

Responsible tourism in protected wetlands along the Danube

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Abstract. *The protected wetlands along the Danube provide the opportunity to preserve the natural and landscape diversity as well as to develop tourism activities related to sustainable regional development. It is especially important to follow specific rules when visiting the protected area and be respected by both the local population and tourists during their visit to the wetlands.*

Keywords: *protected wetlands, responsible tourism, tourism management*

Ответственный туризм в охраняемых водно-болотных угодьях вдоль Дуная

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Аннотация. *Защищенные водно-болотные угодья вдоль Дуная предоставляют возможность сохранить природное и ландшафтное разнообразие, а также развивать туристическую деятельность, связанную с устойчивым региональным развитием.*

Особенно важно следовать конкретным правилам при посещении охраняемой территории и уважать как местное население, так и туристов во время их посещения водно-болотных угодий.

Ключевые слова: *охраняемые болота, ответственный туризм, управление туризмом*

Passing through ten countries, the Danube River is the most international river in the world. It hosts a wide variety of cultural and natural aspects: cultural and historical heritage, encompassing a variety of ethnic groups, which has an impact on art, language, food and much more. All this enhances the charm of this part of Europe.

Protected Danube Areas provides an opportunity to preserve the rich natural and landscape diversity in some of Europe's largest and most striking floodplains: starting with the Danube Delta water world and floodplain forests in the Croatian - Serbian - Hungarian fields, and continuing with the picturesque valley of the Iron Gate, as well as the last free flowing sections in the Upper Danube.

An EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) aims to strengthen and coordinate its development towards "promoting culture and tourism and people-to-people contacts".

The challenge is to establish long-term sustainable development both for the residents and nature.

This is especially true of the protected wetlands along the Danube with their invaluable natural resources. Tourism along the Danube River is varied depending on the natural landscape and history.

At present Danube tourism is primarily focused on cities and culture, cruises and cycling. Hunting and fishing are of particular importance for some areas. Bird watching is the main attraction for the Danube Delta, and develops as such in other places. It is the task and the challenge of protected wetlands, to develop tourism activities related to sustainable regional development that contribute to their management and attaining the conservation objectives with particular attention when working in ecologically sensitive areas.

Protected wetlands are key figures in the field of environmental education and sustainability. They have an increasing number of educational programs and infrastructure, and offer environmental information. These educational elements and tasks are integrated into tourist offers.

A visit to a protected wetland is a trip to the most precious places in Europe.

This is the purpose of the protected wetlands themselves, to lead people to the charm of nature to experience it and discover its wealth. While this emotional aspect plays an important role, learning about how ecosystems work, their relationship with the river, and measures to preserve this natural heritage for future generations is always included.

At the same time, the existence of natural areas, especially in the vicinity of the big ones cities, means a high standard of living for locals. Protected wetlands work to protect the area by storing it for use, for example, in leisure time by the local population.

Most of the protected wetlands offer visitor centers, guided excursions, and open information points to educate and inform about the value and protection of the area and make it accessible to everyone. At the same time, the task of the network is to protect the territories from the adverse effects of over-use of tourists who also have to comply with certain rules.

Target groups are as varied as areas, but the main tasks are: to welcome and inform tourists and locals, focusing on children and young people. It is imperative to work with schools and to offer special programs for families. As far as tourism is concerned, there are a large number of offers for individual tourists, cooperation with tour operators, regional initiatives in the field of tourism or companies that introduce more and more tourists.

As diverse as target groups and offers, the overall goal of all participants in tourism is to preserve the shared natural heritage - nature, for future generations.

Tourism and environmental education are mostly local and shared responsibility of protected areas with other regional stakeholders. Cooperation within the Danube Parks can contribute to higher quality and more innovative proposals for visitors, as shown by the objectives set in the projects implemented such as "Cross-border cooperation to pro-

mote ecotourism in the Danube municipalities" and the project "Cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Romania":

- Develop innovative proposals with an international perspective on the Danube as well as a cross-border and transnational tour

- Joint development of didactic materials and cross-border or transnational educational programs for young people

Responsible tourism

Our joint responsibility during a visit is to show the natural wonders of the protected areas on the Danube and to provide an opportunity for unforgettable experiences in nature.

It is a common responsibility to protect protected wetlands for future generations.

It is necessary to follow specific rules when visiting a protected area such as:

- All protected areas have specific rules for strictly protected areas not available to the public:

- A visitor from the visitor center you wish to visit is required to inform tourists about the places of observation so as to cause the least disturbance.

- No traces left after the visit: Waste is exported out of the protected area.

- The movement is on marked walking or cycling hiking trails.

- Not all water authorities allow rowing and swimming. It is imperative to contact the visitor centers offering this service. If possible, motor boat trips are provided - allowing for a stronger experience among nature with minimal impact from tourists' visit.

Providing well-managed sustainable tourism practices as well as tourist information on the importance of wetlands is an important prerequisite for preserving all wetlands around the world and ensuring long-term benefits for local communities, wildlife economies and biodiversity.

Persina Nature Park

Persina Nature Park was declared 2000. With a total area of 21 762 hectares, it covers areas of Svishtovsko-Belene plain and part of Nikopol Plateau.

The main objectives of the park are to preserve and restore the natural condition of the numerous islands, inland marshes and Danube wetlands. The park includes two island groups: Nicopolis Island Group and Belene Islands Complex. Part of the complex is Persin Island (known as Belene Island) - the largest island on the Bulgarian Danube River. On the island is the first restored Danube wetland.

The most remarkable ecosystems in the Park are floodplain forests and marshes. Several protected areas have been designated for the protection of these habitats: the Reserves Kitka and Milka located on the islands of the same name, Persinski Mlata Reserves Reserve, Persin - East Protected Zone located in the eastern part of Persin Island, Kaikusha Protected Site located on the southern boundary of the Park, and Plavalla Protected Site, near the town of Nikopol.

The most precious wealth of the Park is the birds - there are over 210 species. The natural floodplains of willows and poplars, as well as the Danube marshes, are the only place where rare and endangered species of birds such as shrimp, cormorant, white-tailed potato, various herons and terns nest. One of the symbols of the Park is the Sea Eagle.

Excursions

Recreation and observation points are located along the river. They offer spectacular views: flooded forests, colorful landscapes and various bird species.

Five kayaks are available to be hired, as well as a six-seat motor boat that is used for a special water route "In the Boundaries of the Danube". It is possible to see many herons, cormorants, spoonbills, and in the winter pelicans and swans.

There is a special route focused on the restoration of wetlands and the monitoring of many rare and endangered species. This route leads to the wetland and marshes of Persin Island, which requires special permission to access the island.

Ibisha Island

Ibisha is an island on the Danube River (717 km), located opposite the village of Dolni Tsibar, east of the town of Lom, which has naturally formed under the influence of the river stream - originated from the sand and earth deposits, weak.

With an area of 372 hectares, the island has been on the list of wetlands of international importance since 24 September 2002. Most of Ebila is overgrown with the *Alvus glutinosa*, white (*Salix alba*) and *Salix fragilis* willow, poplar alpine (*Populus alba*) and poplar black poplar (*Populus nigra*), combined with poplar and hygrophilic grasslands. Forests have a rich, practically impassable pseudolian and blackberry bush (*Rubus* sp.). The west coast of the island is a large, sandy, hairless vegetation. Around the Ibisha river shoals are formed. The island's water regime entirely depends on the Danube regime, as part of the island is flooded at high water levels.

The most valuable element of the island's vegetation is floodplain forests (*Alnus glutinosa*), *Salix fragilis*, *Populus alba* and *Populus nigra*.

From the fish in the river stream around the island, there are species typical of this part of the Danube River - pike (*Esox lucius*), carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), *Tinca tinca*, *scardinius erythrophthalmus* etc.

The international significance of the island of Ibisha is determined by the presence of the largest mixed colon and cormorant colony in our country. It is a site of global importance for the nesting cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* and one of the five most important places in Bulgaria for the nesting heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, *Ardeola ralloides* and *Platalea leucorodia*. The existence of the colony of herons and cormorants is entirely dependent on the island's floodplain, as a nesting site and the presence of shallow and river shallows needed to find food, the MOEW reported.

Part of the island's territory is under strict protection as a protected reserve. In 1997 the site was declared BirdLife International as an Important Bird Area. In 1998, the island was declared a CORINE place because of its European importance for the conservation of rare and endangered habitats, plants and animals, including birds. Ibiza Island falls within the protected areas - Natura 2000 sites under both EU Directives, the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive.

Lake Srebarna

The Srebarna Nature Reserve is one of the ornithological wetlands in Bulgaria. It is located 18 km west of the town of Silistra and 1 km from the Danube riverbank. Immediately to its west coast is the village of Srebarna of the same name. The total area of the protected area is 901.2 hectares, including the Danube island of Devnya and the Danube between the coast and the island.

The lake is unique in its kind with the free floating islands on the surface, which in its movements change the pattern formed by the water and plant spots. Extremely inspiring view is the lake-faded lake mirror, a view that contrasts with the bright yellow reeds.

Since 1965 the reserve has been included in the list of the most important wetlands in Europe, produced by the International Birdwatching Bureau.

In 1975, it was declared a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, and since 1977 it has been a biosphere reserve according to UNESCO criteria. Its greatest recognition was the Srebarna Reserve in 1983. It is proposed to be included in the World Heritage List at the seventh regular session of the World Heritage Committee "as a natural functioning ecosystem providing an important living environment for endangered bird species - Dalmatian Pelican".

The Dalmatian Pelican and the Big White Heron nest only in Srebarna. Two other species of small cormorant and white-eyed potato have some of the most important nesting sites in the country, and the Red-breasted Goose - one of the most significant wintering species. Many of these bird species are globally threatened.

Protected area of Kalimok-Brushlen

The Protected Site "Kalimok-Brushlen" is designed to protect one of the few remaining wetlands along the Danube and its unique diversity. It covers an area of about 6000 hectares. The region can be characterized as one of the country's ten most representative areas of conservation value for the protection of natural marshes, riparian and marshland habitats. The wetland zone "Kalimok-Brushlen" is a habitat of plant and animal species that are rare at national and European level.

Because of its rich biodiversity, a protected area is an attractive place for tourism. The fauna includes 109 species of algae, 10 mosses, 16 mushrooms, and over 300 higher plants. The greatest wealth of the Protected Site is the birds - 242 species, 134 of which nest.

Bird watching is a top priority, birds are numerous, attractive and easy to see. Species such as the Dalmatian Pelican and the Spurge grow their little ones here.

For many protected bird species this place is a stop in their migration. There are birds that are wintering here, which allows for ecotourism during the cold months of the year. One of the largest colonies in Bulgaria of herons and some of the last remaining old elm, black poplar and Vardimski oak in Bulgaria are here.

Natural Park Roussenski Lom

Roussenski Lom Nature Park is located in Northeastern Bulgaria, along the canyon of the Roussenski Lom River Valley, the last right tributary of the Danube River. Its area is 3,408 hectares.

Within the endless valley of the river the forests are interwoven into the wild beauty of the rocky peaks, the old fortresses and settlements.

The flora of Roussenski Lom covers 902 species of higher plants and 13 species of orchids.

The bird species - a total of 192, of which 174 are under protection - a reason why the valley of the Lom River is declared an important ornithological site. Especially interesting for scientists are the species inhabiting rocks such as: Egyptian Vulture, Black Stork, White-tailed Buzzard, owls, etc.

Near the Roussenski Lom River there are 70 of the 90 mammal species in Bulgaria, 26 of which are different types of bats. The high percentage of rare and protected mammalian species is due to the diversity of living conditions and habitats, and proves the conservation value of the Park for their conservation.

The historical monuments are an integral part of Roussenski Lom Natural Park. They are everywhere. They create an incredible atmosphere, a sense of past times and a historic close proximity. There are two archeological reserves in the park - Ivanovo Rock Churches and the Medieval Fortress of Cherven.

The cultural and historical image of the Lom River valley will be boring, with no rock monasteries. Only remains are ruins, but they give color to the valley and retain the memory of the place as a center of spirituality for art and the literary elite.

They also remind that much of the grammar from all over the country is assembled here and founders were the Bulgarian kings.

The murals in the rock monastery of "St. Archangel Michael" (12th-14th centuries) are one of the heights of the medieval Bulgarian art and are considered as one of the best works of the Turnovo painting school. In 1979, the Holy Monastery is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Organized excursions

Nature, rich cultural and historical heritage are in favor of the development of tourism and recreation as a whole, as well as specialized tourism in the field of ornithology, speleology, cycling and water tourism, archeology, religion and photography.

The Visitor's Tourist Center of the Park is open and functional all year round.

Well-managed tourism in and around wetlands can bring significant benefits, both economically and environmentally, to the region, at the regional and national levels.

The economic benefits to local communities and local authorities are completely possible and often result in income and employment.

At national level, income from tourism can be significant.

Wetlands can be enjoyed directly when the income from tourism

(visitor fees, local products) are used directly for conservation measures in wetlands, thus linking tourism to the long-term conservation of wetlands.

In Slovenia, a significant annual revenue of 950,000 euros from taxis and souvenir shops at Ramsar site "Skocjan", 305 ha, received 96,000 visitors in 2015. The amount is reinvested in the infrastructure and in direct conservation activities.

Income can also be effectively used to train local guides and tour operators so that they understand basic simple conservation measures for which tourists are responsible and at the same time change their behavior in order to minimize their impact on natural resources.

Appropriate signs in wetlands, brochures, etc. can also demonstrate to tourists the importance of wetlands and the benefits they provide.

Partnership with NGOs (National Natural Communities) can provide additional skills in the management of tourism to achieve sustainability.

The tourism business can be a good opportunity to promote the conservation of biodiversity in wetlands and other ecosystems.

The tourism business can contribute to the promotion and maintenance of the biodiversity of wetlands through:

- reducing pollution from tourism activities, especially by ensuring the treatment and disposal of all solid and liquid waste in a way that does not harm biodiversity and minimize the use of pesticides, toxic chemicals and fertilizers.



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- harvesting all food products and other biological resources use in sustainable tourism activities from sustainable sources;

- supporting the conservation of biodiversity by governmental and non-governmental organizations, including financial support, in the form of sponsorship and voluntary donations;

- without admittance of foreign invasive species in the realization of tourism activities;

- a guarantee of not compromising endangered and endangered species as a consequence of tourism activities or not allowing them to be included in the chain

products that are used in tourism (and in particular as food or souvenirs);

- Use of communications and marketing to enhance the tourism sector in terms of raising awareness among tourists and relevant responsible local institutions of the importance of biodiversity and the steps that can be taken to conserve it.

Conclusion

The key to managing tourism in wetlands is to build understanding among target groups to ensure that wetlands and their opportunities are integrated into integrated plans, programs, strategies for developing tourism or helping local communities to provide tourist services such as accommodation, guided tours and more. The dialogue opens up new opportunities for developing responsible tourism for the benefit of people and wetlands.

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