Life Prespa Waterbirds

A programme of actions to protect waterbirds at Lesser Prespa Lake, adapt to climate change and empower the local community.

Lesser Prespa Lake is home to important numbers of endangered waterbirds, which feed and breed in the rich mosaic of shoreland habitats surrounding the lake.

Waterbirds nest:
in the dense, extensive reedbeds encircling the lake, where they are largely safe from danger and predators.

These birds feed:
in areas where there is shallow water without dense vegetation, at the mouths of streams, as well as in the wet meadows, which provide the ideal conditions for fish, amphibians and reptiles to breed.

The wet meadows of Lesser Prespa Lake are areas of grassy vegetation lying between dry land and the reedbeds. In spring, when the level of the lake rises, these meadows are temporarily flooded with water.

As the reedbeds expand and take up a larger area, they restrict the places where waterbirds can feed and also make it more difficult for fish to access their breeding grounds.

In the past, human activities along the shore of the lake, and the utilisation of reeds for various everyday uses, kept the wet meadows free from vegetation:

- Using reed for building or insulation, and also for animal fodder
- Grazing animals along the shoreline
- Cutting reeds to facilitate fishing

The abandonment of traditional practices led to a significant shrinkage in the areas with wet meadows and shallow water free from vegetation, directly impacting the waterbird populations, as well as fish stocks in Lesser Prespa Lake.

Early management activities

Efforts to restore wet meadows at Lesser Prespa Lake began in 1997, in co-operation with the environmental authorities, residents and local organisations:

- Reeds on the outer edge of the reedbed were cut using mechanical means
- The shore of the lake was grazed by water buffalo and cattle

In the LIFE project 'Protection and preservation of priority bird species at Lake Mikri Prespa', 2002-2007, the Society for the Protection of Prespa carried out activities to manage the littoral vegetation and the water level of Lesser Prespa Lake, aiming to improve habitats for rare birds.

The new **LIFE Prespa Waterbirds** project will utilise the scientific knowledge gained from many years of wetland management, taking new threats to the lake ecosystem from climate change into account, and organise the management of lakeside areas at a transboundary level.

The project actions

- Re-establishing the wetland mosaic, implementing a plan for reed cutting in the wet meadows and the shallow parts of Lesser Prespa Lake

- Clearing sediment and aquatic vegetation from the mouths of streams at Mikrolimni and Lefkona, allowing access for the fish that breed in them

- Clearing selected drainage channels in the agricultural zone, in order to prevent the spread of wildfires to bird nests and colonies

- Studying the impact of climate change on the wetland, aiming to shield the ecosystem from extreme weather events and periods of prolonged drought

- Taking measures to effectively address potential outbreaks of avian influenza

- Strengthening transboundary collaboration with local authorities in Albania and fYRoM in order to co-ordinate management of the wetlands

- Exploring the possibility of using the biomass that will be a by-product of reedbed management as animal fodder, soil conditioner and fuel for heating buildings

All the management activities are being carried out having taken into account the needs of other wetland species: otters, passerine birds, small mammals, amphibians, and rare plants.

Benefits for the ecosystem

- Increases in the populations and the breeding success of waterbirds
- Safeguarding the biodiversity of the area and the diversity of the landscape

The actions focus on the conservation of nine important waterbird species: Dalmatian pelican, great white pelican, little egret, squacco heron, great white egret, night heron, pygmy cormorant, ferruginous duck and glossy ibis.

Benefits for the local community and economy

- Use of biomass for the benefit of municipal infrastructure
- Increases in fish stocks and income from fishing
- Promoting Prespa as an ecotourism destination

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