmshaven (Germany), the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat was established, with the primary task to initiate, support, facilitate and co-ordinate the activities of this collaboration initiative.

The German-Luxembourg Nature Park

In 1963, the German-Luxembourg Nature Park was established, the first transboundary nature park in Western Europe, joining the South Eifel Nature Park and the German part of the German-Luxembourg Nature Park. In 1965 a State Treaty was signed, inaugurating co-operation between the states of Rhineland and Palatinate in Germany and the Grand

Duchy of Luxembourg. According to the Treaty, a commission was established as a common body, in which each side participated with four members. The commission handles management and co-ordination issues and submits relevant proposals to the Governments of both parties. The organs of the Park are the Board of Directors, the assembly of members and the working committee. Everyday management is conducted by the Verein Deutsch-Luxemburgischer Naturpark.

Mercantour – Alpi Marittime

The Mercantour – Alpi Marittime parks are situated on the borders of France and Italy. The reserves occupy two Alpine slopes, with U-shaped valleys and include hundreds of lakes. Since 1987, the *Parc national du Mercantour* and the *Parco delle Alpi Marittime* have been linked and in 1998 the two parks have signed a new twinning contract to confirm their commitment in working together. This expresses their will to intensify common actions concerning scientific research, biodiversity conservation, management, territorial planning, sustainable development and educational activity.

Neretva Delta – Hutovo Blato

The Neretva River flows through Bosnia and Herzegovina and through Croatia. The valley along the last 30 km of the Neretva River, and the river itself, comprise a remarkable landscape, the Neretva Delta. The upper valley, the 7,411 hectares in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is called Hutovo Blato. The entire delta is anticipated for protection as a nature park by the Physical Planning Strategy of the Republic of Croatia and the National Biological and Landscape Diversity Protection Strategy with Action Plans (NBSAP). The proposal awaits official action by the Croatian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Physical Planning.

Since 1995, Hutovo Blato has been protected as a nature park and managed by a public authority. The whole zone is well protected from human impact and functions as an important habitat for many plants and animals.

Neretva Delta has been designated as a Ramsar site since 1992, and Hutovo Blato since 2001. Both areas form one integrated Ramsar site that is a natural entity divided by the state border.

Initial contacts on the co-operation between the two states concerning the Lower Neretva started as early as 1997-1998 through the MedWet2 project²⁵. They were continued with other initiatives, such as a Ramsar Small Grants Fund for the preparation of a joint management plan, a LIFE project for Hutove Blato, and various supportive activities carried out by REC²⁶

With support from the Principality of Monaco, the MedWet Co-ordination Unit facilitated this transboundary co-operation and a memorandum of understanding was signed by the four sides in Zadar (Croatia) in June 2003. A Co-ordination Committee, based on

²⁵ Funded by EC / LIFE Third Countries.

²⁶ 'Transboundary Cooperation through the Management of Shared Natural Resources', with Swiss government funding.

the Prespa model, was established later on, and its first meeting was held in Metković (Croatia) in September 2004.

Dojran Lake

Dojran Lake is shared by Greece and the FYR of Macedonia. Common efforts on the regional and NGO level have been made towards avoiding the further degradation of the lake, caused by a significant fall of the water level, due to excessive water abstraction for irrigation on the Greek side, and by water pollution.

A biannual environmental project for Dojran Lake was approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece, which is managed jointly by EKBY²⁷ and the FYR of Macedonia's environmental organisation "Society for Research and Maintenance of Biodiversity and Sustainable Development". The project is titled 'Evaluation of the wetland functions and values of the transboundary Dojran Lake' and constitutes the continuation of the co-operation initiative between the two neighbouring countries for the conservation of the lake.

Prespa Lakes

Lakes Megali Prespa and Mikri Prespa constitute an undivided geographical and ecological entity shared by Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia. During the summer of 1999, the Society for the Protection of Prespa and WWF Greece, with the support of the MedWet Initiative, proposed to the Greek Government the creation of a new trilateral protected area which would include both lakes and their hydrologic basin. The proposal was accepted swiftly and on 2 February 2000 the Prime Ministers of Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia met in the area and signed a Common Declaration for the creation of the Prespa Park, the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans.

The next step was the establishment of the Prespa Park Co-ordination Committee, consisting of representatives of central government, local communities and the NGO and academic sector, which guides and organises the co-operation among the three countries at all levels. It was followed by the preparation and approval of a joint Strategic Action Plan for Prespa and the launching of a large GEF project.

Danube Delta

The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve is shared by Romania and the Ukraine and is made up of countless lakes, channels and islands at the end of a 2,860 km long river. The Danube Delta is the largest European wetland and reed bed. The Biosphere Reserve was declared as both Natural World Heritage and Ramsar site in 1991.

In 2000, an Agreement was signed between the Ministry of Environment and Territorial Planning of the Republic of Moldova, the Ministry of Waters and Environmental Protection of Romania and the Ministry of the Environmental and Natural Resources of

²⁷ The Greek Biotope / Wetland Centre, based in Thessaloniki (Greece).

Ukraine, on the co-operation for the Transfrontier Nature Protected Area in the zone of the Danube Delta and Lower Prut River. Recently, however, the decision by the Ukraine to construct a navigation channel through the core of the wetland (Vystroye) has strained the collaboration.

Lake Fertö – Neusiedler See

Lake Fertö – Neusiedler See represents the westernmost steppe lake in Eurasia, shared by Hungary (1/4) and Austria (3/4). Marshes, a vast reed belt and saline grasslands surround this shallow and alkaline lake. The diverse cultural landscape of the Lake Fertö area has also been inscribed on the World Heritage list, since it has been the meeting place of different cultures for eight millennia. The management of the lake and scientific research is carried out in co-operation by both the Neusiedler See – Seewinkel National Park (Austria) and the Lake Fertö-Hanság Nemzeti Park (Hungary). Of particular interest is the joint Education Strategy for the transboundary national park and wetland system that the two national parks have recently developed.

Podyi/Thayatal National Park

Up until 1989, the Thaya River was the border line of the 'Iron Curtain', separating the East and West of Europe. However, even before the creation of the National Park Thayatal in 2000, the Environment Ministers of both the Czech Republic and Austria and the Head of the Province of Lower Austria signed a declaration of cross-border co-operation, on the basis of future common development of the Park.

Important issues are handled by a bilateral commission, consisting of representatives from the relevant ministries and nature protection departments, the national park administrations and the advisory committees.

Such issues concern management co-ordination, common rules for fishing and game regulation, visitor guidance, information and necessary infrastructure.

Aggtelek Reserve and Slovensky Kras

Aggtelek Biosphere Reserve in Hungary is situated adjacent to Slovensky Kras Biosphere Reserve in Slovakia, in a vast karst area that belongs to the southern limestone foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Caves of Aggtelek and Slovak Karst have been designated as a World Heritage Site. In 1999, the two states established an intergovernmental agreement for joint projects including research, protection and monitoring.

West Polesie

The West Polesie in Poland was approved by the UNESCO MAB (Man and the Biosphere) Programme as a Biosphere Reserve. The West Polesie comprises a vast open lowland landscape with a mosaic of swamps, moors, lakes, rivers and forests, and is adjacent to Ukraine's Shatskiy Biosphere Reserve. Both state authorities received recommenda-

tions from the Bureau to continue working towards a merger and a possible expansion of the reserve, in order to include Belarus as well, leading to the establishment of a potential West Polesie TBR²⁸.

Pasvik Nature Reserve

As a result of an environmental protection agreement between Norway and Russia, the Pasvik Nature Reserve was established in 1990. The decision was made in 1989 during a meeting of the environmental protection authorities in Murmansk Oblast and Finnmark County. The decision was welcomed by the central authorities both in Oslo and Moscow and the military border forces and border commissioners, as well.

Management of the nature reserve is being carried out through the co-operation of the administration of Pavik Zapovednik on the Russian side and the County Governor of Finnmark and Svanhovd Environmental Centre on the Norwegian side, on a wide range of activities such as, environmental surveillance, nature information, environmental education and data collection and building of field stations. A common book and brochure have already been published and a Russian military border tower has been converted into a bird watching tower.

The co-operation of the Reserve is co-ordinated by the Work Group on Biodiversity.

²⁸ Transboundary Biosphere Reserve.