

Wetland Tourism: Romania – The Danube Delta



Romania, Birdwatching on the Danube Delta © Courtesy of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority

Romania's Danube Delta

Biosphere Reserve (DDBR) covers around 580,000 hectares, where the waters of the Danube enter the Black Sea. It is the second largest and the best preserved of Europe's deltas; its dynamic, relatively wild ecosystem supports a rich diversity of wetland habitats, numerous lakes, ponds and over 330 species of birds and 45 species of freshwater fish. The region has a long history and the DDBR includes a number of Iron Age fortified sites, remnants of Greek and Roman settlements, and early Christian architecture. The site has been listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance since 1991.

Agriculture, fishing and forestry in the reserve

area are a vital part of the livelihoods of people living in the delta region, including between 12 and 13 thousand who live in settlements within the DDBR. During the 1980s, the delta suffered damage from a series of economically and environmentally disastrous large-scale agricultural and fish farming developments sponsored by the then government, which caused degradation and loss of the delta's wetlands and led to soil salinisation and the virtual extinction of wild carp in the region. More than 15,000 hectares of the wetlands have now been restored, and management of this vast region has developed ways to balance public use with conservation, and to encourage sustainable tourism, providing opportunities to diversify livelihoods in the region.

The Ramsar Secretariat selected 14 case studies for a publication on wetlands and sustainable tourism, to be launched at the 11th Conference of Parties, July 2012. www.ramsar.org/tourism

The DDBR includes 20 strictly protected sites covering a total of 50,904 hectares (8.7% of the Reserve's surface), areas which contain the very best examples of the Reserve's natural terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Buffer zones covering 222,996 hectares (38.5% of the Reserve's area) have been established around the strictly protected sites, designed to protect these sites from human activities in adjacent areas. The remainder of the Reserve consists of economic zones, covering 306,100 hectares (52.8% of the Reserve's surface) which include easily flooded areas, protected fishing, fish farming, agricultural and forest areas, and areas where ecological restoration has been carried out or is planned by the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA).

The Reserve is highly diverse – as well as the delta landscapes, it incorporates navigable sections of the Danube, flood plains, the Sărăturile Murighiol-Popu brackish lake, the Razim-Sinoie lagoon complex, and coastal areas along the Black Sea which include a tourism resort and coastal waters up to the 20 metre depth contour.

A strategy for international conservation assistance was established in 1991 with support from IUCN, to create an integrated plan for management and restoration of the DDBR. This provided guidelines for forestry, agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, as well as for immediate practical conservation by individual agencies. The first Management Plan was produced in 1994-1995 with inputs from government agencies, academic institutions, and scientific institutes, including the Danube Delta Research Institute (DDRI), Tourism Research Institute, and others. Ecological restoration of the delta began to succeed in the mid-1990s, and by today, more than 15,000 ha of abandoned polders have been ecologically restored to wetlands in good condition, with support from the World Bank Project 'Danube Delta Biodiversity' and the government. During 2001-2002 the Management Plan was revised and during 2006-2007 a second Management Plan was elaborated with the support of the members of Scientific Council of

DDBRA. During 2002-2003 the joint management objectives for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in the nature protected areas from Danube Delta (Romania-Ukraine) and Lower Prut River (Republic of Moldova) were elaborated, obtaining support from the EU Commission (TACIS-CBC Program).

The DDBRA works in conjunction with other government agencies to apply an intersectoral approach to management and planning on the delta, in order to implement key EU directives, including the Water Framework Directive, Habitat Directive, and Floods Directive, as well as international agreements including the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Convention of Biodiversity. This intersectoral approach contributes to cost-effective and sustainable development of the region.

The management plans have been prepared with input from all key stakeholders in conservation, recreation and tourism development in the DDBR, as well as relevant government agencies and the County (Judets) Councils of Tulcea and Constanța.

Tourism is an important and growing activity in the Reserve, although currently it only provides just over 2% of the region's employment, compared to 63.5% for fishing and agriculture. According to data from authorized tourism operators, 72,328 tourists visited the DDBR in 2010, of which 56,256 were from within Romania and 16,072 from other countries.

The DDBR's Management Plan 2008-2012 incorporates a special theme for tourism and leisure, and a range of projects and studies have been conducted in preparing the tourism component. In particular, these have included a review of the potential for sustainable tourism development in the Reserve, a project on an Integrated Culture and Tourism Strategy for Sustainable Development in the Danube, launched with UNESCO in 2008, and development of a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy in the Danube Delta with funding from the Flemish Government.

The tourism component of the management plan sets out objectives for the period, which include implementation of a visitor management plan and promotion of the region's traditional local tourism. The plan includes a strategy for sustainable tourism and diversification of tourism based on the delta's landscape and habitats, zoning of tourism in the DDBR, and implementation of a tourism certification scheme to ensure the quality of tourism products and services in the region.

As part of the strategy for tourism and visitor management, the Management Plan establishes eight main zones for tourism and recreation in the DDBR, based on the main tourism activities available in each area, areas that are strictly protected and where access is not permitted, and potential to enhance special character tourism. The tourism strategy also includes local partnerships between the DDBRA, local municipalities, and tourism businesses to enhance tourism products and marketing, and to establish local regulations. This includes providing training and capacity building for guides and tourism businesses, and helping to set up local tourism associations. At regional level, the DDBRA is establishing a brand as part of coordinated marketing of the delta and its tourism, and promotes tourism through a website, participation in national and regional tourism fairs, visitor guides, information centres and advertising campaigns.

The DDBRA has also implemented a system of signage throughout the Reserve, along with a series of visitor centres. This has significantly raised awareness about the Reserve and improved public attitudes towards it.

An Administration Consultative Council was established in 2011 to assist planning and decision-making for the management of the DDBR. The Council includes representatives of local authorities, economic operators, and NGOs. Furthermore, wider public consultations and debates are organised to discuss specific projects in the region, as required by law.

Management of the DDBR is supported by the Danube Delta National Institute for Research and Development (DDNI), which has been set up to provide scientific support for decision makers both in the DDBRA and the Tulcea County Council. For its capacity to influence policies at local and central levels, DDNI was nominated as "National focal point" for fisheries and land cover. At European level, DDNI has been designated as a Centre of Excellence for Deltas and Wetlands.

The DDBR's natural and cultural features are major tourism resources. The delta offers an almost unspoilt landscape of river channels, lakes, reed beds, dunes and forests, beaches on the Black Sea coast and village settlements with traditional buildings and a rich culture.

The types of tourism and tourist attractions offered in the Reserve match the diversity of its landscapes, and are based around the area's natural and cultural features. They include:

- rest and relaxation tours, based in resort hotels and pensions in the DDBR or on floating hotels, combining trips on channels and lakes with beach holidays along the Black Sea coast;
- discovery tourism in small groups, or self-guided, to explore the delta's wild landscapes using boats and kayaks and hiking beside channels or sand dunes;
- youth programs focused on discovery, understanding and appreciation of nature;
- rural tourism, with tourists being hosted and guided by local people;
- 'sun, sea and sand' tourism on the beaches of Sulina, Sf. Gheorghe;
- birdwatching, photographic safaris, sport fishing, exploring the Delta on kayaks, visiting localities, gastronomic tourism based on the region's traditional cuisine and food products.

The tourism activities in the DDBR are authorized by the Regulation and Licenses Department

within DDBRA, which also sets regulations for tourist boats and floating hotels, including requirements for management, collection and disposal of all liquid and solid wastes. Regulations also protect bird colonies and nesting birds and control the commercial and sport fishing that is allowed in the Reserve. According to the new legal framework approved in 2011, hunting is not allowed at all in the Reserve. Tourists pay an access fee of 5 lei (euro 1.15)/person/day, 15 lei (euro 3.45)/person/week, or 30 lei (euro 6.90)/person/year.

Tourism services and facilities in the Reserve are provided and managed by private tourism companies, while the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority authorizes which types of tourism activities are allowed, determines where they can take place, sets regulations for visitor management, promotes education and information through information centres, and monitors tourism activities and their effects on the Reserve. The County Council of Tulcea and Romania's National Tourism Information Centre & 3D Centre also promote tourism in the Reserve. The 3D Centre is a modern visitor centre built by the Tulcea County Council based on a cross-border cooperation project financed by the EU with a view to promoting the values of the natural heritage of the Danube Delta shared by Romania and Ukraine. The centre includes maps, information, and dioramas representing the natural habitats, landscapes and cultural heritage of the area and aquariums with the most important fish species including the sturgeon, the biggest and endangered species in Danube Delta.

The DDBRA has also established Information, Documentation and Ecological Education Centres to provide visitors and local people with information about the Reserve and to raise awareness about its ecological importance and wildlife, and the role of visitors and of the local population in achieving the objectives of environmental management of the natural heritage. The centres are located in Tulcea, Crisan, Sulina, Murighiol, and St. Gheorghe, and two more will come into operation during summer 2012, one in Gura Portitei resort (a European

Destination of Excellence, "EDEN") and another in Chilia Veche village.

Tourism activity in the Danube Delta is developed in compliance with the current regulations and laws which control tourism activities, in order to protect the natural heritage. There are visitor routes and special rules for tourism activities and access in DDBR, and DDBRA rangers monitor and enforce compliance with the Reserve's regulations. The DDBRA has established 24 tourist routes within the Reserve, comprising 15 routes for boat trips and excursions and 9 hiking trails. These approved routes have been developed to allow tourists to experience the Reserve's special habitats, species, and bird colonies, as well as its culture and traditions.

Accommodation is available within the DDBR comprising a diverse mix of hotels, floating hotels and other types of ships, urban and rural pensions of 2, 3, 4 and 5 stars, villas, cabins, bungalows, hostels, holiday villages or camping sites, boarding houses, and youth camps. Between them, these provide over 3,600 bed spaces for tourists.

The value of the Danube Delta's natural heritage and the sound management of the DDBR were recognized in 2000 by the Council of Europe, which awarded the European Diploma of protected areas for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. This award has been renewed in 2005 and 2010, and the DDBR has also received other awards as well, including a 'Blue Globe' award for best management practices in wetlands at the 10th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Japan in 2010. It has also been designated a European Destination of Excellence ("EDEN") and was selected as "Landscape of the Year 2007-2009".

Internationally, the DDBRA cooperates with the Danube Biosphere Reserve in Ukraine, and both are included in the International Network of Cross-border Biosphere Reserves (Romania-Ukraine 1999). The DDBRA is also involved in a programme to enhance sustainable nature conservation and regional development strategies



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in floodplains and wetlands along the Danube and to encourage cross-border collaboration and networking. The DDBRA participates in various programmes funded by the European Commission or other donors to exchanges experiences and

expertise with other wetland sites. It is part of DELTANET, a group of eight European estuaries and deltas with similar characteristics, problems and opportunities.

Sources:

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