

Ramsar Advisory Mission No. 22: Austria (1991)

CONVENTION MONITORING PROCEDURE

REPORT NO. 20 [vere 22]

DONAU-MARCH-AUEN, AUSTRIA

General Introduction

1. Each Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention ("Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat" Ramsar, 1971) "shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance" (Article 2.1 of the Convention). The Contracting Parties "shall designate at least one wetland to be included in the List" (Article 2.4) and "shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List"(Article 3.1). Furthermore, each Contracting Party "shall arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the list has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Information on such changes shall be passed without delay to the organization or government responsible for continuing bureau duties" (Article 3.2).

2. These are the principal stipulations of the Convention concerning wetlands included in the Ramsar List. Successive meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (held in 1980 at Cagliari, Italy, in 1984 at Groningen, Netherlands, and in 1987 at Regina, Canada,) have devoted special attention to the conservation of listed wetlands and to the best ways of avoiding 'change in ecological character'.

3. Conference Document C.3.6 of the Regina meeting ("Review of national reports submitted by Contracting Parties and Review of implementation of the Convention since the second meeting in Groningen, Netherlands in May 1984") included a section (paragraphs 66 to 107) entitled "Changes in the ecological character of listed wetlands". This section recalls that it is "essential that, after a wetland has been designated for the List, its conservation status should be maintained", and that "the concept of preventing 'change in the ecological character' is fundamental to the Ramsar Convention". Paragraphs 74 to 107 then review the various wetlands on the List where such changes have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur.

4. During the discussion of these paragraphs, several delegates emphasized the importance of avoiding changes of this kind in listed wetlands and the Conference approved a Recommendation (C.3.9) on this matter. The Recommendation (text attached to the present document) urges Contracting Parties to take swift and effective action to prevent any further degradation of sites and to restore, as far as possible the value of degraded sites;

the Recommendation requests Contracting Parties in whose territory are located the sites identified in Conference Document C.3.6 as having incurred or being threatened by damage, to report to the Convention Bureau the actions undertaken to safeguard these sites.

5. At the fourth meeting of the Ramsar Convention's Standing Committee in 1988, the members (Pakistan, Canada, Chile, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Tunisia and USA) and observers (United Kingdom, IUCN, IURB and WWF) considered the best way of promoting the implementation of Recommendation C.3.9. A "Monitoring Procedure" was adopted by the Standing Committee to enable the Ramsar Bureau to work with the Contracting Party (or Parties) concerned, in order to find a solution to possible change in ecological character at Ramsar sites; this procedure has been used since February 1988 by the Convention Bureau. The 1990 Montreux Conference approved Recommendation C.4.7 which "endorses the measures taken by the Standing Committee to establish a Ramsar Monitoring Procedure"; the Montreux Conference made a number of amendments to the text of the Procedure; this revised text is appended to the present report (Appendix I). Recommendation C.4.7 also instructs the Bureau to continue to operate this procedure when it receives information on adverse or likely adverse changes in ecological character at Ramsar sites. Recommendation C.4.7 finally "determines that Monitoring Procedure reports shall be public documents once the Contracting Party concerned has had an opportunity to study the reports and comment on them".

6. The Montreux Conference also approved Recommendation C.4.8 on "Change in ecological character of Ramsar sites". This recommendation referred back to Regina document C.3.6 and to the similar document presented at Montreux (document INF. C.4.18) which, in its paragraph 224, lists 44 Ramsar sites in 23 countries which appear to have undergone, to be undergoing or to be likely to undergo change in ecological character. Recommendation C.4.8 requests the Contracting Parties concerned to take swift and effective action to prevent or remedy such changes; it instructs the Bureau to maintain a record of such sites and to give priority to application of the Monitoring Procedure at sites included in this record.

7. Funding for the Monitoring Procedure is provided from the Convention's core budget and also from additional voluntary contributions made by Contracting Parties, Unesco and interested non-government organizations, notably WWF and RSPB (the Royal Society for Protection of Birds, UK).

Implementation of the Ramsar Convention in Austria - general

8. Austria deposited its instrument of accession to the Ramsar Convention with the Director-General of Unesco, Paris, on 16 December 1982. The Convention therefore came into force for Austria on 16 April 1983 (Bundesgesetzblatt, Jahrgang 1983, 89. Stück, ausgegeben am 12. April 1983, Seiten 1157-1164). At the time of accession, Austria designated five wetlands for the List of wetlands of international importance: Neusiedlersee (Burgenland); Donau-March-Auen (Niederösterreich); Untere Lobau (Wien); Stauseen am Unteren Inn

(Oberösterreich); and Rheindelta, Bodensee (Vorarlberg). Purgschachen Moor (Steiermark) was added to the Ramsar List in September 1991. Austria has not yet accepted the Paris Protocol nor the Regina Amendments, but has informed the Ramsar Bureau that acceptance procedures will be completed in the near future. An Austrian delegation took part in the 1984, 1987 and 1990 meetings of the Conference of Contracting Parties. Austria has also been represented as an observer at meetings of the Ramsar Standing Committee. Austria has made annual financial contributions to the budget of the Convention since such contributions were instituted in 1988, and has recently made additional voluntary contributions to the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Fund, and to the cost of producing the Ramsar "Newsletter". An Austrian National Ramsar Committee has been established with participation by representatives of the Federal and Provincial Governments and of invited NGOs. This Committee meets once or twice a year, according to need.

Donau-March-Auen - general background

9. The area designated for the Ramsar List by Austria under the name "Donau-March-Auen" covers an area of 38,500 hectares in the province of Niederösterreich. It is immediately adjacent to another Austrian Ramsar site, "Untere Lobau" (1039 hectares), which in administrative terms comes under the authority of the neighbouring provincial government of Vienna, but which in ecological terms is a continuation of the Donau-March-Auen. The term "Au", immediately recognisable in German but unfamiliar in most other languages (though significantly, the Czechs have a word for it - "Luh"), refers to areas along the valleys of the major central European rivers, with their ox-bows, damp oak and alder forests, and hay meadows, subject to periodic flooding at the time of snow melt or sudden downpours. As river regulation, hydroelectric energy production, and agricultural reclamation intervene, this unique habitat dwindles and disappears. Practically none is left along the Rhine; along the Danube and its tributaries, it is under severe threat. The Donau-March-Auen are the only major section of "Au" so far designated for the Ramsar List.

10. The Austrian Ramsar site extends along 35 kms of the course of the River Donau (Danube) downstream of Vienna as far as the border with Hungary and the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and along 15 kms of the course of the River Thaya and 60 kms of the course of the March, from the border between Austria and the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic just north of Bernhardsthal to the confluence with the Danube at the Hainburger Pforte (see map of the area, as deposited by Austria at the time of accession - Appendix II). This position along international frontiers should be emphasized, particularly in the case of the March and Thaya, which in the Ramsar site form the frontier between Austria and the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic; (this frontier was of course for many years the "iron curtain"). Conservation of the Ramsar site is scarcely imaginable without close links to immediately adjoining sites in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and in Hungary. Throughout this report, the international dimension will play a very large role.

11. Hainburg. The Donau-March-Auen Ramsar site was the subject of considerable discussion at the Groningen and Regina conferences. At this time, interest was centered on the Donau-Auen because of a proposal to build a dam across the Danube at Hainburg, in order to provide hydroelectric power and to regulate the river for navigation.

12. The Summary Report of the Plenary Session of 8 May 1984 at Groningen (document C.2.3 of the Conference, published on pages 15-16 of the Proceedings) reports on comments from the Austrian delegation: "no detailed results had as yet emerged from studies in the area which could be affected by construction of a hydroelectric dam and power station on the Lower Danube at Hainburg. The Lower Austrian Provincial Government and the Federal Government would both consider the findings and make a decision; either might reject the plans or subject their acceptance to specific conditions. The construction of the hydroelectric power station would solve the problem of the tendency of the Lower Danube to dry out; it might however also affect the riverine forest. In the absence of expert data, the Austrian government was unwilling to rely on opinions and guesses."

13. In 1985, the Austrian authorities provided the Ramsar Bureau with further information on the decisions of the Administrative Court about Hainburg. This was circulated to all Contracting Parties under Bureau Notification 85/2 (attached as Appendix III). As noted in the Review of implementation of the Convention since the Groningen meeting, (published on page 205 of the Regina Proceedings), the principal elements of this information were as follows:

The Administrative Court recognized that implementation of the authorization by the "Danube power station" might irreparably damage the area and has granted temporary relief. All clearing works will therefore be suspended. . . . Clearing works could not be started again before December 1985 . . . since . . . clearing works can be carried out only during . . . December and January.

On 5 January 1985, the Austrian Government decided on an eleven-point programme including: maintenance of the Hainburg power plant project; suspension of clearing works; cessation of protest activities in the river forest; harmonization of existing environmental plans and preparation of a Danube-March-Thaya river forest national park.

14. The Austrian national report to the 1987 Regina meeting (Proceedings, page 420) indicated that a commission had been established to consider the setting-up of the Danube-March-Thaya national park and that federal funds had been made available for planning; a government commission was examining alternative solutions for the former plans to build a power station at Hainburg. In plenary session at Regina (Summary Report of Plenary Session of 3 June 1987, document C.3.8, Proceedings page 46), the Austrian delegation stated that "the Austrian Federal Government had charged a Government Commission with the task of elaborating alternatives for hydroelectric exploitation of the Danube east of Vienna. A report was expected at the end of June 1987 and in addition the Federal Ministry for

Environmental Protection had funded a private association of ecologists to help plan a national park in the Donau-March-Thaya-Auen." The Ramsar Bureau understands that the Provincial Governments of Lower Austria and Vienna subsequently joined the Federal Government in financing a study of the feasibility of establishing such a park.

15. By the time of the Montreux conference in 1990, the emphasis in the Austrian national report had changed. The report notes that the Ramsar site could be threatened by hydroelectric exploitation of the Danube between Vienna and Hainburg, but gives much greater attention to other problems affecting the site, in particular in the March valley. The general impression, at Montreux and in the conservation community at large, was that the Hainburg power station project had been quietly shelved, as a result of direct popular protest, legal action in the Lower Austrian courts and acceptance of international obligations, notably those under Ramsar.

16. March-Auen. In its section on the Donau-March-Auen the Austrian national report to the 1990 Montreux meeting lays much greater stress on problems in the March valley. As noted in conference document INF.C.4.18, the report calls for:

strengthening of nature protection measures for the whole Ramsar site;

cancelling of drainage measures in damp meadows;

ending establishment of new arable land

cancelling and prohibition of gravel extraction through the appropriate Federal Ministry; and

clarification of the future status of the site with respect to energy creation on the Danube and the Danube-Oder canal.

Quite separately from the national report, the Austrian delegation also tabled at Montreux a much more detailed 200-page illustrated document, produced by the Federal Environment Agency (Umweltbundesamt, Wien, Monographien, Band 18, May 1990), entitled "Ramsar-Bericht I: Rheindelta/Marchauen". The last 40 pages deal with the March-Auen, and emphasize problems of conserving present or former flood meadows in the river valley.

17. Because of the continuing uncertainty over the situation at Hainburg, the possible impact of the Danube-Oder canal, and the difficulty in maintaining the ecological character of the riverine meadows and forests in the valley of the March and Thaya, there was clearly a possibility of change in ecological character at this Ramsar site. It was therefore decided that the site should be one of the 44 sites in 23 Ramsar states included in the "Record of Ramsar sites where a change in ecological character has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur"; this record was established by Recommendation C.4.8 of the Montreux Conference. The Recommendation calls for priority application of the Monitoring Procedure in sites on the Record.

18. At the meeting of the Austrian Ramsar Committee held in Bad Gams, Steiermark on 25 October 1990 (with the participation of Mr. M. Smart, then Conservation Coordinator of the Ramsar Bureau), the status of the Austrian Ramsar sites was further discussed. On this occasion, it was confirmed that the ecological character of the Donau-March-Auen might be affected by hydroelectric installations east of Vienna (the sites mentioned were Wolfsthal II and Engelhartstätten), by the Donau-Oder canal, and by continuing exploitation of agriculture, forestry and fishery. The meeting therefore requested the Ramsar Bureau to contact the Austrian authorities, with a view to organizing operation of the Monitoring Procedure at the Donau-March-Auen by an international expert mission. A rapid visit to the March-Auen, particularly in the area of Rabensburg and of Markthof, was organized for M. Smart - in the company of Dr. Kurt Farasin, one of the authors of the Umweltbundesamt monograph - on 27 October 1990.

Organization of the Monitoring Procedure Mission

19. In a letter of 31 October 1990 addressed to Dr. Schreiber of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Environment, Youth and the Family, the Ramsar Bureau indicated its intention of writing to the Austrian Federal Chancellor, the Federal Minister of the Environment, and the Prime Minister of Lower Austria, suggesting that the Ramsar Monitoring Procedure be operated at the Donau-March-Auen. These further letters were duly sent and in a letter of 15 January 1991 to the Bureau, Dr. Schreiber, after referring to the Umweltbundesamt monograph on the March-Auen which represented a first monitoring of the Ramsar site, indicated that he warmly welcomed the visit of any international delegation to the site.

20. The Ramsar Bureau therefore established a German-speaking team with international experience of wetland conservation, and in particular of riverine forests and meadows. The team was made up as follows:

Michael Smart, Director of Conservation and Assistant Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention

Monica Herzig Zurcher, Technical Officer for Listed Sites, Ramsar Bureau

Emil Dister, Director, WWF Auen-Institut, Rastatt, Germany.

21. Arrangements for the visit were made by the authorities of the Austrian Federal Government and of Lower Austria, and the following programme was carried out:

Monday 15 April

Discussions with officials of the Federal Government (see Appendix IV for participants' list)

Discussions with officials of the Lower Austrian administration

Discussions with officials of the Donau-Auen national park planning commission

Tuesday 16 April

Visit to the March-Auen, in the company of Federal and Lower Austrian officials, and of visitors from the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. Areas visited included Rabensburg, Hohenau sugar factory, Ringelsdorf, Angern (lunch with Bezirkshauptmann), WWF Reserve Marchegg, Lange Lüsse meadow restoration (Distelverein).

Wednesday 17 April

Meeting with Dr. Zinke ("Ecological Bricks for Our Common House of Europe").

Discussion with Minister of the Environment, Youth and the Family, Dkfm. Ruth Feldgrill-Zankel

Press conference with Minister Feldgrill-Zankel

Thursday 18 April

Meeting of Austrian National Ramsar Committee, Illmitz, Burgenland.

The members of the mission wish to express their gratitude to the Austrian Federal Government (and in particular to the Umweltbundesamt, and to Dr. K. Farasin), to the authorities of Lower Austria and to Austrian non-government organizations for preparing such a full and comprehensive programme and documentation, which allowed them to carry out their task in a short time.

22. Since the mission visited Austria, the Ramsar Bureau has had extensive contacts with the Ramsar authorities in the Czech and Slovak Republic, and in particular in the Czech Republic. The leader of the mission to Austria, Mr. M. Smart, has had an opportunity to visit the Auen on the Czech and Slovak banks of the Thaya (Dyje) and March (Horava). Further information received during this visit has been incorporated into the present report, in order to present a more balanced international picture.

Donau-March-Auen - current situation

23. The area of the Danube, March and Thaya valleys has been well described in documents provided to the Ramsar Bureau by the Austrian authorities at the time of accession (and published in the Ramsar "Directory of wetlands of international importance"), in the above-mentioned Monograph No. 18, and in the special report prepared for the mission by the Federal Environment Agency ("Umweltbundesamt, Interne Berichte UBA-IB-300"). The present report therefore concentrates on describing and evaluating the issues related to conservation and wise use of wetlands in the Ramsar site.

24. Donau-Auen - the Hainburg dam: As indicated above, the principal remit of the mission was to report on the situation in the March- and Thaya-Auen and to suggest solutions for the problems. In view of the long involvement of the Ramsar Convention in the issue of the

dam across the Danube at Hainburg, however, the mission also looked into the status of the Donau-Auen. During discussions with Federal officials, notably of the Wasserstrassendirektion, the mission learnt that the construction of a dam at Hainburg was still under serious consideration. The reason why the dam is still being proposed is, however, rather different from the original motivation. Little emphasis is now placed on generation of electricity - it seems generally accepted that the demand for electricity in Austria was over-estimated in earlier calculations; however, the question of Danube navigation remains an important issue. In addition, water engineers emphasize that the building of some 20 dams on the Danube upstream of Vienna has created a new problem of deepening of the river-bed ('Sohleneintiefung'): the increased speed of the current and the greater erosive power of the regulated Danube is wearing away the river-bed downstream of the last dam. This is a well-known problem to dam-builders and river engineers throughout the world, and there are two common solutions - either to continue to build more and more dams, thus exporting the problem downstream; or to tip material into the river to replace the matter eroded from the bed. This latter solution is the one adopted on the Rhine in Germany, and on many other rivers throughout the world: it is effective but unending, since the silt and small stones are eventually washed away and have to be replaced again and again.

25. Donau-Auen national park: The mission also had the opportunity to study the current position as regards establishment of a national park. They learnt that the Betriebsgesellschaft Marchfeldkanal (the body carrying out the feasibility study mentioned in paragraph 14) is charged, not with establishing a national park, but with investigating whether one should be established. Its remit seems to extend furthermore only to the Donau-Auen, and not to the March- and Thaya-Auen.

26. The mission heard reports of forestry plantations in the Donau-Auen, and of problems of hunting management in this area. In some areas quick-growing *Populus* species have been planted to produce toothpicks and matches; recently there has been a return to afforestation with native species, and this tendency may be further encouraged by a new law. Game (deer, roe deer and wild boar) has been so numerous, and has been encouraged by hunting interests, that regeneration of forests (especially oak forests) has been hampered.

27. Public interest in Auen: On the other hand, it would appear that public interest in, and appreciation of the Auen landscape is continually increasing. WWF-Austria is conducting a successful campaign to purchase areas along the rivers. It already owns part of the nature reserve at Marchegg on the River March, and manages the area in cooperation with the private owner of the remainder. In October 1990, it organized a successful "Auen-Show" on Austrian television, which raised 83 million Austrian schillings for purchase of over 400 hectares in a quite different section of the Auen, on the southern bank of the Danube, near Petronell. This area would be submerged in case of construction of the Hainburg dam.

28. Furthermore, in response to political changes in Central Europe in the last few years, an initiative entitled "Ecological Bricks for Our Common House of Europe" has been developed by a consortium of non-governmental organizations. The initiative, which has received extensive support from WWF-Austria, suggests establishment of multinational protected areas (or "building bricks") across the former iron curtain. One of the zones proposed is a three-nation protected area incorporating the "Au" areas of Danube, Thaya and March in Austria, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and Hungary (see "Politische Ökologie", Sonderheft 2, Oktober 1990, pages 18-22).

29. The proposed Donau-Oder canal: This proposal, long discussed, has become more topical with the recent political changes throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and the increased traffic, trade and exchange of persons that is expected to result. Several versions of the canal in the area of the River March are under discussion: it is reported (Österreichisches Raumplanungsinstitut; Wösendorfer 1990) that the Austrian authorities have refused to allow damming of the River March itself, so various alternative routes have been proposed. One would cut across the March-Auen south of Angern, and could then join the Danube southeast of Vienna, or flow parallel to the River March; another would flow through the territory of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. In any case, a major dam would be required on the Danube at Wolfsthal just short of the frontier with the Czech and Slovak Republic. Such a dam would cause not only much of the present Donau-Auen, but also the March-Auen, to be flooded; its effect from a nature conservation point of view would therefore be much more serious than the proposed Hainburg dam, which would only affect the Danube (see map at Appendix V).

30. In the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, a company named Ecotransmoravia has been established with a capital of 500 million crowns to promote the Danube-Oder canal. (The canal in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic would link not only Danube and Oder, but would include a branch to the Elbe). The Ramsar Bureau understands that the approval for the Czech and Slovak section of the canal is unlikely to be forthcoming for the next ten years for both economic and environmental reasons. Economic problems include the cost of the undertaking and the fact that the proposed canal would go through alluvial river valleys which are major sources of drinking water. Environmental problems include the fact that the proposed route would go through three proposed Ramsar sites in the Czech Republic - the wetlands of the lower Thaya, the Morava valley near Litovel, and the Oder valley landscape protection area northeast of Ostrava.

31. March-Auen - Conservation measures: The Ramsar site was of course designated by the Federal Government (no doubt after consultation with the Lower Austrian Government), but the responsibility for conservation measures - as in many other states with a federal structure - lies with the governments of the provinces, in this case Lower Austria. There is therefore already a diffusion of the central government's responsibility here, and a need for a provincial authority to accept international obligations and responsibilities for maintaining

the ecological character of the Ramsar site. Such responsibilities include making the necessary financial provisions for administration, wardening, management, study and public access.

32. It was evident to the mission that the Lower Austrian authorities had been unable to provide the necessary funds. On the one hand, a proper management concept has not been drawn up for the Ramsar site as a whole: Ramsar sites do not have to be strict nature reserves - it is clear that an area like the March-Auen, which has a long history of human settlement and agricultural activity, needs to have a mosaic of protected zones and of areas where those activities which over the centuries have formed the landscape may be pursued. This is the Ramsar concept of wise use for the benefit of human populations, without whose consent and active support no "National Park" or other form of protected area can be effective in the long term. Drawing up, putting into practice and administering such a concept calls for considerable input of funds. On the other hand, the available staff in the provincial administration is quite inadequate to carry out even the current tasks: the mission was informed that there are only two or three biologists in the Lower Austrian administration for nature conservation; their time is wholly taken up with administrative tasks, and they have not even been able to visit all the areas under their authority. While local committees and organizations are involved in natural resource use and planning efforts, necessary monitoring and management are neglected for lack of staff.

33. By comparison, the South Moravia part of the Czech Republic has five Landscape Protection Areas, each with a staff of about ten persons (including scientists), while the Czech Institute for Nature Conservation has another 80 staff in South Moravia; numbers of staff attached to these conservation bodies have increased since the change in political organization in November 1989.

34. The boundaries of the Ramsar site along the March and the Thaya are the rivers themselves to the north and east, and roads and railways to the west. The western boundaries, which naturally run along the higher ground skirting the former flood plain, are thus boundaries of administrative convenience rather than ecological limits. The Lower Austrian authorities have adopted a number of protection measures in the area:

A Landschaftsschutzgebiet Donau-March-Auen (landscape protection area), covering 20,500 ha. and hence smaller than the Ramsar zone, has been declared; it places some restrictions on building, but does not affect agriculture, forestry or tourism.

Several nature reserves have been declared. The largest is the NSG Untere Marchauen (1,150 ha. including the WWF reserve at Marchegg); other important ones are Rabensburger Thaya-Auen (385 ha.) and, on the Danube in the area administered by the Vienna Provincial Government, Lobau-Schönauer Hafen (525 ha.); the total area of strict nature reserves within the landscape protection area is just over 2,000 ha. Plants and animals are strictly

protected in such nature reserves, yet in many cases it is difficult to regulate agriculture or forestry.

35. One example where nature reserve designation has proved effective in maintaining the original status is in the Rabensburger Thaya-Auen. It was planned to build an earth dike to prevent the River Thaya from flooding riverside land. Since the area concerned was a nature reserve, the line of the dike was changed considerably - after long negotiations - so that the area remained under the influence of floods. (In the region, this is regarded as a major success for nature conservation. One could equally take the view that preventing a flood plain from being flooded is a fairly major change in ecological character, and should not have been considered in a Ramsar site in any case; or if it was considered, the Ramsar Bureau should have been given advance notification).

36. Despite the measures taken, considerable changes are occurring in the traditional landscape of the March-Auen, as noted in the Austrian report to the Montreux meeting (see paragraph 16 above). It is scarcely surprising that changes occur when there is no overall management of the area, and therefore no proper administrative structure or financial support. In these circumstances, there is constant change of natural or semi-natural areas to create arable land, forestry plantations or other semi-industrial installations.

37. Drainage of damp meadows: The traditional usage of the March-Auen was for summer grazing and hay-making. This activity declined in this century and was practically brought to a stop by a decision in the 1960s and 1970s to restrict subsidies for cattle-raising to the Alpine regions of Austria. In the March-Auen, therefore, areas which needed to be grazed or mowed to maintain their grassland vegetation were either abandoned, in which case natural succession took over, or more often were transformed into arable or forestry land. Agricultural subsidies are available for many crops, so farmers naturally changed their cropping methods. In the short time available, the mission had insufficient time to go into the complicated issue of agricultural subsidies in any depth; nevertheless, it is clear that the level of agricultural subsidy has an enormous influence on crops and the landscape. With agricultural subsidies tending to decrease all over Europe, and particularly in the European Community which Austria is likely to join in the coming years, it would seem appropriate to undertake a review of the whole issue of subsidies - a painful but necessary process at national level.

38. This active drainage process has been exacerbated in recent years by drought, a factor repeatedly brought to the mission's attention. The reason for the drought is not clear, but it is certain that major floods have not been regular in recent years. The cause could be increased regulation of the flow of the River March upstream in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (there have been major regulation works there in recent years and the third of the water reservoirs on the Thaya at Novy Mlyny was completed in 1989 and was being filled in 1990-91), or could simply be natural or cyclic. Whatever the cause, the recent dry years have accentuated the tendency to plough up former wet meadows, and to plant

cash crops or trees providing quick profits. Forestry problems like those mentioned in paragraph 26 arise, as in the Donau-Auen, but on a smaller scale since there is less woodland in the March-Auen. Nevertheless, the problem of game animals preventing regeneration is serious in the Marchegg reserve, where thick forest survives.

39. The mission was able to see some of the work of the Distelverein, a body which, with very limited resources and financial support, is working to establish contracts with local farmers so that they shall maintain traditional methods of farming. Not the least important aspect of the programme is its educational and cultural value, in restoring a respect for the natural landscape values of the area.

40. Another development in the former wet meadows is the installation of the sugarbeet factory at Hohenau and, more important, of the settling ponds. These ponds, while still in operation, provide damp habitat for certain wetland birds and flowers and some might argue that they replace, to some extent, the lost habitat. Some of the ponds, however, are very close to Distelverein meadow restoration areas and there is a serious risk of encroachment. Furthermore, when abandoned, these ponds produce land some two metres above the original ground level and can clearly never be restored as meadows. There is in addition a problem of pesticides or nutrients being leached into the land around and changing the whole character of the vegetation. It seems urgent to replace the ponds by a proper treatment plant. The mission was informed at the end of its stay that this was indeed intended.

Likely future developments in Europe

41. The political changes in Central and Eastern Europe have completely altered the outlook for the March-Auen. The area was previously a backwater, the end of the world, an abandoned area where nature could take its course. This indeed is one of the reasons for its continuing high value from a nature conservation point of view: on either side of the former iron curtain, scarce animal, bird and plant species have survived because they exist in a "wilderness" where they have not been disturbed. Part of the ecological wealth of the area has been conserved precisely because of the lack of disturbance, and this is why the area must be seen not simply as an Austrian site, but as a river valley with two banks which, in the case of the March, happen to come under the jurisdiction of different states (both of which, to complicate matters further, have a heavily decentralized form of government). International cooperation is therefore crucial.

42. Now, in the past couple of years, the area has suddenly become a focus of contact, a necessary artery of transport, an ideal playground for the big cities just to west and east (the suburbs of Bratislava are clearly visible from one of the quietest corners of Markthof). There will undoubtedly be calls for improved transport and trade facilities (Donau-Oder canal connecting the Danube with both Oder and Elbe, and leading to Bohemia and central Europe; increased navigation on the Danube and through the Hainburger Pforte, the natural

access to the Pannonic plains); the establishment of border crossing points along the March and Thaya; increased recreational opportunities (sport-fishing - already something of a problem along the March - canoeing, camping). There is, as a result, a great urgency, a need to take decisive action before the area is spoilt for lack of care or concern. Measures and plans developed (or alternately, opportunities lost or wasted) in the next couple of years will be decisive.

Recommendations of the mission

43. In the meeting with Minister Feldgrill-Zankel on 17 April, the mission presented a summary of its conclusions in brief written form. The present recommendations follow the format presented on that occasion.

44. Responsibilities for nature conservation in Austria: The Federal Government signs international conventions and is therefore the natural point of contact with international bodies like the Ramsar Bureau. On the other hand, responsibility for nature conservation and for management of Ramsar sites lies with the provincial administration, in this case, Lower Austria. Cooperation already exists through normal channels between the Federal and Lower Austrian Governments, and through the Austrian National Ramsar Committee. Much closer coordination and, above all, greater financial support is, however, required if Austria's international obligations are to be fulfilled. The mission therefore recommends that the Federal and Provincial Governments (Lower Austria in the case of the Donau-March-Auen, but other provinces in the case of other Ramsar sites in Austria) identify administrative means to improve consultation and provide financial sources to improve site management.

45. Situation in the Donau-Auen: The mission was pleased to know that studies of the possibility of establishing a National Park in the Donau-Auen are proceeding in Vienna; it hopes that consideration will also be given to the possibility of including in this park the most valuable parts, from the nature conservation point of view, of the March- and Thaya-Auen. The mission draws attention to the interest evoked in Austria, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and Hungary in a transborder three-nation park. The mission was nevertheless surprised, after all the statements made by the Austrian authorities, to learn that serious consideration is still being given to construction of the Hainburg dam on the Danube. The mission wishes to draw the attention of the Austrian authorities to the possibility of overcoming the problem of river-bed erosion by the infilling with large-size, non-erodable materials, a technique proposed by river engineers on many occasions, but never applied on a large scale. The mission also draws the attention of the Austrian authorities to the need, in the forests along the Danube, to plant native trees and to control game populations.

The mission therefore recommends

(1) that the Austrian authorities pursue more vigorously the establishment of a national park covering both Donau- and March-Auen in Austria, and of an international Auen park, covering the surviving areas of Au along the Rivers Donau, March and Thaya in Austria, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and Hungary;

(2) that, in order to overcome the problem of river-bed erosion in the Danube below Vienna, the Austrian authorities use the technique of infilling with large-size materials, rather than proceeding with further dam-building, thereby providing a precedent and an example for the rest of the world;

(3) that the Austrian authorities take the necessary measures in the Donau-Auen to prevent reafforestation with non-native species, and to control the deleterious effects of game on tree regeneration.

46. Situation in the March-Thaya-Auen: The mission emphasizes that this area is undoubtedly a wetland of international importance, because of its position as a transition area between the Pannonic plains and western Europe, its unique landscape forms with characteristic plant, animal and bird associations. The mission points out however that, despite Ramsar designation, considerable degradation has taken place because of changed water regimes (construction of dikes to prevent flooding, river regulation), changes in agricultural practice (abandoning of traditional cattle raising and hay-making regimes, drainage, afforestation, subsidies to promote different crop regimes; development of an industrial sugarbeet processing factory). The mission is convinced of the need to produce an overall concept for the conservation and wise use of the Ramsar area, including establishment of larger strict nature reserves, promotion of sustainable management practices like those pioneered by the Distelverein, active participation of local inhabitants and adequate administrative support for the development and application of the concept. The mission emphasizes that much of the surviving natural values of the area are derived from its cross-frontier status and from the existence of areas of particular value from the nature conservation point of view in the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. The mission appreciates the measures already taken by the Austrian authorities to promote cooperation with the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, but urges that these be strengthened and extended in order to take the necessary rapid action (including land purchase in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic). It suggests that the Austrian authorities act in cooperation with international bodies, such as the Ramsar Bureau and the Ecological Bricks for Our Common House of Europe movement, which have extensive contacts with organizations such as WWF and the World Bank interested in funding imaginative environmental initiatives, in order to increase the sums available for such actions. Finally the mission draws attention to the severe long-term ecological effects of building the Donau-Oder canal and urges that no decision on its execution be taken until a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment of the canal and its real benefits has been carried out.

The mission therefore recommends

(1) that the Austrian authorities (at federal and provincial level) develop an overall concept for the management of the March-Thaya-Auen sector of the Ramsar site, respecting the "wilderness" concept and therefore avoiding disturbance by new frontier crossings, taking into account the Ramsar principle of wise use, giving particular attention to a review of agricultural policies and subsidies, considering the extension of the successful action of the Distelverein, allowing for the likely increase in recreational and tourist use of the area, and taking full account of the opinions of local people;

(2) that the Austrian authorities provide the necessary administrative and financial means for putting this concept into practice, along the lines adopted in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic;

(3) that the Austrian authorities pursue and develop (in collaboration with international bodies like the Ramsar Bureau), as a matter of the greatest urgency, their support for cross-frontier initiatives, notably with the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, realizing that the value of the Austrian Ramsar site depends in a large measure in conserving the values of its counterpart site on the opposite bank of the river;

(4) that the Austrian authorities proceed with plans for the excavation of a Donau-Oder canal on the basis of the precautionary principle, and do not approve the scheme until the most rigorous Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out and has shown that such a canal will not change the ecological character of the Ramsar site.

47. The Ramsar Bureau looks forward to receiving the reactions of the federal and provincial authorities in Austria to its comments and recommendations. The Bureau will be happy to collaborate further with the Austrian authorities in the implementation of the report. The Bureau will in due course submit the results of this and other applications of the Monitoring Procedure to the Ramsar Standing Committee and Conference.

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