Ecsed/Ecedea-marsh is situated in Northeast Hungary but extends beyond the border into Romania. The marsh formed in a 10-12,000 year old natural depression and covers a total area of 30,000 hectares, where the river Krasna/Kraszna and Somes/Szamos have over time evolved into marshland. Up until the end of the 19th century the Ecsed Marsh was the largest marshland in Central Europe. Parts of the marsh and the rivers that provide water for the area still exist today although intensive agriculture is clearly the most common form of land use.

How do these actions contribute to the shared vision of a restored, re-connected Tisza floodplain system? Why is this mechanism good not only for the involved municipality and design company, but also for local people and for environment as well?

- It acts a model of wetland restoration taking place on a non-protected, heavily degraded area, where the actual field works are undertaken by "non-nature conservationists".
- It ensures that thousand hectares (initially) of restored marshland will once again act as a water storage sponge and its role in flood mitigation along the Kraszna river will be demonstrable, visible and quantifiable.
- The mixture of habitat-mosaics and different human management influences will host not only a rich biodiversity but will also trigger positive effects on the microclimate.
- Compared to the low-income, intensive monoculture, this type of extensive fishing and grassland management mix, combined with the income from the angler's fee, is one of the emerging pillars of a new, diversified local economy.
- The inventory and continuous monitoring of the returning wildlife will be carried out by Fűvészkert Egyesület, the local conservation NGO, with the co-operation of the local school.
- Local entrepreneurs are launching their small-scale businesses, drawing upon the main (international) attraction nearby, and strengthened by the fact that the cross-border nature of the project will be always a magnet for visitors.

WWF is convinced that such a development – the switch from floodplain arable to water and wetland mixed economy – is the way forward for the challenged agricultural communities along the Tisza river and elsewhere in Hungary. It is part of the One Europe, More Nature story: that natural solutions and innovative approaches are possible and that in this way land-use can be changed towards a new pattern which is beneficial for the economy and the ecology, including the performance of vital flood management functioning.

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WWF's One Europe, More Nature initiative is a pan-European project making positive changes to valuable landscapes across the continent. It is funded by WWF Netherlands and is jointly managed by WWF's teams on agriculture, freshwater and forestry.
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Harvesting nature

Restoration of the Ecsed Marsh – together with local interests

What futures for European landscapes? How will the local population in the easternmost part of the enlarged EU react to rapid changes in the agricultural sector? Are nature conservationists able to convince mayors, farmers, and enterpreneurs to set up win-win mechanisms to restore the Tisza floodplains to their former glory?

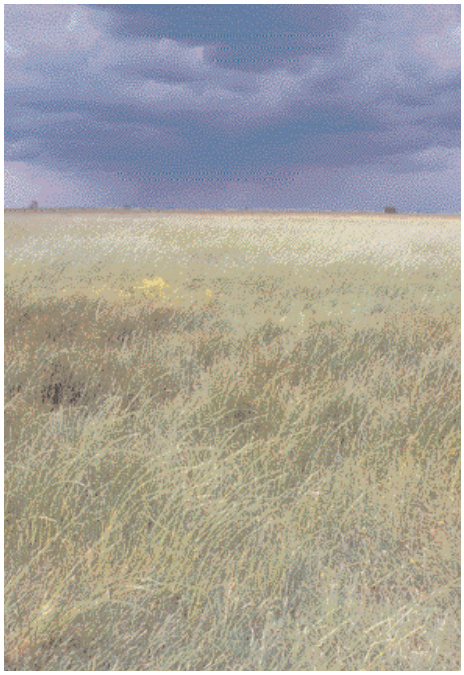
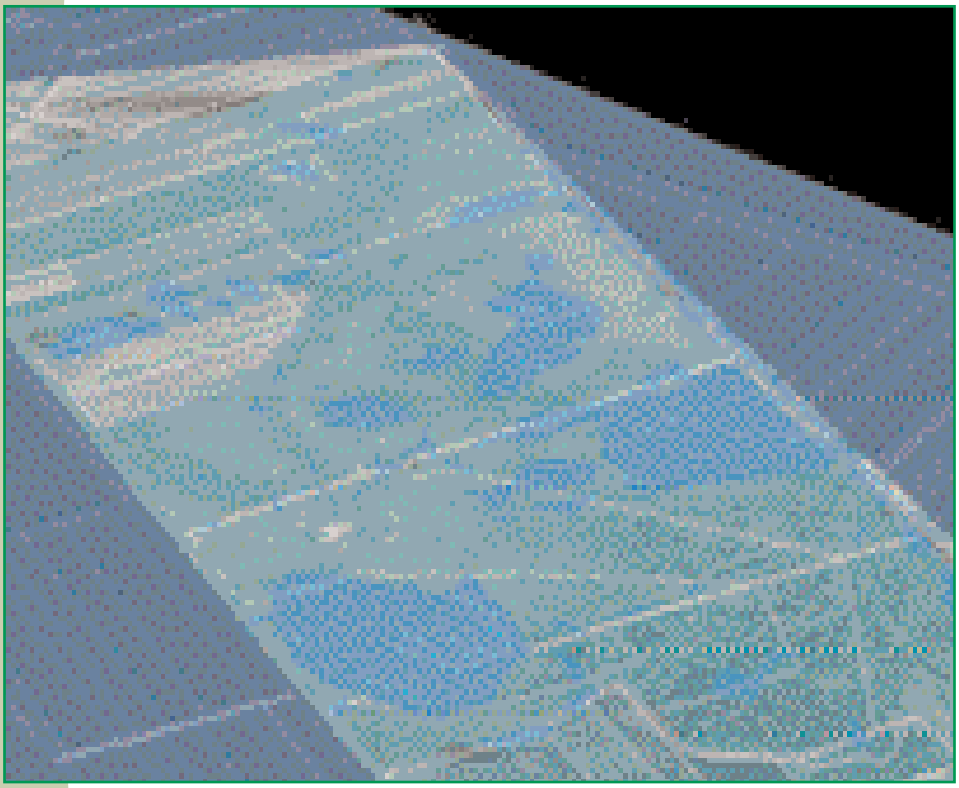


Photo: Balázs Lesku

The location of the former Ecsed Marsh is highly symbolic. When the One Europe More Nature project began, it was just a dark spot on the map of Europe. When – on 1st May 2004 – Hungary joined the European Union, the former marsh found itself half in the EU and half out. In three or four years' time – when Romania is scheduled to join – the marshland will find itself wholly inside the EU. WWF is working to restore this vital part of the Tisza basin and to demonstrate here how win-win mechanisms can operate on the ground in a – literally speaking – enlarging European Union.

The return of natural ecological functions to this floodplain will go a significant way towards achieving the WWF vision for the Tisza, by adding more than 1,000 hectares of cross-border restored wetland to the hydrological system, and by providing a demonstration that acts as a guide and inspiration for other parts of the river basin as well. The win-win mechanism underpinning this ambitious process centres on the switch from low-yield, low-profit yet intensive arable crop production to a mixed economy based on water and wetland. A combination of public- and market-based investments are pieced together which together provide sufficient incentive for farmers to move across to the new economy of wetland restoration, wetland management for alternative agriculture (extensive grazing meadows), fishing, tourism, recreation, and water (flood) management functions.

The resultant landscape changes will benefit people and nature locally whilst acting as a model for other parts of the Tisza basin, other parts of Hungary, and elsewhere in Europe where an agricultural community located in a former floodplain faces an uncertain future under a reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).



Visual design: Zsolt Dömötörfy

To expand the size of the restored area, a large number of owners and their different interests need to be understood, and common approaches defined based on sound economic motivations. (On the map above the thin white lines show clearly the ownership of the many land parcels.) For the long-term success of the restoration WWF Hungary reviewed several potential ways to manage the ownership issue and tested some of them on the ground. One of the good examples is the so-called "shared ownership rights". The Ecsedi Nyír-Erdő Birtokos Társulat (Association of forest owners in the Ecsed-Nyírség region) has been operating for 10 years, whereby landowners share the costs, investments, risk and also the economic benefit of the forests. This arrangement is followed in the wetland area too, to scale up the first OEMN experimental site so that management does not depend on the borders of the owners' individual plots but upon an agreed "common" approach.

Photo: Ferenc Kis

Which type of mechanism will drive from this...

Photo: László Haraszthy

...to that?

To kick-off such a dramatic turn in the life of these people, well-designed pilot areas are essential. WWF Hungary and WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme conducted a joint hydromorphological and geographical survey in two specific areas, one in Hungary, other in Romania, where the land-owner municipalities are interested in alternative solutions and to reconnect the mosaics into a revitalised river-marsh complex.
By December 2004 the mayor of Nagyecsed had received all necessary official permissions to re-create part of the wetland and accompanying soft-tourism site. WWF's main role was most important in the planning process, with the implementation shouldered by future beneficiaries, mainly the angler's association and the municipality. The local nature conservation NGO will be responsible for quality management, especially in the ecologically valuable zones. Since unemployment is very high, the potential new income sources (for example reedbed management and harvesting) are very attractive for local farmers, within the framework of sustainable regional development.

Photo: Mónika Kiss

"Agriculture is still the main source of income in the region. Whereas in Hungary as a whole 10% of the population heavily depends on agriculture, in our region this figure is more like 35-40%. Traditional floodplain management and the complex land-use systems that were once used have today largely disappeared. Despite this the strong presence of cultural floodplain heritage still exists, so that the local people – on both sides of the border – have the common understanding that our future is our past."

Lajos Kovács, mayor of the town Nagyecsed.

Photo: Ferenc Kis

"Traditional land usages are looked upon as a great opportunity in my village: grazing with old domestic animal races or small scale fishponds probably paying better than our actual arable farming, which is heavily in the red. We are waiting for the results of the Csicsós pilot site and if it works I will apply for the wetland conversion measure in the National Agri-Environmental Scheme, on my own 50 hectares near the river Kraszna."

Bálint Fülöp, a key driver farmer from Papos near Mátészalka.