

Ramsar Advisory Mission No. 55: Croatia (2005)

Mission Report

Kopački Rit, Croatia

28-30 September 2005

by Tobias Salathé, Ramsar Secretariat

Contents

Introduction

Background

Kopački Rit Ramsar Site N°583

Issues considered by the Ramsar Advisory Mission

Conclusion and Recommendations

Acknowledgements

Itinerary and people contacted

Introduction

1. The Ramsar Convention gives special attention to assisting Contracting Parties in the management and conservation of listed sites whose ecological character is changing or likely to change as a result of technological development, pollution or other human interference. This is carried out through the Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAM), a technical assistance mechanism formally adopted by Recommendation 4.7 of the 1990 Conference of the Parties (formerly known as the Monitoring Procedure and the Management Guidance Procedure). The main objective of this mechanism is to provide assistance to countries in solving the problems at particular Ramsar Sites related to the maintenance of their ecological character.

Background

2. During COP5 (Kushiro, Japan 1993) the Croatian delegation drew attention to the fact that Kopački Rit was under occupation and therefore out of the control of Croatia and proposed that the site should be added to the Montreux Record and that the Monitoring Procedure should be applied. Accordingly, the site was added to the Record on 16 June

1993. In a letter signed by the Minister on 7 September 1994, the Croatian authorities requested implementation of the Monitoring Procedure.

3. As part of the reporting procedure on Ramsar Sites listed in the Montreux Record, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel received information in April 1995 that the Baranja region floodplain on Croatian territory was occupied by forces of former Yugoslavia, that there were reports of serious damage to the area through deforestation for firewood, and that there were plans to construct a military transport road across the area. The Ramsar Secretariat got in touch with the United Nations Protection Force in Zagreb (Unprofor), who indicated however that a ground visit was not possible because of random, unmapped mine fields. In view of the overwhelming practical and political problems at the time, the Secretariat did not pursue application of the Monitoring Procedure.

4. Fortunately, the situation has improved substantially since. The Croatian authorities, as well as the international community, formally recognized the outstanding importance of this wetland in southeastern Europe and the entire Danube river basin. Support from several sources, at Croatian and international level, allowed the authorities to undertake concentrated and sustained efforts to improve the conservation and management of Kopački Rit Nature Park, designated on the Ramsar List.

5. According to Article 5 of the Convention, the need for consultation and coordinated activities in favour of wetlands shared between different countries was increasingly put into practice over recent years. This concerns also the adjacent wetland ecosystems at the confluence of the Drava and Danube rivers, shared by Hungary, Croatia and Serbia & Montenegro. As part of the implementation of the Pan-European Ecological Network, promoted by the Council of Europe, the European Centre for Nature Conservation is coordinating a project for joint transfrontier management of the Kopački Rit Nature Park in Croatia and the Béda-Karapanca part of the Duna-Dráva National Park in Hungary (Ramsar Sites N°583 and N°901). The project was able to substantially improve cooperation between the management authorities of the two protected areas and already produced very useful results.

6. During the international conference on the “Management of transboundary Ramsar Sites – chances and challenges” at lake Neusiedl/Fertö in November 2004, as well as during the 5th European Regional Meeting of the Ramsar Contracting Parties in Armenia, in December 2004, the Drava-Danube confluence area was identified as a priority area for transboundary cooperation. At these occasions it was suggested that transboundary cooperation should also include the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve (sometimes referred to as a Regional Park) managed by the Vojvodina Forests public enterprise, proposed for Ramsar listing by the Institute for Nature Protection in Serbia.

7. Since the listing of Kopački Rit on the Montreux Record, the Ramsar Secretariat remained in regular contact with the Directorate for Nature Protection (in the Ministry of

Culture), the administrative authority in charge of Ramsar implementation in Croatia, in view of implementing the postponed monitoring procedure. Upon request by Mr Eugen Draganović, Ramsar focal point in the Directorate for Nature Protection, the Secretariat agreed to undertake a Ramsar Advisory Mission prior to COP9 in November 2005, in order to evaluate the current state of the Ramsar Site and assess if it should be removed from the Montreux Record.

Kopački Rit Ramsar Site N°583

8. When declaring its succession to the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Croatia designated Kopački Rit on 3 February 1993 for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (together with three other sites). The Ramsar Site corresponds to the area of the Nature Park in the floodplain of the Drava and Danube confluence in the Osijek-Baranja county, subject to extensive spring flooding. The area supports a mosaic of lakes, marshes, wet grasslands, extensive reedbeds and woodlands and includes numerous channels, oxbows, and a complex of fishponds. The site is of considerable importance for breeding herons, as well as cormorants, storks and white-tailed eagles. Wintering and staging birds also frequent the site. Biological diversity is high with over 400 vascular plants, 293 bird, 55 mammal, 55 fish, 11 amphibian and 10 reptile species recorded. Principal human activities include forestry, hunting, tourism, water management, agriculture, stock and fish farming. The area is subject to increasing siltation and nutrient-enrichment (cf. the Annotated Ramsar List at: www.ramsar.org/profile/profiles_croatia.htm).

Issues considered by the Ramsar Advisory Mission

Developments since 1993

9. The region was occupied by Serb rebels between 1991 and 1995. This was the period when the site was included in the Montreux Record, only a few months after its designation for the Ramsar List. Following the Dayton peace agreement in 1995, during the period of UN transitional administration for eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Sirmium, the economic conditions improved and the region was able to recover. However, it still remains the region with the highest unemployment rate in Croatia. Through the peaceful reintegration process, formerly occupied regions on the right (western) side of the Danube were formally brought back under Croatian jurisdiction on 15 January 1998. A signal of stabilisation and sustainable recovery was the signature by Croatia of an association agreement with the European Union in 2001, followed by the start of accession negotiations in 2005.

10. A Zoological Reserve was already established in the natural Baranja floodplain in 1967 (IUCN Category I “strict nature reserve/wilderness area”). It now forms the core zone (7,143 ha) of the Ramsar Site. At the time of Ramsar listing in 1993, the Nature Park (IUCN Category V “protected landscape”) covered an area of 17,770 hectares. In 1997, a public institution to administer and manage the Nature Park was created, now employing about 20 staff. Through the East Slavonian Reconstruction Project, financial support from the World Bank was provided for administrative and infrastructure development of the Nature Park and the elaboration of a management plan. In 1999, the Nature Park was extended to cover 23,891 ha by adding on the right river side transitional and agricultural lands landwards of the river dykes in the floodplain. Further expansions, with a view to connecting it with the Béda-Karapanca part of the Danube-Drava National Park in Hungary, are currently being discussed.

11. The eastern border of the Nature Park coincides with the (now) international border between Croatia and the Vojvodina province of Serbia & Montenegro, following the cadastral delineation based on the historical meandering of the Danube. However, since 1998, *de facto* each country controls the territory on its side of the current main Danube river flow. This implies that 5,100 ha of the Ramsar Site, situated on the left (eastern) bank of the current Danube flow, are managed by Vojvodina Šume, a state forestry company in Serbia & Montenegro, not by the Croatian Kopački Rit Nature Park management office.

A management plan for the Ramsar Site

12. The management capacity of the Kopački Rit Nature Park has improved impressively recently. The new director, Ms Vištica, and her staff have gained recognition among local stakeholders and authorities and are able to implement modern site management practices and sustainable development activities. Among significant improvements are plans for the conversion of formerly intensively cultivated land in the new part of the Nature Park to organic farming, the installation of sewage treatment facilities, and the development of visitor and tourist accommodation facilities in the villages around the Nature Park.

13. The preparation of a management plan for the Nature Park was launched under the East Slavonian Reconstruction Project with additional financial support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF). As a result, in 2003, a dozen sectoral studies plus an extensive management plan and supporting documents were published. However, their quality was criticized by national and international NGOs and experts in view of the prescriptions provided in the Ramsar guidelines for wetland management regarding the proposed zonation, the use of best-practice approaches, and the sustainability of proposed natural resource uses. Public hearings on the sectoral studies were undertaken at the time. However, they did not prevent a strong feeling of exclusion among local people and NGOs. In response to this, the new Nature Park director assured the Ramsar Secretariat that wider and more formal discussions with the public at large are now foreseen for early

2006. After all, it is in the Nature Park's own and foremost interest to gain wide acceptance of the proposed management activities among the local stakeholders.

Current human activities and possible developments

14. After these necessary consultations to bring public participation into the management planning process (for guidance cf. *Ramsar Handbook 5* on "Participatory Management"), it is suggested that the planning process should focus on strategic and forward planning issues. They could include the recognition of a core zone in the floodplain where no hydrological and landscaping interventions (e.g., embankment construction) should occur, a zone modified simply by dynamics of the river, its eroding forces and sedimentation patterns. Human disturbance in this dynamic and natural zone should be limited to a minimum. Besides the Zoological Reserve, this zone should also include the more upstream parts of the – largely still functional – floodplain. Access should be granted only for monitoring and research activities and educational purposes along specific boat routes. Zoning of the Nature Park (and possibly its surroundings) should furthermore include a buffer zone where sustainable hunting, fishing and forestry activities can take place. Forestry interventions should, however, be assessed according to an economic cost-benefit analysis. Forestry should make use of the natural ecosystem properties (e.g., indigenous species) and exclude monospecific plantations inside the Nature Park. A proposal exists to set up specific forestry reserves for the benefit of rare and endangered species.

15. The existing management plan documents need to be complemented by specific action plans, concrete management projects, and reviews, according to the methodology outlined in *Ramsar Handbook 8* providing frameworks for "Managing Wetlands". Specific management measures need to recognize that the river floodplain also contains habitats such as sand banks, extensively used meadows, wet and dry grasslands. Such habitats, specifically in former intensively farmed areas, may be of specific importance for rare and threatened species and should therefore benefit from specifically adapted management measures. Specific action plans would also have to include measures against the spread of alien species, e.g. the invasive bush *Amorpha fruticosa*. An interesting experiment to this end was briefly visited on the last day of the mission in Lonjske Polje Nature Park, where rustic breeds of Slavonian and Sirmian gray cattle were introduced with a view to reducing the spread of *Amorpha*. Methods of long term sustainable management of fish farming in the traditional ponds, in line with the Park's conservation objectives for priority species, would also merit specific management proposals.

16. The mission visited the new European Environment Centre and restaurant at Dvorac Tikveš, as well as the former hunting estates (still to be restored) foreseen for tourist accommodation. Developing sustainable nature tourism, regular education programmes, and training courses (e.g. also at the Zlatna Greda ecocentre) promise to create socio-economic benefits at local level. The tourist experts of Osijek-Baranja county and Bilje

municipality provided convincing evidence that the number of visitors to the Nature Park, using local accommodation, restaurants and transport facilities, is constantly increasing and promises to become a sustainable source of local income. These developments are encouraged as long as they are compatible with the Nature Park's management plan objectives, notably the conservation needs for rare and threatened species and natural habitats.

17. The mission was presented with information on extensive forest clear-cutting schemes, particularly of native, old stands of oak *Quercus robur* and poplar *Populus alba/nigra* communities. These schemes are implemented on both sides of the Danube, respectively, by Croatian and by Vojvodina forestry enterprises. A surface of over 1000 hectares was clear-cut during the period 1993-2003, according to satellite imagery presented to the mission. This poses a serious management problem to the Nature Park authorities. Clear-cutting schemes without appropriate reforestation measures, or followed by the plantation of non-indigenous trees, are causing a substantial loss of forest biodiversity and making forest ecosystems the most endangered ones in the area.

Potential impacts on the site from upstream activities

18. The Croatian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management recently provided licenses for the exploitation of more than 2 million cubic metres of gravel and sand along the Drava. The Drava League, in the name of Croatian, Hungarian, Slovenian and international NGOs, expressed its concern about transboundary environmental impacts of these activities on protected areas, including Ramsar and Natura 2000 sites. Although some of the extraction licenses concern areas immediately upstream of the Nature Park near Osijek, the impact of such extractions would not be crucial for Kopački Rit, due to the fact that most of the water and sediments is brought by the Danube. However, in order to ensure the long-term hydrological stability of both rivers and their wetland ecosystems, in accordance with the plans for the establishment of the Mura-Drava-Danube transboundary Biosphere Reserve, it is recommended that gravel and sand exploitations along the Drava should be minimal.

19. It is also recommended that the Park authorities monitor possible impacts of planned water management and exploitation activities in the Park's wider vicinity. In light of the requirements by the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), a close cooperation between the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management and the Ministry of Culture (in charge of protected areas) is recommended. As part of the development of the Danube River Basin Management Plan (coordinated by the Danube Commission, ICPDR), Croatia and twelve other Danube basin states committed themselves to meet the requirements of the WFD and use its horizontal guidance on wetlands.

Trilateral issues regarding the transboundary nature of this wetland

20. Transboundary cooperation of Kopački Rit Nature Park with the Drava-Danube National Park in Hungary has already produced significant results for the establishment of a common management approach and the restoration of the most valuable ecosystems. Lessons learnt during this cooperation between the Hungarian National Park and the Croatian Nature Park can now help to establish closer cooperation with the forest managers in charge of the Special Nature Reserve in the Vojvodina part of the trilateral floodplain. It makes little sense that crucial management measures, concerning the same floodplain area shared between three countries, are implemented according to substantially different conceptual approaches (e.g., concerning forestry, fishing, agriculture, or visitor management). As the nature, history and experience of the respective management authorities differs between the three countries, it is urgently suggested that they work more closely together in order to coordinate their respective management approaches and interventions.

21. The wish of the Institute for Nature Conservation in Serbia to have the Gornje Podunavlje protected area included in the Ramsar List provides a unique opportunity for trilateral cooperation according to Article 5 of the Ramsar Convention. External support is already provided for specific projects. Other potential donors have expressed their interest. The opportunity exists now to restore the Drava-Danube confluence floodplain substantially in order that it will become a major south-east European wetland area (and possibly also World Heritage site). When the conservation and management objectives for this area, shared between three neighbours, will coincide, border disputes should no longer remain an obstacle for effective cooperation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

22. Since the listing of Kopački Rit Ramsar Site on the Montreux Record in 1993, the situation has substantially changed and improved. Armed conflicts in the area ceased in 1995. Since then, most of the area was cleaned from mine fields and reintegrated under Croatian jurisdiction. The establishment of the Nature Park management authority in 1997 provided the basis for modern site management and development measures. With the new director of the Park, this can now be effectively implemented.

23. Public consultations on the management plan document, elaborated with international support in 2003, are urgently required in order to obtain a wide acceptance of the proposed management objectives by the local stakeholders.

24. Then, it is suggested to focus on strategic development planning, notably looking at a careful zonation of the protected area (in view of biodiversity conservation, forestry, hunting, fishing, education, tourist and visitor management) and its proposed extension towards the upstream Béda-Karapanca part of the Danube-Drava National Park in Hungary, with which fruitful cooperation was engaged with international support.

25. The Nature Park authorities are encouraged to monitor hydrological works, excavations and other human interventions upstream along the Drava and Danube in order to identify possible downstream consequences in time and avoid damage to the Park's ecosystems.

26. The Nature Park authorities, in coordination with the relevant sectoral authorities, are urged to change and improve current management practices, in order to avoid further detrimental consequences of human interventions inside the Nature Park, notably concerning water management, river regulation, wetland drainage, forest clear-cutting and plantation, and hunting activities.

27. Finally, pragmatic and objective-oriented cooperation with the managers of the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve on the Serbian side of the Danube floodplain is strongly suggested. The lessons learnt through the cooperation with the Hungarian neighbours should now serve to launch a trilateral cooperation for this unique wetland area in Europe.

28. Documentation available at the Secretariat for Kopački Rit Ramsar Site is very scarce and does not correspond to the requirements for Ramsar Information Sheets and Maps as outlined in Resolution VIII.13. The Directorate for Nature Conservation is urgently requested to send an updated RIS and Ramsar Site Map to the Secretariat, according to the guidelines and explanations provided in *Ramsar Handbook 7* on "Designating Ramsar Sites" (accessible online at www.ramsar.org/lib_handbooks_e.htm). The same request is also formulated concerning the three other Croatian Ramsar Sites: Crna Mlaka, Delta of Neretva and Lonjsko Polje.

29. Furthermore, the Directorate for Nature Protection is encouraged to submit to the Secretariat information required in the questionnaire foreseen for the removal of a site from the Montreux Record. Upon receipt of this questionnaire (via e-mail), the Secretariat will consult with the Scientific and Technical Review Panel about its possible removal, according to the procedure outlined in *Ramsar Handbook 8* (paragraph 234ff).

30. Finally, the Ramsar authorities of Serbia & Montenegro are encouraged to declare their part of the floodplain for designation under the Ramsar List and to engage in transboundary cooperation with the Hungarian and Croatian neighbours in view of a possible formal trilateral Ramsar designation, as beautifully illustrated on 30 June 2004 with the joint declaration of the "Trilateral Ramsar Site Floodplains of the Morava-Dyje-Danube Confluence" by Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are expressed to Mr Draganović, of the Directorate for Nature Conservation, for organizing the logistics of the mission and guiding it. Ms Vištica, the Nature Park director, is thanked for her hospitality and availability to visit the area and discuss the issues in detail. Mr Mikuska provided much essential information and shared his extensive knowledge of the area with the author of this report.

Itinerary and people contacted

- 28 September Travel to Zagreb, welcome by *Eugen Draganović*, national focal point for the Ramsar Convention in the Ministry for Culture, meeting with Assistant Minister *Zoran Šikić*, responsible for nature conservation and protected areas, to outline the background and objectives of the mission plus general Ramsar matters in Croatia; in the afternoon drive to Osijek with Mr *Draganović* leading the mission, dinner with him and professor Ms *Biserka Vištica*, director of Kopački Rit Nature Park.
- 29 September Introduction to the area in the offices of the Nature Park at Bilje by Ms *Vištica* and *Tibor Mikuska*, biologist of the Nature Park; then field visit of the Ramsar Site (with above, including Mr *Draganović*) and its surroundings starting with the new visitor facilities near Kopačevo village, boat trip through the core zone (Zoological Reserve) to Kopačko lake, drive on the dyke northwards between the Ribnjak fishponds and the core flood zone to the Dvorac Tikveš former state hunting estate, now partly restored to serve for the European Environmental Centre, restaurant and future tourist accommodation; continuation of the field visit outside the Nature Park northwards to Batina village and war memorial to overlook the Danube floodplain at the meeting point of Croatia, Hungary and Serbia & Montenegro. In the late afternoon, discussions with local stakeholders at the Park centre near Kopačevo, including representatives of the ecological association Green Osijek, of the Eco Centre Zlatna Greda, of Bilje municipality, of the Osijek-Baranja county tourist office and of the Hungarian community of Kopačevo village. In the evening debriefing discussion with Ms *Vištica*, Mr *Mikuska* and Mr *Draganović*.
- 30 September Return drive with Mr *Draganović* towards Zagreb. En route brief visit of Lonjsko Polje Nature Park Ramsar Site in the Sava floodplain. Stop at the Park offices in a restored traditional oak house in Krapje village, guided visit to the herd of Podolac grey cattle introduced to manage vegetation growth and invasive species (*Amorpha fruticosa*), visit of the sluice in the Sava dyke, of the central part of the floodplain used for communal grazing and of the visitor centre in the stork village Čigoć; then return drive to Zagreb airport and travel back to Gland.