



The Greek Ramsar sites a parody of conservation

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This brief aims to summarize the present status of the Greek Ramsar wetlands. Greece has ten Ramsar sites, of which seven are on the Montreux Record. This is probably the worst performance, at least in the entire Mediterranean. The Evros delta is used in this brief as a case study since it is one of the most important Greek Ramsar wetlands and one of the 3 that in 1999 were removed from the Montreux record based on alleged progress in conservation status and removal of threats.

The majority of issues addressed in this brief have already been shared with the competent authorities at all levels by WWF Greece, other environmental NGOs and finally, regarding the specific situation of the Evros delta, by a unanimously agreed letter of the local Management Body. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to draw the attention of the competent central authorities to the gravity of the situation. Having failed to elicit a meaningful response from the national government, we now call on the Ramsar COP to consider the information presented here. We furthermore urge the Ramsar Convention and the COP to take all necessary steps within its jurisdiction to press for substantial improvement of the Greek Ramsar wetlands.

A. The Evros Delta - a telling case study

Due to its biodiversity and specifically its bird-fauna, the Evros delta was the most important wetland of Greece and the most highly acclaimed waterfowl-hunting destination. Major flood-prevention and land reclamation works between 1955 and 1970, the ever increasing hunting pressure, the encroachment and intensification of agriculture and livestock grazing, the increased accessibility through road construction, the dramatic decrease of shallow fresh waters and wet meadows, and the overall disturbance had a dramatic impact upon its breeding avifauna and biodiversity. Since the 1970's the Evros delta has experienced a 90% decrease of breeding bird species and numbers and a corresponding 50% decrease of wintering birds. In parallel, hydrological changes affected negatively the coastal marine fisheries, industrial and non-point agricultural pollution still affects the water quality, the wetland area is being lost or degraded and the unique landscape is gradually destroyed by buildings, dykes, ditches, roads and rubbish.

It is with the greatest dismay that we report that since its removal from the Montreux record in 1999, the wetland has dramatically deteriorated. No substantial measures were ever taken and promised initiatives are either still pending or cancelled. The wetland area is lost and degraded due to uncontrolled and uncoordinated interventions by individual users and also the local and regional authorities. There is no integrated management of the freshwater resources and as a result the water quality is worsening and the habitats of shallow fresh water have been restricted to the point of extinction. Hydrological changes, extended alterations to habitat use, unavailability of proper breeding habitats due to continuous disturbance by humans and illegal hunting are only some of the reasons that result in a continuing loss of biodiversity that specifically affects the breeding but also the wintering birds. There are circa 400 illegal buildings in areas of supposedly absolute protection (200 built during the last 5 years!). This is accompanied by increased waste, high numbers of cars and boats, and chaotic earthworks (for ditches, dykes, gravel removing, dam-making, etc). The continuing land-use change (areas of absolute protection become grazing lands, pastures are built, etc) also results in a dramatic deterioration of the landscape quality. Illegal activities are not controlled, or even monitored, effectively.

In the absence of a clearly defined and operative management authority, there are too many authorities, services, legal bodies and privates involved in the Delta who act in an uncoordinated and uncontrolled way, often promoting conflicting interventions that lead to loss of resources and natural degradation. Illegal activities are not controlled, or even monitored, effectively. The situation is especially aggravated since the eastern part of the wetland (the border-line with Turkey and

excluded from Ramsar) that is covered with extensive marshes, is among the most inaccessible parts of the wetland and favors the development of illegal activities such as poaching and smuggling.

The Evros delta is under an impressive list of international designations (Ramsar, Barcelona Convention, EU Birds Directive, EU Habitats Directive). On a national level though little has been done to halt the degradation of the area and even less to actively promote its conservation. Despite a plethora of studies, fragmented legal decisions the Evros delta is currently suspending in a kind of “legal void” since none of the above regimes is legally enforced at a national scale. During the last years the only project implemented in the Ramsar site was the EU funded LIFE-nature “Restoration and conservation management of the Drana lagoon in the Evros Delta, Greece”. However, its results and outputs are threatened due to the lack of maintenance beyond the project, lack of wardening and monitoring, and because of uncontrolled grazing and poaching.

B. The general view

In the absence of effective conservation measures for the Ramsar sites, we are already witnessing a severe deterioration of the conservation status of the majority of the Greek Ramsar sites. Unfortunately this applies to all Greek protected areas.

All Greek Ramsar sites lack a comprehensive legal status with associated zonation systems and effective land use regulations in place. Greece continues to lack an overall framework or binding policy for nature conservation. The relevant national strategy on wetland resources has never been officially endorsed or gazetted nor, of course, been implemented.

All Greek Ramsar sites lack management plans, agreed management objectives, wardening schemes, or any long-term programme of the site’s management authority (with secure funding, personnel, methodology). All conservation activities are based mainly on the efforts of environmental NGOs and, as a result, all related work (research, monitoring, awareness, etc) is based on the *ad hoc* priorities of the relevant executing body.

The Management Bodies (MB) of the protected areas (Ramsar sites included), are a telling example of the lack of overall planning and adequate funding: They were established in 2003, but have been kept without funding and virtually inoperative. In all the Management Bodies the convened Boards of Directors were quick to prepare and submit all legislative documents and proposals needed for the release of necessary funds and the commencement of their operation. Yet the response of the responsible Ministry was such that made sure that the release of the funds would not be made possible: in the beginning, it was the huge delays in the approval of the legislative administrative documents, without which the MBs could not absorb any funding. Additionally, the members of the management bodies are considered to be in abeyance since August 2004 and have been therefore informed by the Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works not to take any decisions that may prejudice the future Boards of Directors.

Finally, the secured funds are inadequate for the tasks and responsibilities of the Management Bodies of the protected areas. Additionally they are almost exclusively based on EU funding (Community Support Framework). According to the relevant Law, the MBs responsibilities include the overall management, monitoring, research and development of projects in each site. On the basis of WWF Greece estimations, only 3% of the EU CSF (6% if renewable energy is added) are channelled to the environment, while another 4.7% is targeting resource management measures. At the same time, almost 40% of the available money is used to fund projects with anticipated negative impacts on the environment, such as large infrastructure works! The only national funding for the period 2003-2006 were 15,000-25,000€ that were distributed to each MB upon their establishment.

In the past, the Greek state has claimed that the inclusion in the Montreux record does not have any practical consequences and that, in fact, it can be a negative incentive for any conservation measures. We consider however that the Evros Delta must again enter the black list of wetlands undergoing alarming ecological changes and that the Greek government must finally undertake its full responsibilities to at last safeguard efficiently its wetlands of international importance.