

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

DESTINATION: PRESPA

Lake of silence and tranquillity

There are not many places left in this world where you are woken up by complete silence. At the break of dawn, apart from the sounds of the cormorants which accompany the fishing boats in the early morning, there are no sounds at the end of the village of Stenje by Lake Prespa – the only “sound” is the absence of sound, the never-ending, blessed silence...

“However, nights in July and August are quite loud here”, says Milti, as everyone here calls Dragan Mitrevski, the local who is the best source of information for the village and its surroundings. We thought that our illusion about the absolute quiet and stillness has been shattered by the image of loud tourists, yet it had not – “The njivica fish (bleak) come to the shallows to spawn. Their thrashing in the shallow water can be heard in the quiet summer nights. They are the main attraction for the tourists, and the locals as well. They shimmer and glitter in the water, as if they were made of silver. You can catch them with your hands”.

Njivica or belvitsa (bleak) are a species of fish unique to Lake Prespa. The tourists who come here are also a species apart – they are people who seek and enjoy the peace they can find here, unlike nearby Lake Ohrid, the major tourist destination in Macedonia, which is more renowned, established and visited.

Ohrid and Prespa, the twin-lakes as they are called, are separated and at the same time connected by mount Galicica, one of the three national parks in Macedonia. The two lakes and the mountain are an unusual geologic and hydrologic phenomenon. Like communicating vessels, the lakes are connected with underground channels under the massive limestone mountain. Lake Prespa flows into Lake Ohrid, which makes it its main hydrologic source. Many who admire the beautiful springs of Saint Naum, one of the star attractions on the shores of Lake Ohrid, are not aware that a large part of its waters comes from Lake Prespa (more precisely, around 40%). The hydrological connection between the two lakes has been scientifically demonstrated several decades ago, with the process of releasing coloured matter from Lake Prespa into the channels under Galicica, which then appeared in the waters of Lake Ohrid. The experiment was carried out by the Skopje-based Institute for Application of Radio Isotopes; however the locals only nod their heads and say they have known this for a long time even without scientific tests. They will expound the theory that Small Prespa (a smaller lake which is part of the lake system and is located on Greek territory), Great Prespa and Lake Ohrid were once upon a time a huge river – and they will substantiate this with the fact that the river of Crni Drim flows out of Lake Ohrid (another phenomenon linked to these lakes), which then merges with Beli Drim in Albania and flows into the Adriatic Sea. Scientists challenge this theory, but in any case it is one of the interesting local myths.

Lake Prespa is located in the south-western part of the Republic of Macedonia. The majority of its waters – 65% – belong to Macedonia, 18% to Albania and 17% to Greece. Since it is one system with Lake Ohrid, these two lakes are among the five oldest lakes on our planet (apart from Lake Baykal in Russia, Titicaca in South America and Tanganyika and Nyasa in Africa). Ljupco Melovski, PhD, from the Institute of Biology with the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, who has been studying Lake Prespa for years, highlights the global importance of the lake system, together with the mountain and the nearby forests: “These are very old ecosystems. Their origins are in the Tertiary period, five million years ago. They are endemic precisely because of their age”. The unique endemism and the rich biological diversity are the features of this lake system and “its” mountain (biologists call Galicica “Little Caucasus”, comparing it to the world renowned region of biodiversity). Further value to the system is provided by the vicinity of another national park – on its eastern shore its basin borders the National Park Pelister, which with its specific natural wealth just adds to the richness of this area.

While Lake Ohrid is famous for its natural and cultural characteristics and importance, Prespa is a sleeping beauty of which very little is known. However, its values far outweigh its popularity. Apart from the natural, it also hides cultural importance – it suffices to be aware of the small church from the early 12th Century (1191) near the Prespa village of Kurbinovo, dedicated to Saint George (Sveti Georgi) and the miraculous White Angel shining on its wall. This and the other frescos in this small single-nave basilica are considered one of the few pearls of European painting that were the precursor to the Renaissance period.

Despite all of this, life in Prespa is quiet, while the main sources of income are not the tourists but the two local resources – fish and apples. Fruit-growing and fishing are the most important economic activities in the municipality of Resen, the only municipality on the Macedonian shore of Lake Prespa. The view of the seemingly endless orchards with red fruits by the lake is really idyllic.

“You have to come to our apple festival”, we are cordially invited by the Resen Mayor, Mihail Volkanovski. “Apple picking is the main event in October. Everyone is in the orchards, seasonal workers are hired and for the entire month the crates are filled with ripe, red fruit. The apple is the symbol of Prespa. The annual yield is around 70,000 tons, and our most famous type is Idared.” Apart from apples, the mayor also talks about a vision that is slowly becoming reality – integral management of the lake with cooperation of the three countries that share its waters. It all began in 2000, when the prime ministers of Macedonia, Albania and Greece signed a Declaration of Cooperation, expressing goodwill for integral management of the lake, based on the idea that this region will grow into a trilateral cross-border Prespa Park. A joint coordinative body was also formed (PPCC – Prespa Park Coordinative Committee), with representatives of the governments, the local self-governments, experts and NGOs, which still functions today, coordinating the activities regarding the lake system. Under the supervision of this body the First Strategic Action Plan on Sustainable Development of the Prespa Region was developed in 2003, based on which various international donor and aid agencies (GEF-UNDP, SDC, KwF, GTZ, WWF) have implemented projects in Prespa.

The GEF (Global Environment Facility) project implemented via UNDP (United Nations Development Program) is specific in many of its aspects and it has already become part of people's lives in the region, the mayor says, adding that the project has contributed to the development of the municipality more than all mayors put together. Following the project's principle of sustainable development of the Prespa basin, the mayor says that the municipality's strategy has been focused on environmental management in all areas of economy and moderate and alternative tourism.

"We cannot repeat the mistake made in Ohrid and allow overwhelming development of the lakeshore. The natural ambience must be preserved. Eco-tourism is already developed in the village of Brajcino, and there are other alternative ideas as well. Prespa is known for its forests, it is a natural spa for people suffering from asthma and problems with the airways. It offers peace and quiet, and this is its advantage", Mayor Volkanovski adds.

Deirdre Boyd, UN Resident Coordinator / UNDP Resident Representative, explains the reason for the interest shown for Prespa Lake: "Lake basins are valuable resources sustaining livelihoods, economic production and biodiversity throughout the world. Transboundary lakes, such as Prespa, provide opportunities for regional integration and cooperation. The key to effective management lies in high-level political support, strong links with decision makers, institutions, communities and adaptability in the face of emerging issues".

"Globally, there are 263 watersheds that cross the political boundaries of two or more countries and they represent about one half of the Earth's land surface and forty percent of global population. These facts emphasize how much issues related to watersheds management can connect countries but at the same time they can also generate conflicts. Therefore, GEF is supporting over 100 countries in preparation of cooperative management frameworks in some of the world's most important transboundary waterbodies. Recognizing the global significance of the Prespa Lake and appreciating the efforts of the governments and citizens in the three neighboring countries, GEF provided support through UNDP, contributing to the strengthening of cooperation and confidence at all levels and promoting regional sustainable economic growth", Head of UNDP Environment Practice, Anita Kodzoman, adds.

Dimitrija Sekovski is a young man from Resen who has been managing the GEF-UNDP project since its beginning in 2004. He says that it is very important that there is a project office in Resen, because in this way the project team is in daily direct contact with the citizens and all structures – the local self-government, the NGOs, the associations of fishermen and farmers.

The interest of these global organisations in Prespa was piqued not only by the richness of the region, but as well as by the processes of degradation that have become apparent in the past decades, as a combination of the activities of natural and anthropogenic factors. "As a consequence of the 20-year drought (until 5-6 years ago), the lake level has declined for 8-9 metres. The loss of such an amount of fresh water, combined with the increased inflow of chemicals, pesticides and wastewaters from households, overfishing, deforestation and many other activities, resulted in disturbance of the ecological system of the lake", says Sekovski.

His colleague, Nikola Zdraveski, adds that the process of eutrophication is already underway, which means that the lake system already takes on the features of a marsh. “This is in fact successive aging of the lake. Biological nutrients (primarily nitrogen and phosphorus, as a result of agriculture) intensively accumulate in the lake, which on the other hand stimulate intensive algae development. The living organisms change. The so-called algal blooms` events very often are followed by many toxins` producing algae species, such as the blue-greens which degrade the entire ecosystem”, Zdraveski explains.

“To prevent and diminish these negative trends, the project activities are focused on these specific problems (many of them were initially small projects that were implemented by the NGOs via the GEF small grants program): trainings for farmers to reduce the use of chemicals and pesticides, the opening of an agrochemical laboratory and the establishment of a system of agro-meteorological stations, organised collection of garbage in all villages, a big project for reducing the negative impact on the Golema Reka (River), the largest tributary of Lake Prespa, in which SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) participates as a donor”, Sekovski adds.

In 2006 GEF approved a long-term project (from its programme for so-called Full sized projects). This is a cross-border project implemented with the cooperation of the governments of Macedonia, Albania and Greece. The highlight of this cooperation was the signing of the international, trilateral Agreement on integrated management of the Prespa basin (on 2 February 2010, World Wetlands Day).

Macedonia’s Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning, D-r Nexhati Jakupi, says that this major project, worth 4.3 million dollars, is important for all three countries and the region. “The cooperation of the three countries is excellent. With the signing of the Agreement the governments have a legal obligation to cooperate, 10 years after the joint communiqué that they will promote collaboration with the goal of preserving the ecosystem of Lake Prespa and its basin”, the minister underlines. The first component of the project calls for the development of an integrated Prespa Lake Watershed Management Plan, which is harmonized with the European Union legislations. The exact status of the waters in the lake confluence will be defined for the first time, through annual monitoring of the waters taking into account around 40 parameters. In the second component the focus is on agriculture, fishery and forest management, with an environmental approach, while the third component envisions the establishment of a cross-border monitoring of the environmental system and establishing a joint database, as well as biodiversity conservation initiatives. The fourth and the fifth components are focused on the work of the joint bodies, working groups, meetings and lessons learned.

During our visit to Prespa we had the opportunity to see for ourselves how one of these activities functions. We witnessed an exciting event – collecting specimens of the fish and the lake water (for regular monitoring), which was carried out by the Hydrobiology Institute from Ohrid with the help of local fishermen. The team of fishermen and scientists met in the village of Asamati. They were only able to board the boats with the help of tractors, because the sand

was waterlogged from the rain that kept falling during the entire day. Lake Prespa is also unique because it is the only lake in the Balkans with sandy beaches. The fine sand is somewhat of a geological rarity – it has glacial origins and has been created for thousands of years.

Being forced to board the boats in this manner, while the wind was shaking the reeds on the shore and created waves, the sun was setting and the light was slowly diminishing, it was a minor challenge for the biologists and my photo reporter colleague to preserve the equipment and their dry clothes. The main role in this little adventure, which already extended through the sunset, belonged to Sali Zulal, a local fisherman. Sali managed to keep dry both the equipment and the feet of the actors in this process, despite the ruffled lake and the gathering darkness. He skilfully gathered the special nets and safely brought the small fleet of boats to the sandy beach.

Sali Zulal is the chairman of the Fishermen Association “Prespa Carp” from Resen. He says that around 80% of the local population earn their living fishing. “My father and my brothers are fishermen too. I have been fishing for 25 years, and the Lake and I are great friends. The goal of the fishermen is to preserve the fish fund, to establish some order, guard services and prevent illegal fishing. We hope that this project will help us with this goal”, he says.

Zoran Spirkovski, head of the Fisheries Department with the Ohrid-based Hydrobiology Institute, and his colleague Dusica Ilic Boeva, later, over a cup of hot tea, explained to us the process we have witnessed: “The previous day, with fishermen’s help, we placed special nets at a specifically chosen location, which we have gathered tonight. The caught fish will be weighted and evaluated, according to the methodology agreed upon by all three countries. We monitor the situation with the endemic species, especially the endemic Prespa trout, the spawning ground, the populations of non-autochthonous, invasive species (which are unfortunately present in the lake, artificially introduced), then we evaluate the fish according to types and those caught by the cormorants, and keep fishing statistical data. The monitoring is an important tool for following and evaluating the state of the ichtiofauna”, the biologists explain. Apart from fish, Lake Prespa is rich in birds too. “There are hundreds of gulls this year. You cannot see the beach because of them”, says Kiril Jonovski, a real mine of information about the lake and its surroundings. For more than eight decades he has been observing the lake and keeping records of its state. This retired journalist and publicist has collected his observations and information in two books on Lake Prespa. “A month or so ago there were 12 swans, which is rare. While the pelicans and the cormorants constantly circulate above the water”.

Ljupco Melovski, PhD, who is hired as an expert in the project, explains that because of its features – reeds, wet meadows and one flooded forest (which is unfortunately significantly degraded), as well as the rich flora and fauna, the lake has been included in the Ramsar list of wetlands of global importance for migratory birds. The Ezerani region on the northern lakeshore has been declared a strict natural reserve (however, a process is underway to change its status to a nature park, with a more moderate regime of protection). In this region one can see very rare types of birds in global frames: pelicans, cormorants, endangered species of ducks, grebes, and sometimes even flamingos.

Lake Prespa is the breeding ground of the Dalmatian Pelican, while on the Golem Grad Island there is a cormorant colony. This island, one of four in the lake and the only one in the waters belonging to Macedonia, is also called the Snake Island, because of the numerous water snakes that can be seen on its shores. It is also forested with the endemic juniper where the cormorants make their nests, but also destroy with their droppings, which dry the tree bark. Biologists say that this is just one of many examples where one species destroys another, equally rare and valuable. However, science usually does not interfere in such cases, leaving it to Mother Nature to somehow solve the situation...

Even so, not everything should be left to Mother Nature. Young people in Prespa are increasingly aware that nature and men should cohabitate. Ljupco Krstevski, Vesna Prinzevska, Natasa Zdraveska and Sonja Fuzevska have dedicated their youth, energy, knowledge and love towards their home region to protecting the lake. They are all members of the Coalition for Prosperous Prespa, which incorporates 12 NGOs, and which, as many other institutions, is involved as a partner to the GEF-UNDP project. They work on promotion, education of the population and raising awareness with environmental campaigns. They believe in the sustainable development of Prespa and that the key role in all of this is played by people. "There is a tendency for young people to leave Prespa. They do not see any future here. We hope that the new perspectives opened by the UNDP/GEF project will motivate them to stay. For example, the new strategy for sustainable tourism can pave the way for many new opportunities. I really hope that people will recognize the numerous potentials of the Prespa region, from both a natural and cultural heritage perspective. For example, there are some 'forgotten' crafts, like pottery making. There is an International pottery colony every year in Resen - artists from all over the world gather here to work, drawing their inspiration from the Lake and the region as a whole. We have a worthy collection of pottery art in the City Cultural Center, but there is only one pottery craftsman remaining in the region", says Ljupco Krstevski. Sonja Fuzevska adds that people should be educated and advised on how to use the local resources and the cultural and natural heritage in a sustainable way. "We think that they all love their environment and have a special collection with the Lake. This project is successful because, it invests in people and respects their needs and capacities" she says.

And the people who live in the Prespa region, just like the lake itself, are gentle and noble-minded. They live a quiet life, they maintain their traditions but are also open to new projects and modern principles. They change their habits, especially those that negatively affect their environment. "People here are special" – we get a confirmation from a third party, the most unusual of tourists, the French couple Jean-Claude and Daniele Allard, who have stayed several days in Prespa on their journey through the Balkans. "We do not visit museums and monuments, but markets, so that we can meet people. We are interested in people and we love to make new friends and contacts. And we have immediately trusted the locals here, they are gentle, willing to help, they are easy to communicate with" – add the French tourists, who are delighted with the tranquillity they found, the peaceful sleep and that blessed silence...