Prespa

Basin countries

Albania, Greece, and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Summary of basin characteristics

The Prespa basin, covering a total area of 2,519km^2, contains the lakes Mikri ('small') Prespa and Megali ('large') Prespa and is situated in the Balkans, straddling the borders of Albania, Greece, and FYR of Macedonia. The basin has no surface outflow, with Mikri Prespa flowing into Megali Prespa, which in turn flows into the Ohrid Lake basin via subterranean channels and from there to the Adriatic Sea. The area is famed for its natural beauty, high biodiversity, and outstanding cultural values (e.g. Byzantine monuments, traditional architecture, unique artisanal fishing methods).

Significant parts of the lakes and adjoining wetlands in the territories of Greece and FYR of Macedonia are designated as Ramsar Sites.

Socio-economic importance

Around 5,000 people in the Albanian part of the

basin are engaged mainly in subsistence farming, the former collective agricultural system having been abandoned since the collapse of the totalitarian regime. Basic infrastructure has deteriorated and communities are under strong economic pressure to overexploit natural resources.

Rural depopulation and unemployment have characterized the region, especially in Greece. However, 75 per cent of the population (about 1,200 people in 13 villages) in the Greek sector continue to rely on agriculture, especially mono-cultivation of beans, for their livelihoods, though increasing tourism offers alternative income generation.

The portion of the basin within the territory of FYR of Macedonia is the most densely populated. Here, over 17,500 inhabitants live in some 40 settlements, though strong rural-urban migration is resulting in an ageing and declining population. Fruit growing is the major activity, while the manufacturing sector employs about 3,000 people.

Biodiversity values

There is high habitat diversity in the Prespa basin, with a flora of more than 1,500 species. The indigenous fish species are all endemic, while endangered mammals include brown bear *Ursos arctos*, wolf *Canis lupus*, chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica* and European otter *Lutra lutra*. The area is especially important for waterbirds, notably the largest breeding colony of Dalmatian pelicans *Pelecanus crispus* (listed by IUCN and BirdLife International as Vulnerable) in the world, as well as a substantial number of white pelicans *P. onocrotalus* and pygmy cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*.

Priority issues for river basin management

Until the 1960s, Mikri Prespa was a mesotrophic lake characterized by extensive reedbeds, wet meadows and rich wildlife, while Megali Prespa was an oligotrophic, deep, crystal-clear lake. Since the 1960s, human interventions in all three countries have adversely affected the hydrological regime of the area and consequently its ecological functions.

In the late 1960s, irrigation systems were built for agriculture in Greece and FYR of Macedonia. In Greece, 1,000ha of wetlands were drained and converted to farmland and the natural connection between the two lakes was replaced with a concrete channel. In 1986, a sluice gate was added to control water flows for irrigation. Also, in the mid-1980s, Greece received huge payments under the EU's Integrated Mediterranean Programme. This resulted in an expansion of irrigated agriculture, with major adverse environmental impacts, including over-abstraction from the lake system, degradation of farmland (due to poor irrigation practices), and a decline in water quality in the ecologically vulnerable Mikri Prespa.

In Albania, deforestation and overgrazing have contributed to erosion in the basin, and accelerated sedimentation. The latter occurred as a consequence of linking the Devoll River to Lake Mikri Prespa in 1953, in order to channel spring and winter rainfall into the lake and to draw off water from the lake for irrigation during summer. In 1976, the network was expanded to irrigate the 22,500ha Devoll and Korca valleys.

The FYR of Macedonia contributes to the increasing pollution load of Megali Prespa through runoff of agricultural chemicals.

Role of WWF and its partners

In 1990, WWF was instrumental in the creation of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP). This is an umbrella organization consisting of seven national and three European non-governmental organizations (including WWF). SPP is locally based and works at grass-roots level, undertaking a wide spectrum of initiatives including:

- conservation research
- habitat management
- restoration of traditional buildings
- institutional development
- training
- building of local capacity
- public awareness raising
- environmental education
- promotion of local products
- promotion of sustainable development projects.

Through its local, on-the-ground activities, SPP

successfully won the trust of local communities and secured their support for and involvement in planning for the future of Prespa and sustainable management of its natural resources.

SPP and WWF worked together with NGOs in Albania and the FYR of Macedonia, and in partnership with the Greek government, which established cooperative links with its counterparts in the other two countries. This cooperation culminated in the establishment of a transboundary protected area, Prespa Park, aimed at:

- maintaining and protecting the unique ecological values of the basin
- preventing and/or reversing the causes of habitat degradation
- exploring appropriate management methods for the sustainable use of water in the basin
- providing a model approach that can be applied in other transboundary situations.

A Strategic Action Plan for the organization and operation of Prespa Park, as well as sustainable development of the overall basin, has as its key objectives:

- Conservation of the ecological values, functions and biological diversity of the Prespa Park area
- Sustainable management of water in the basin and measures to address past hydrological interventions
- Institutional reform to ensure protection of the entire catchment
- Enhancement of opportunities for the sustainable economic and social development of local communities
- Wise use of natural resources for the benefit of nature, local economies and future generations.

A Coordination Committee formed to oversee implementation of the action plan is comprised of three representatives from each of Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia (representing the environment ministries, local authorities and NGOs), and a permanent observer from the 'MedWet' initiative for Mediterranean wetlands (under the umbrella of the Ramsar Convention). Observers from donor organizations, NGOs and other bodies regularly attend meetings.

A trilateral secretariat, with an NGO member from each country, carries out the practical work of implementation. Initial financial support came from the Greek Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, which also provides overall support to the work of the Coordination Committee.

An ambitious work plan was adopted, including the preparation of a project concept on integrated ecosystem and natural resources management for the Prespa lakes region. This was subsequently taken forward as a successful GEF PDF-B application by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the German Bank for Reconstruction (both already active in the Prespa region, in Albania and the FYR of Macedonia). A US$15 million GEF proposal will be the product of the 12-month project preparation phase. Among the elements of the PDF-B will be preparation of a water level management plan for the lakes, with implementation as part of the full project.

As a contribution to the Strategic Action Plan, SPP is implementing a project that is 60 per cent funded by the EU LIFE programme, aimed at improving nesting habitat for Dalmatian pelicans and pygmy cormorants. This involves a range of actions, including management of the littoral vegetation, promotion of more ecologically sound water-level management, scientific monitoring, and public awareness. It is expected that the project will result in a tripling of the area of wet meadows and have a positive effect on 42 species of European conservation concern. Socio-economic benefits will be derived from enhanced fish spawning habitat and subsequent higher fishery yields. The project runs for a four-year period, from 2002 to 2006.

Conservation method demonstrated

Establishment of the Society for the Protection of Prespa enabled WWF and its partners to work through a locally based entity aiming to conserve the unique values of the Prespa basin in Greece, through environmentally sustainable economic development. Stakeholders gradually came to realize that these values were the result of long-term coexistence of people

and nature, whereas degradation of natural resources was in large part responsible for socio-economic problems prevailing in all three basin countries.

The SPP recognized that preparation of effective plans required detailed baseline knowledge of the entire area and that long-term implementation of such plans would depend on transboundary agreement and cooperation. This led to the joint SPP-WWF initiative for the establishment of Prespa Park. Given the recent political conflict in the Balkans, this was an innovative way of bringing together people distrustful of each other for decades. Prespa is becoming a high-priority testing ground for state-of-the-art concepts such as sustainable development at the river basin level, and cooperation in protected area management. The role played by NGOs involved in Prespa Park has been formally recognized to the extent that they have become trusted partners charged with fulfilling important tasks under the Strategic Action Plan.

Prespa Park is a system of multinational protected areas, zones of 'organized' management, and large-scale land-use planning, with enforcement based on existing national laws. While its long-term success will require the continued participation of international donors, it is hoped that the Park will eventually lead to sustainable development of the Prespa region from both an ecological and a socio-economic standpoint. However, it is important to keep in mind that transboundary cooperation takes time to develop, as confidence is built and new links and working methods are established. New trilateral, basin-wide institutions are being set up, and their role will develop gradually.

Resources devoted

All governmental and NGO partners have contributed to the encouraging progress to date, whether through direct financial support or through allocation of other resources.

WWF is the main funder of SPP's activities (covering 53% of the EUR650,000 average annual costs for the period 2000-2002) and also provides technical support for research and management work undertaken by SPP. WWF played an active role in the declaration of Prespa Park and is supporting its ongoing development, *inter alia* by participating in and co-funding preparation of the Strategic Action Plan.

To date, government aid agencies and international organizations (notably the EU) have covered 40 per cent of SPP's costs, with individuals and companies providing 7 per cent.

Chronology

1990

- Establishment of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP).

1995

- Ezerani Lagoon, the northern part of Lake Megali Prespa, is designated as a Ramsar Site by the FYR of Macedonia.

1999

- Establishment of Prespa National Park (27,750ha) in Albania.
- Presentation of the Ramsar Award to SPP in recognition of the Society's ability to motivate and persuade stakeholders to work cooperatively for sustainable management of the Prespa basin.

2000

- A joint declaration (on World Wetlands Day, 2 February) by the Prime Ministers of Albania, Greece, and the FYR of Macedonia establishes the transboundary 'Prespa Park'.
- WWF recognizes the establishment of Prespa Park as a 'Gift to the Earth'.

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Lessons learnt

1. Changing the perspective of local stakeholders is key
For example, in Greece, the adverse environmental impacts of EU-subsidized irrigated agriculture raised strong feelings against both the EU and the Greek authorities. However, this proved to be the turning point for government policy towards the protection and sustainable development of Prespa, such that stakeholders with apparently differing priorities now share a common vision.

2. Focus on identifying and pursuing key objectives, but behave opportunistically where appropriate
Through a combination of strategic direction and opportunistic action (e.g. sensing and seizing the political momentum), the basin partners were able to secure the designation of the trilateral protected area.

3. Use drivers other than conservation
Focus on rural development issues, especially water allocation, and business/income development opportunities for local people.

4. Recognize that capacity building will probably be needed
Plan for this accordingly, making sure that capacity-building activities are designed in close consultation with the partner(s) concerned.

5. Understand the driving forces influencing land management decisions made by owners, occupiers and users

6. Get the technical information and science base right
This is essential to be able to support beyond reasonable doubt what conservation bodies are advocating at a field and/or policy level. Gather information at the beginning and select strong (or potentially strong) partners who know how to obtain the information required.