Conservation and Integrated Management on the Danube Islands, Romania

LIFE06NAT/RO/000177

Layman’s Report
This publication has been developed within the
“Conservation and Integrated Management on the Danube Islands, Romania LIFEo6NAT/RO/000177” project

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BEFORE THE PROJECT

How did it all start?

The Romanian side of the Danube hosts almost 140 islands which lie on 35,000 ha, covering about 30% of the Romanian natural floodplain forest, together with sand banks, lakes, marshes and natural channels. The islands are the home of incredibly rich ecosystems, which are vital for conserving the biodiversity of the entire Danube basin.

The Danube Islands are the home of a rich diversity of plant and animal species, many of them protected by national and international laws. Hundreds of bird species are nesting, feeding or resting on the islands during their migration period. But, unfortunately, the value and beauty of these areas are too less known. The only ones who value the islands are the fishermen, who know that near the quiet banks the capture is always bigger.

The islands have been, during the last decade, the subject of 3 main sources of pressure:

- The replacement of the natural forest with hybrid poplar plantations, which are poorer in bio-diversity, but considered to be more profitable.

- The navigation, more precisely the implementation of the infrastructure projects for the navigation improvement, which generates banks erosion and irreversible changes in the river morphology.

- The invasive species, especially the False Desert Indigo (*Amorfa fruticosa*), a shrub similar to *Robinia*, which grows faster than tree seedlings, suffocating the young forests and the plantations.
What we planned to achieve with the LIFE project

Our purpose was to protect and maintain the rich biodiversity of the Danube Islands, by:

• Implementing an adequate management of the natural and semi-natural forests.
• Limiting the negative impact of the navigation.
• Contributing to the implementation of the EU provisions of the Habitats and Birds Directive.

Our project area covered 8 Romanian islands situated in Călăraşi County, between km 411 and 318 on the Danube: Albina, Haralambie, Ciocâneşti, Trămşani or Pisica, Șoimu, Turcescu, Cianu Nou and Fermecatu.

The situation of the islands before the implementation of the project:

• Haralambie, Ciocâneşti and Șoimu were nature reserves.
• Albina, Trămşani (Pisica) and Cianu Nou had suffered minimal human interventions, such as forest exploitation.
• Turcescu and Fermecatu were used for wood production, around 50% of their surface being covered with commercial hybrid poplar plantations.

During the project all the 8 islands became parts of 5 bigger Natura 2000 sites.
THE IMPLEMENTATION

The project was implemented between September 2006 and August 2010. The total budget was 567953 €, from which 283977 € was supported by the European Union.

The project was based on a strategic partnership including the Environmental Protection Agency Călărași, as beneficiary, WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Romania, the Forestry Directorate Călărași, the Institute of Research and Forest Management and the Romanian Ornithological Society.

It included 3 main types of activities, connected to the three main objectives.

1. Adequate management of the natural and semi-natural forests

Management plans for the islands

All the 8 islands were included in 5 Natura 2000 sites: 2 SCI - Oltenița-Mostiștea Chiciu, Canaralele Dunării and 3 SPA - Dunăre Oltenița, Ciocănești Dunăre and Dunăre Ostroave.

We elaborated 8 management plans, as the result of a participatory process based on the consultation of the cointrested factors: the Forestry Directorate Călărași, as the administrator of the forest, the custodians of the Natura 2000 sites and 4 monasteries which hold the property of 120 hectares of forest on Fermecatu Island.

Forest Management

The installation of 20 breeding platforms for the White-Tailed Eagle and 20 breeding platforms for the Saker Falcon.

26 ha of hybrid poplar plantations have been replaced with native species, like the White Poplar and the White Willow on Turcescu and Fermecatu islands. This represents 16% of the area covered by the hybrid poplar plantations on the islands before the beginning of the project.

We installed warning signs on the islands, specifying the critical period for birds breeding (from March to June) and the penalties for shooting protected bird species. The Forestry Directorate Călărași agreed to intensify the control in the area and to not perform any kind of forestry works (logging, rearing the trees, clearings, etc) that can produce disturbance during the breeding season.

New Forestry Management Plans were developed, which include our project objective of floodplain forest restoration. Also, Șoimu, Haralambie and Ciocănești islands, which were already natural reserves, were included, according to the Romanian legislation, in the forest functional category 1.5C – natural reserves with a strict protection status and entirely excluded from logging activities.

Thanks to our cost-benefit analyses, which proved to be favourable to the native species, the management plans eliminated any further replacement of the natural forest with hybrid poplar plantations and encouraged the natural floodplain forest regeneration on the islands. Also, we evaluated the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification potential for the Forestry Unit Călărași. We cut the Desert False Indigo (Amorfa fruticosa), by using different methods of eradication evaluated in a specific research program.
Site investigation, to complete existent data about the islands

2 Natura 2000 habitats have been identified on the islands: 92A0 *Populus alba* and *Salix alba* galleries and 91F0 Riparian mixed forests of *Quercus robur*, *Ulmus laevis* and *Ulmus minor*, *Fraxinus excelsior* or *Fraxinus angustifolia*, along the great rivers (*Ulmenion minoris*).

48 species listed in the Annexes of the Birds and Habitats Directives have been identified, out of which 29 are bird species and 11 are mammals (Greater Mouse-ear Bat, Particoloured Bat, Otter, European Polecat etc.). A mix cormorant colony of 200 individuals (Great and Pygmy Cormorant) was found on Haralambie Island in 2006.

GIS maps were developed, including habitats, Black Poplar patches, breeding platforms installed for the White-Tailed Eagle and the Saker Falcon, White-Tailed Eagle active nests and the mix cormorant colony on Haralambie Island. The GIS maps have been used to locate the nature conservation measures and to demonstrate the banks erosion on the islands. This last aspect supported our request to the Ministry of Transport to regulate the distance and speed of the ships when approaching the affected islands.

2. Limiting the negative impact of the navigation

Our project tried to offer solutions for sustainable inland navigation that mitigates the negative effects of the navigation projects, which is a major concern at European level. As a result of our policy work, the EU asked the beneficiary of ISPA projects to improve the environmental impact assessment and to prepare an adequate environmental monitoring plan for Călărași-Brăila project.

Also, we managed to exclude Ciocânești Island from Calafat – Silistra navigation project. Until now, none of these projects have been implemented yet.
3. Awareness Raising

Useful information about the project, relevant documents, reports, conclusions of the seminars, as well as other communication materials are available on the project website, www.ostroaveledunarii.ro

10 information boards presenting the LIFE project have been installed in key points.

Around 20 public events were organised in Călărași, București and Borcea and attended by more than 1000 participants.

Subjects related to the project have been well covered by the local and national media.

Several visitors’ facilities were built during the project: two bird watching towers (on Fermecatu and Ciocânești) and a wooden trail on Fermecatu.

Two leaflets, one poster, two brochures named “The Romanian floodplain forests – past, present and future” and “Flora and fauna of the Danube islands” as well as a DVD resuming the project were produced.

The project offered the chance of producing a documentary, called “My Island”, which was directed by a Romanian TV star, Mihaela Rădulescu and narrated by Dani Oțil, also a known public figure. The film was projected in 10 schools and high schools and was screened at the Dakino Film Festival in 2009 and at the Planet Report environmental film festival in Cluj, in 2010. Also, in 2010 the documentary was distributed in 54 000 copies, together with the June issue of Bioplanet kids magazine.

A handbook for forestry good practices was published and used as technical support for 3 training courses with foresters along the Danube and other stakeholders.

The project outcomes, problems encountered and lessons learned were also presented, to more than 100 stakeholders and experts, in 3 seminars about conservation measures for Natura 2000 habitats and species occurring on the islands. The conclusions of the seminars are available on project website.

In order to identify the best approach in mitigating the effects of the expansion of the navigation in the Danube and to promote sustainable alternatives for inland navigation, an international workshop was organized in Ruse. The result consisted in a common position paper – “Save the Danube as a lifeline! Steps towards sustainable navigation”, which has been sent to European Commission and International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR).
We encountered quite a few challenges during the project.

Some of the partners were involved in a European project for the first time.

Our partners have different perspectives. For example, the foresters were more economically oriented, while the other partners focused on the environmental benefits.

The Cross-sectoral cooperation – in order to obtain the agreement for reducing ships speed when approaching the islands, we had to collaborate with the Ministry of Transport, which is economically oriented.

Weather conditions: in the first 3 years the drought affected our floodplain forest reconstruction and in the last year we had to deal with the flood. The power of the spring flood should be considered, in the future, for any kind of banks reinforcement activities or in the design of any infrastructure that would to be installed on such small islands.

The economical crisis – it can influence nature conservation measures foreseen in the future.

How we succeeded?

By perseverance, a good communication and support between the partners, we managed to overcome most of these challenges. As a conclusion, environmental issues can be more effectively addressed if green markets develop more in the future and state authorities provide strong support, both legally and financially. From our experience, the foresters understood the importance of the habitats and species conservation, but, in the same time, we shouldn’t forget that they have to support themselves and wood harvest is, at present, their main source of revenue.
OUR RESULTS, BRIEFLY

- Increased capacity for developing a sustainable management of the Danube islands.
- Updated database of the species living on the islands
- Practical management measures for Natura 2000 habitats along the Lower Danube floodplain
- Reconstruction of 26 ha of natural floodplain forest
- No more replacement of the natural floodplain forest with hybrid poplar plantations
- 1,1 ha of natural floodplain forest regeneration secured from invasive species
- New methods for the eradication of the Desert False Indigo
- Better breeding conditions for the White-Tailed Eagle and the Saker Falcon
- Starting points for eco-tourism activities on the islands
- Better communication between the stakeholders

Can others do the same?

Much of the work carried out during the project has been an example for a number of professional conservation managers and stakeholders. More exactly:

The handbook for forestry good practices is an useful tool for the custodians of the Natura 2000 sites along the Danube, such as the Forestry Directorate Constanța.

The floodplain forest reconstruction experience can be transferred to other protected areas (islands or dyke-bank zone) where the replacement of hybrid poplar plantations with native species are to be included in the management plans.

The results of the study and the experience regarding the limitation of the invasion of the Desert False Indigo can be applied in the case of all river floodplains.

The collected data about the islands’ functioning and benefits has been used in developing a 3D wetlands model for another LIFE project. Moreover, the reports produced in the project are considered to be a reference phase in the impact assessments studies for development projects in the islands area (e.g. sand mines).

The reduction of the ships speed when approaching the protected islands can be extended to other areas along the Danube, in order to diminish the level of erosion.
The conservation measures foreseen in the management plans of the islands will be included in the management plans of the Natura 2000 sites that cover the project islands.

EPA Călărași and FDC will maintain the breeding platforms and visitors’ facilities on the islands.

FD Călărași, WWF and EPA Călărași will continue to monitor the conservation measures.

FDC will keep replacing the withered seedlings, until the floodplain forest reconstruction works succeeds.

Călărași County will include the objectives and activities proposed by our Eco-tourism strategy for the islands in its future tourism development projects.

The Forestry Unit Călărași is going to follow the entire procedure for the FSC certification, as soon as they find the necessary financial resources.

EPA Călărași, FD Călărași and WWF Romania will continue to communicate the outstanding value of the islands.

EPA Călărași, FD Călărași, WWF Romania and the custodians of the Natura 2000 sites which cover the islands will continue to lobby and support the central authorities for the elimination of the legal provisions that are contradictory with some conservation measures, for a better reflection of the Natura 2000 sites in the economical legislation and for securing the protected areas financing, including PES (Payments for Ecosystem Services).

The project website will be maintained and, if financial resources are secured, new relevant updates will complete our work.
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