



CASE STUDY

Transboundary: Prespa Basin National Park



Summary

The Prespa basin was affected by over-abstraction and diversion of water, wetland drainage, deforestation, and overgrazing, leading to danger for livelihoods and ecosystems. Action was taken by WWF through the creation of the Society for the Protection of Prespa, eventually culminating in the creation of Prespa National Park. To change the perspective of local stakeholders and to ensure that they share a common vision is vital for success.

Background

The Prespa basin, covering a total area of 2,519 km², contains the lakes Mikri (small) Prespa and Megali (large) Prespa and is situated in the Balkans, straddling the borders of Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia. Significant parts of the lakes and adjoining wetlands in the territories of Greece and North Macedonia are designated as Ramsar Sites. More than 20,000 people rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods in this region of high biodiversity value. There are more than 1,500 plant species, and endangered mammals including brown bears, wolves, chamois and otters. The area is especially important for water birds, notably the largest breeding colony of Dalmatian pelicans in the world.

The unique values of this ecosystem are being progressively eroded because of either changes in or intensification of specific human activities including over-abstraction and diversion of water, wetland drainage, deforestation and overgrazing which have adversely affected the hydrological regime of the area and consequently its ecological functions as well. However, the people are under strong pressure to further overexploit the area for their economic survival.

Prolonged drought and tectonic activity over the past two decades have also contributed to

a several meter decrease in the water level in the lakes.

Since the Prespa Lakes region extends across national boundaries, it is also subject to different, uncoordinated and even conflicting management regimes and policies, which further exacerbate the threats to the ecosystem as a whole and make unilateral and piecemeal response measures ineffective.

Actions taken

In 1990, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was instrumental in the creation of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP). SPP is locally based and works at grass-roots level, undertaking a wide spectrum of initiatives including conservation research, habitat management, institutional development, local capacity building and public awareness-raising. Over time SPP and WWF began to work with government officials from Albania, Greece and the North Macedonia.

This cooperation culminated in the creation in 1999 of Prespa National Park, a trans-boundary protected area. The objectives of the park's action plan for sustainable management include habitat conservation and renewal, water management, enhancement of socio-economic development for communities, and the required institutional reform to promote these goals.

With signing the Prespa Park Declaration, the Prime Ministers of the three States Contracting Parties to the Convention committed themselves to "join forces across the borders of their sovereign nations to establish a protected area that should provide great benefits for the local people and at the same time should contribute to conserving biodiversity of the planet". In the final part of Declaration, the commitment to enhanced co-operation with regard to environmental matters between competent authorities of the three countries was declared. This commitment was expressed with the words "joint actions would be considered [...]". The content of envisaged considerations has been designed as to:

1. "Maintain and protect unique ecological values of the "Prespa Park";
2. Prevent and/or reverse the causes of its habitat degradation;
3. Explore appropriate management methods for the sustainable use of the Prespa Lakes water;
4. Spare no efforts so that the "Prespa Park" become and remain a model of its kind as well as an additional reference to the peaceful collaboration among our countries".

The trilateral Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC) was established in 2001. Members of the PPCC are the representatives of the Ministries for Environment, Mayors or the Local Municipalities, and one NGO from the three countries (with strong local involvement). Additionally to its crucial political, administrative and institutional role, the Prespa Park Co-ordination Committee (PPCC) was envisaged as having also a significant role in technical issues. Its main responsibility has been to guide "the course of future measures and activities so as to realize the objectives of the Prespa Park.

The park's coordination committee (consisting of environmental ministries, local authorities and NGOs from all countries) has been successful in obtaining funding for work from the United Nations Development Programme, the German Bank of Reconstruction and the EU LIFE programme.

Outcomes

UNDP-GEF Project “Integrated Ecosystem Management in the Prespa Lakes Basin of Albania, FYR of Macedonia and Greece” was developed with intention to catalyze the adoption and implementation of ecosystem management interventions in the Prespa Lakes Basin shared between the three States, that would integrate ecological, economic and social goals with the aim of conserving globally significant biodiversity and conserving and reducing pollution of the transboundary lakes and their contributing waters.

The PPCC, operating in line with (or, it might be said, in limitations of) the PMs’ Prespa Park Declaration commitments, made the Prespa trilateral co-operation process clearly visible as a particularly positive example of transboundary cooperation developing in the SEE. The Prespa process is visible today not only at the national stages of three States (which initiated the process in a top-down manner) but also at regional and, what is particularly important, at the local stages. Moreover, the work of the PPCC served as a catalyzing impulse for more productive activity of civil society, scientific and business communities in all three countries and the Prespa region itself.

However, three truly remarkable results of the PPCC achieved in the long-term course of playing its (initially designed as a short-term and “provisional”) role, must not be overlooked, and should be appreciated. Those are:

1. Development of the Strategic Action Plan for the Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park (SAP);
2. Participation as a Steering Committee in implementation of the UNDP-GEF PDF B phase and contribution by providing comments and recommendations to the development of the Full Size GEF Project;
3. Drafting the text of Tripartite Agreement on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park Area.

This case demonstrates how transboundary, cross-sector participation can promote sustainable economic development in a vulnerable environment. People who have mistrusted each other for decades are being brought together.

By cooperating and utilizing the strengths of NGOs, national governments and local people, integrated aims can be agreed, funding can be found and the resulting work carried out to the benefit of all concerned.

Lessons Learned

Changing the perspective of local stakeholders to ensure that they share a common vision is vital, in this case, where the opposition against EU agricultural politics was turned into common visions and actions to change the conditions in Prespa.

By having a focus on identifying and pursuing key objectives and the necessity of seizing political momentum, the basin partners were able to secure the designation of the trilateral protected area.

To achieve public support for the project it was necessary to use other drivers than conservation. Focus was placed on rural development issues, especially water allocation,

and business/income development opportunities.

It is necessary to understand the driving forces influencing land management decisions. Stakeholders and decision makers are landowners, occupiers and water users.

It is essential to get the technical information and science base right to demonstrate what conservation bodies are advocating. Gather information and select partners who know how to obtain the information required.

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Related IWRM Tools

Basin Management Plans, Transboundary Organisations, Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, Conflict Management, Impact Investment Market Maps

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