

NATURA 2000 award Application – 2014

Title:

Management of Lake Lesser Prespa through a multi-stakeholder participation process

Applicants:

Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP)
Prespa National Park Management Body

Summary:

This application concerns the ongoing support of a multi-stakeholder wetland management process for Lesser Prespa Lake in Prespa National Park (ETHNIKOS DRYMOS PRESPO), Greece. The core of this process is a Wetland Management Committee (WMC) that has gradually led to local stakeholders taking full responsibility for management activities since 2012. The WMC was established by the SPP as a means to sustain the outcomes of a LIFE-Nature (LIFE2002NAT/GR/8494) project which initiated integrated wetland management in the area.

Between 2009 and 2013, with the support and the initiatives of the SPP and the PNPMB, this committee gradually evolved and expanded its membership. Today it represents a unique multiparticipatory wetland management process; the first of its kind in Greece and often cited as a successful model. In addition to its innovative character, another very important aspect is that local inhabitants undertake most of the management programme, implementing activities such as reedbed cutting and grazing which are of benefit to both nature and the local economy. This approach ensures the long-term continuation of the process and consequently the sustainable management of Lesser Prespa Lake. The applicants have both played a leading role in this process: the SPP as the founding member and active member of the WMC and the PNPMB as the designated authority for wetland management in Prespa.

Category:

4. Reconciling interests/ perceptions

How effective are your activities on reconciling interests and/ or perceptions?

Prespa's rich ecosystem has indubitably developed alongside human activities from prehistoric times until now. In the past agriculture, fishing, and stockbreeding were all sustainably carried out around the wetland and they played a crucial role in the preservation of the natural landscape with people acting as 'natural conservationists'. However, in the 1970s development trends such as the construction of a widespread irrigation system disrupted this balanced implementation of human activities leading to the intensification of agriculture and consequently the gradual degradation of the Lesser Prespa Lake wetland habitats. The wetland was successfully restored through the implementation of long-term research and conservation activities by the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP). These efforts were significantly boosted by a LIFE Nature project (GR8494) which enabled large-scale wetland management and encouraged the involvement of local stakeholders in wetland management with the introduction of a multi-stakeholder governance system, the Wetland Management Committee (WMC). The challenge of the After Life period was to sustain the good status of the wetland by handing over the implementation of these activities to the local community and reconciling the conflicting needs of the various 'users' of the wetland. The main stakeholders around the wetland are farmers, stock-breeders, fishermen and conservationists. All of them seek different and conflicting benefits from the

wetland ecosystem services; thus water management and the adjustment of water level regime according to the needs of each target group are an area for compromise and reconciliation. All the issues are brought to the table at the WMC and discussed, taking into consideration the various parameters. Between 2009 and 2013 great strides were made through this multi-stakeholder approach, leading to 1) local stakeholders taking over integrated wetland management activities under the auspices of Prespa National Park Management Body (PNPMB) and 2) the enlargement of the WMC with new members who had an increased interest in the wetland, such as stock-breeders and fishermen. Gradually a growing sense that wetland management is a communal issue has been cultivated, as the approach has been shown to be beneficial for biodiversity, the local economy and the local community. Fishermen and stockbreeders are considered to be the two groups who have benefited most, as the restored wet meadows are ideal for fish spawning in spring and provide rich pasture for grazing in summer.

However, careful control of the water level also ensures adequate flooding of wet meadows in early spring for feeding waterbirds and water storage for irrigation needs, addressing agricultural and conservation needs. This success is due to systematic co-operation between the PNPMB and the SPP. The PNPMB is now the designated authority for wetland management, while the SPP provides ongoing scientific support. The PNPMB is supported in this process by the WMC, which plays an advisory role. The WMC was established following a proposal from the SPP in 2008, aiming to directly involve all the stakeholders in the decision-making process. In the beginning, the WMC included representatives from the Ministry of Environment, the Regional Authority for Western Macedonia, the Municipality of Prespa, the farmers, and the SPP. In 2012, following an SPP proposal as part of a LIFE Information project (GR319), the WMC was enlarged to include members from local stock-breeding and fishery co-operatives, whose activities affect and are affected by conditions in the wetland; thus it is now a single forum where all the relevant stakeholders can together decide on the best management for the wetland. Today, the decisions of the WMC are based on scientific technical reports incorporating annual data on water level, vegetation and bird colony numbers.

How innovative are your activities focusing on reconciling interests and/or perceptions?

The WMC was set up in order to improve the management of the Prespa wetland and to ensure the sustainability of results of the LIFE Nature project which had enabled large-scale restoration activities for the first time. Previously, wetland management activities had been implemented mainly by the SPP with the agreement of local stakeholders but with very low-key involvement in the process. This situation gradually changed and the main driver was the effective operation of WMC and its evolution into a local institutional body. Innovative achievements have been accomplished through the operation of this system: 1) Wetland management activities carried out by local stakeholders. The core issues for wetland management are: 1) Water level management through the operation of the sluice which controls water flow from Lesser Prespa Lake to Great Prespa Lake, and 2) Vegetation management through reed-bed cutting and cattle grazing. All decisions on wetland management are taken by the PNPMB, with the help of the WMC which acts as an advisory body, and are implemented by local stakeholders and/or the PNPMB itself. The sluice operation is managed by the PNPMB, while vegetation management is primarily conducted by stock-breeders, with contributions from the PNPMB if needed. This management by local stakeholders has been taking place since 2012 (<http://bit.ly/1faqB5z>). Lesser Prespa Lake is the only wetland in Greece where wetland management is implemented to this extent and, most importantly, carried out by local stakeholders. This hand-over of responsibilities from the SPP to local stakeholders was the result of long-term systematic efforts by the SPP and the PNPMB to simplify the scientific aspect of wetland management and connect it instead to

the actual benefits that the local community derives from it. Thus local stakeholders not only gradually understood the scientific “reason why” for each proposed conservation measure but also the “what’s in it for me”. Annual scientific reports on the basic environmental parameters of wetland management - vegetation, water, birds - are prepared by the SPP to provide an overview of the impact of the previous year’s conservation activities on the wetland and to provide a scientific basis for the next year’s decisions.

The core concern is to make decisions that service as wide a range of needs as possible, with the final decisions balancing proposals from various interested parties. 2) Enlargement of the WMC with members from the fishery and stock-breeding associations (2012). This enlargement followed an SPP proposal as part of a LIFE Information project. The rationale behind it was that all interested stakeholders should have a say in the decision-making process. Only in this way would they share responsibility for the decisions taken and have an integrated view of the wetland functions and the different ecosystem services it offers to each target group. This inclusion has already brought tangible results, in particular the extension of the closed season for fishing in the lake. The closed season is the fish spawning period when fishing is banned, and it is regulated by the Regional Fishery Department. In the past the closed season ran for 30 days, however this was not long enough for all the fish to spawn. In 2012 the closed season was extended to 45 days for the first time following a proposal from the PNPMB. This was a great achievement and shows that fishermen understood that the long-term benefits of the extended closed season outweighed the temporary loss of income. At this point it is worth noting that the PNPMB has undertaken to promote the vital issue of a joint closed season in both lakes, as all concerned, including fishermen, have agreed on the need for this measure. In conclusion, with these new members all interested stakeholders now participate in wetland management and form a multi-participatory decision-making system which is unique in Greece.

How sustainable are your activities focusing on reconciling interests and/or perceptions?

The WMC is not a typical institutional body, as it was not set up under the guidance of the state but at the initiative of local and regional organisations. However, it is worth noting that although the WMC is not a typical institutional body, the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change is represented by a participant in the Committee. So taking into consideration the unofficial governmental character of WMC, the greatest challenge on its establishment was its sustainability and its effective operation in the long term. By effective operation we refer not only to the organisational functioning of the Committee but also to the sustainable character of its decisions for the benefit of the wetland as well as the implementation of its decisions by local stakeholders. So far the effective operation of the WMC has been evident from its decisions and the wise management of the wetland. Between the hydrological years 2009 and 2012 there was a gradual increase in the areas which are managed and a respective increase in the involvement of local stakeholders in conservation activities, while from 2012 onwards vegetation management has been exclusively carried out by local inhabitants and the PNPMB. Consequently, the operation of the WMC so far allows us to be optimistic about how it will operate in the future. This is not only due to its wise management of the wetland until now but also to the gradual enlargement of its membership as well as the broadening of its agenda with new issues. It is important to mention that the WMC agenda includes issues of great interest for local community, which are related to socio-economic benefits, such as water level, the closed season or the delimiting of stock-breeding areas. So, the operation of the WMC is expected to continue as it has been doing in relation to issues of crucial importance for all participants. For some of these issues, such as the water level, there is a conflict of interest between the various stakeholders; this fact actually strengthens the existence of the WMC even more as participants are eager to attend so as to promote their interests. Another factor

which is crucial for the sustainability of this multistakeholder process of wetland management is the funding required for the implementation of the planned conservation activities, especially for vegetation management, cattle grazing and reed-bed cutting, which require a significant amount of funds annually. From 2000 to 2007 these funds were provided exclusively by private and European funding through the SPP. Since 2007 the SPP's participation in vegetation management has gradually decreased due to the increased participation of local stakeholders. This was due to a gradual changing of perspectives and a growing understanding of the economic benefits resulting from vegetation management. Since 2012, as mentioned above, vegetation management has been carried out exclusively by local inhabitants under the auspices of the PNPMB. In addition the PNPMB may apply complementary management or provide related infrastructure (in areas that require special attention) in accordance with its Management Plan. In this way vegetation management, which is one of the two important aspects of wetland management, is financially assured through the participation of local society. The second important aspect, water management, mainly concerns the management of the sluice, an activity which only requires wise decision-making – and not funds – which the WMC ensures. To conclude, this kind of multi-participatory wetland management process is unique, has never before existed in Greece and is often cited as an example of successful management. Taking into consideration the commitment of local stakeholders so far and their concrete involvement in the process its future sustainability is expected.

To which cost-benefit results have your activities focusing on reconciling interests and/or perceptions led?

From the very beginning the management of the wetland through the multi-stakeholder process of the WMC under the auspices of the PNPMB, as described in the application form above, was envisaged on the basis that it should be funded by the local community and supported by the local authorities. This was felt to be the only way that it would work in the long term and experience has shown that this approach has been successful. However it must be said that this was not an easy task and it required a large amount of funds, provided by private donors and the EU, in order to arrive at the current situation. It is the result of systematic efforts by the SPP, starting in 1991 and involving long-term research, pilot activities and finally large-scale restoration and conservation efforts to avert the process of degradation in Lesser Prespa Lake. The restoration methodology was based on 1) the revitalisation of traditional practices in a contemporary way, 2) a "responsibility sharing" approach and 3) the introduction of a new local, multi-stakeholder governance system, in accordance with current institutional requirements and commitments. Thus, the SPP, by investing a great deal of effort and securing the necessary funds for applying and testing restoration processes, steadily promoted the establishment of a sustainable mechanism whereby the local community would bear the responsibility and the cost of the wetland management within a process that would also ensure the sustainable nature of its decision-making. Since 2009 the SPP has been supporting this multi-stakeholder process by promoting the activities necessary to ensure its strengthening and long-term operation. These activities, as mentioned above, have included mainly 1) The inclusion of the scientific aspect of wetland management and its inter-connection with socio-economic benefits which has contributed to the stakeholders' increasing understanding of wetland functions and ecosystem services and thus their corresponding increasing involvement in the process, and 2) The institutional strengthening of WMC by promoting its enlargement with members from the fishermen and stock-breeders associations. On the parallel the PNPMB since 2009 has undertaken an active role in wetland management by: 1) organizing the annual meeting of WMC in the beginning of each hydrological year and extraordinary meetings whenever deemed necessary throughout the year, 2) proposing to the regional Fishery Department, the "closed"

fishing ban period of the lake, according to WMC decisions, 3) recording the water level of both lakes and 4) operating the sluice based on the WMC decisions under the scientific support of the SPP.

To what extent are your activities focusing on reconciling interests and/or perceptions replicable?

The management of a wetland through a multi-stakeholder process of a management committee under the auspices of a management authority had never existed before in Greece. It is unique and has been frequently cited as an example of successful management. Since the activity mainly concerns the development of a management process, it is eminently replicable and can act as a case study or model to be adapted and applied to other areas; indeed the SPP and other stakeholders in the area, such as the Municipality of Prespa and the PNPMB, have been asked in several meetings and workshops to promote this multi-stakeholder management system and the mechanism by which it operates. For example, this month, on 11th February, representatives from the management authority for the Evros Delta Protected Area attended the most recent meeting of the Prespa WMC as observers. Positively influenced by this multi-stakeholder governance system the reason for their visit was their intention to develop a similar system for the management of the Evros Delta wetlands.

The Evros River springs from the Rila Mountains in Bulgaria, south of Sofia. It is the second biggest river in Eastern Europe and is characterised by the large amount of sediment that it transfers and deposits on its delta. The Evros Delta not only constitutes one of the most important wetlands in Greece but also in Europe. The most important result, however, is that this system of environmental management has led to the maintenance of the good conservation status of the wetland, and this has already attracted the interest of stakeholders from other areas. In this context the SPP has been asked to contribute to specific projects that relate to wetland restoration through water and vegetation management. In particular the SPP was invited by the Prespa National Park of Albania to contribute to the wetland restoration project for the Albanian part of Lesser Prespa Lake by formulating "Guidelines for wetland vegetation management". This project is funded and coordinated by KfW. Additionally the SPP is participating as a partner in a new LIFE Nature project (LIFE12 NAT/GR/000275) implemented in Lake Stymfalia, an inland wetland in southern Greece. The main objective of this project is the establishment of a sustainable management and financing system for an important but degraded wetland ecosystem. The SPP has been asked to participate as a partner due to its expertise in wetland restoration and reed-bed management, transferring this experience and knowhow to another wetland.