

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LIFE2002NAT/GR/8494: CONSERVATION OF PRIORITY BIRD SPECIES IN LAKE MIKRI PRESPA, GREECE.



Αρχείο ΕΠΠ /Λ. Νικολάου

Society for the Protection of Prespa

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The objective of the LIFE-Nature project entitled: “Conservation of priority bird species in Lake Mikri Prespa” (2002-2007) was to ensure and improve the conservation status of the Dalmatian Pelican and the Pygmy Cormorant by restoring and managing their habitats in Lake Mikri Prespa. During the implementation of the project, all actions included in the original four-year duration (2006-2006) were completed successfully, while additional complementary actions took place in the prolongation year (July 2006-June 2007).

The **final report** is structured in **four basic sections**:

- a) the introductory section gives a presentation of the current status, the problems and the wider framework within which the project actions were completed,
- b) the second section includes a technical analysis of the project actions,
- c) the third section contains an evaluation of the project and conclusions on its contribution to the conservation and to socioeconomic development of the protected area,
- d) the fourth section includes the annexes of the report, in which specific actions are analyzed and more information are given on the effects of management interventions implemented throughout the project on bird species and wet meadows, as well as and on issues related to the project management.

The report is complemented by electronic annexes with photographic and video material on the realization of the project actions, accompanied by a selection of relevant publications that circulated during the last year of its duration. Poster presentations at congresses on specific actions of the project are also given. Other deliverables presented with the final report are the “**Guideline Document on the Restoration and Management of Wet Meadows (2007-2012)**” and the “**After LIFE Conservation Plan**”, which prescribes the future management needs and proposals and analyses the actions that have to be accomplished to further ensure the conservation values of Lake Mikri Prespa.

At this point, the basic topics on the realization of the project actions are summarized. Activities under **Measure A** (preparatory actions, elaboration of management plans) included the accomplishment of the technical studies necessary for the **reconstruction of the sluice** at location Koula (activity A.1), as well as the completion of the “Guideline Document on the Restoration and Management of Wet Meadows (2007-2012)” (activity A.2). The technical studies were contracted to external assistants and were completed within the predicted budget and time schedule. The same studies received the official

approval by the relevant state services and the project proceeded to the construction phase. The “Guideline Document” (GD) was written by SPP staff and external collaborators, completed within the prolongation period of the project, and approved – as foreseen in the prolongation proposal – by the Board members of the Management Body of Prespa National Forest (MBPNF).

Activities under **Measure C** (Non-recurring management) included the reconstruction of the sluice connecting the two Prespa Lakes. It was co-funded and supervised by the SPP and particular effort was devoted on finding the proper legal framework that would allow interventions on public land to a NGO, such as the SPP. By the detection of an accepted solution on procedural issues and with the agreement of the competent authorities (Regional Administration of Western Macedonia), the sluice reconstruction was assigned to a constructing company selected after an announcement issued by the SPP. The task was **realized very successfully** within the original timetable and budget although serious problems had to be overcome (e.g. lack of complete hydro-meteorological data, existence of old ammunition at the excavation site from the Second World War). The new sluice was completed within the first two and a half years of the LIFE project and was delivered by the SPP to the Regional Administration of Western Macedonia (RAWM). On May 2005 the sluice was delivered by the RAWM to the MBPNF on a festive inauguration ceremony and since then the MBPNF is responsible for its operation. In 2005, the MBPNF established a three-member water level management committee for the delimitation and implementation of the management goals that deal with the annual fluctuation of the water level of Lake Mikri Prespa. The committee consists of representatives of the Prespa Municipality, the Local Land Reclamation Service (LLRS) and the SPP. The SPP has undertaken the scientific and consultative support of the committee which has functioned regularly until the end of the project.

The unobstructed operation of the sluice, the attainment of management objectives on the annual regulation of the water level of Lake Mikri Prespa, the smooth functioning of the **water level management committee**, the minimal maintenance of the structure, as well as the positive response of the local people and authorities, prove the successful confrontation of the problem and the fine execution of the project actions. The proper completion and functioning of the new sluice, as well as of the other management interventions, led to the agreement of local and national authorities on the necessity to prolong the project and compile the “Guideline Document on the Restoration and Management of Wet Meadows” (Action A.2) aiming at concentrating all the knowledge and experience gained through the project in one document, and at the same time provide detailed guidelines for wetland management in the next five years, that is in the after-LIFE period (2007-

2012). It has to be reported that this **Guideline Document examines** in detail and in an integrated way all aspects on wetland management and wetland values, namely: a) water management, b) vegetation management and monitoring, c) bird fauna management and monitoring, d) management and settlement of land uses, e) administration and funding of these actions, and f) annual and total evaluation of management interventions. The document/plan defines the protected area and considers its conservation needs by taking into account rare species and habitats, as well as human activities that affect and are affected by the management activities. For each of the previously mentioned sectors, it analytically presents the on-site and **regulatory measures** that have to be applied by the MBPNF in order to achieve conservation-oriented wetland management, and it proposes the establishment of a new Wetland Management Committee under the supervision and guidance of the MBPNF. The latter will have the responsibility of the annual realization and evaluation of the wet meadows restoration and management plan.

Actions under **Measure D** referred to recurring management and monitoring. They included vegetation management by means of **grazing and systematic annual cutting the reedbed vegetation** at eleven potential wet meadow littoral sites (Actions D.1 and D.2 respectively). Grazing was practiced by one herd of water buffaloes and two cattle herds, cutting was done every summer (some sites were mown in autumn as well), while the combination of summer cutting followed by grazing was also applied. The **result** of vegetation management activities was the **tripling of the total wet meadow surface** at Lake Mikri Prespa, namely from 32.5 ha before the project (2000) to 100 ha in 2007. These activities were done with the participation of local farmers and had positive results for fishing and stock-breeding in the area. That is because wet meadows function as spawning grounds for phytophilous fish species (such as the carp which is the main fishery in the area) and as grazing and hay-harvesting pastures with a substantial increase of hay bales from 340 in 2002 to more than 3,000 in 2005-6. The grazing and cutting actions started and were continued as originally planned throughout the project duration.

Another part of **activities under Measure D** was devoted to the monitoring of the managed sites and the wider protected area. To be precise:

- a) Monitoring of hydro-meteorological parameters, as well as of the sluice gates operation, in order to decide on the sluice gates annual functioning and in an effort to reach conclusions about its future management (Action D.3a that was included in the annual prolongation of the project).
- b) Monitoring of the vegetation at the managed sites (Action D.3b) aiming at recording the evolution of qualitative and structural vegetation characteristics,

which showed a clear reduction of high emergent helophytes to the benefit of wet meadow plant species over the project.

c) Monitoring of bird use of the managed sites (feeding) and bird populations (breeding) (Action D. 3c). Depending on the species, monitoring methods were applied on a continuous or weekly basis to estimate the number of breeding pairs of the two target species and describe their nesting habitats. In parallel, the presence of birds at the feeding sites (most of which were vegetation management sites) was recorded in order to measure the effects of the different vegetation management methods on bird use of the sites. At the same time, other aquatic bird species were also monitored at the same sites. One of the projects' major successes was the **re-breeding of the Glossy Ibis** at Lake Mikri Prespa after 35 years of nesting absence and only sporadic presence on spring migration. The species bred in the Mikri Prespa reedbeds in 2005 and 2007. Moreover, in 2007 **Bittern breeding** was also confirmed for the first time at Prespa lakes.

All these monitoring actions were described in technical and scientific reports annexed in the present final report. They contain detailed presentation of the methodologies applied, as well as important scientific results. As with previous project actions, all monitoring actions were carried out within the planned schedule and budget.

Measure **E actions** included the **public awareness and dissemination of results** activities and were also completed within the original plan. Informative printed material (Action E.1) were published with the aim to brief the wider public on the content, evolution and results of the project. In total, two informative letters were sent to the inhabitants of Prespa (500 copies each), two brochures in Greek (10,000 copies), English (3,700 copies) and French (1,300 copies), another brochure in the last year of the project and two small size posters (3,000 copies) were produced and distributed to many public services and schools. Finally, two metal posters, providing information on the LIFE project and more specifically on water and vegetation management, were positioned near the new sluice.

The **guided bird watching activity** (E.2) from observation/ view points was an innovative action at which 3,400 visitors participated; while at the SPP information Center in Agios Germanos over 31,000 people were informed on the project activities.

The website of the project was constructed in the second year (2003) and was hosted by the SPP website. By the end of the project a layman's report was also produced and copies of it are annexed in the present report in electronic and printed form. This publication aims at summarizing the content and results of

the project in a simple way for the information and further sensitization of the local community and the wider public.

These informative actions were complemented by the **wardening** and the on-site provision of information activity that took place not only around the project managed sites, but in the wider protected area of the Prespa National Forest. It was carried out by systematic weekly patrols aiming at preventing harmful activities and promoting the values of the area and the need for their conservation. During the project, illegal activities were stopped by the project wardens at the wetland, but also at forest habitats.

Finally, part of Measure E was devoted to the **promotion of the project** through the local and national mass media (Action E.3). In total, throughout the project more than 40 articles, press releases and presentations to websites were circulated, 5 TV presentations were made, 4 interviews of project staff were given and 4 documentary presentations of the project were shown by national and regional TV channels.

Measure **F actions** (overall project operation and monitoring) also started and were completed in time. Through project management (Action F.1), special emphasis was given on the compilation of agreements and contracts with internal and external collaborators, the performance of the necessary calls for external assistance and the monitoring of the proper implementation and reporting of all project actions. Within the same action, special attention was paid to keeping financial and management procedures, as mentioned in the standard administrative provisions of the LIFE-Nature program and the SPP internal regulations. The results of project management are described in the technical and financial reports included in the present final report.

Many **project presentations** were made on the occasion of national and international meetings aiming at highlighting the project targets and means used for their implementation, as well as analyzing plentiful valuable scientific data obtained from the field activities.

The establishment and **operation of a Scientific Committee** (Action F.2) began with its formation by experienced scientists, Dr A. Crivelli, Dr F. Mesléard, Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat, France) , Prof. V. Papanastasis, School of Forestry and Natural Environment, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Dr G. Parisopoulos, Director of the Institute of Agricultural Machinery & Constructions (National Agricultural Research Foundation) and M.Malakou, biologist, SPP Managing Director. According to the program, the Scientific Committee convened four times at Prespa and followed the evolution of project actions with priority to the scientific part that dealt with the monitoring of hydro-meteorological data, birds and vegetation, to which the committee members assisted and provided guidance. After each meeting, the

members delivered reports on the evaluation of the current progress of project actions and identified potential problems. The final reports of the committee members included proposals for the future management of the wetland that were considered during the compilation of the “Guideline Document on the Restoration and Management of Wet Meadows” (Action A.2).

Action F.3 included the cooperation and **networking of the Prespa LIFE-Nature project** with another four LIFE projects taking place at Greek Ramsar wetlands (Nestos River, Strofylia-Kotychi wetlands, Drana Lagoon and Amvrakikos wetlands). The SPP project team participated at the five meetings of the network and in the compilation of the technical report on the LIFE-Nature program and the Natura 2000 sites. The production of this publication was a responsibility of the Nestos LIFE project. The role of the networking activity of the five projects was very important for the support of each project separately and for the exchange of useful information between projects.

Conclusively, the LIFE-Nature project in Prespa contributed to the following subjects:

A. Successful completion of sizeable and significant infrastructure (replacement of old sluice by a new and efficient structure) accompanied by a thorough investigation of procedures on the realization of such works by NGOs, as well as their implementation on the ground.

B. Effective implementation of recurring management and monitoring actions (water, bird and vegetation monitoring) by means of actual on-site activities to which local people participated, and by compiling a specific management plan for the continuation of such activities in the next five years including guidelines on funding opportunities and annual evaluation processes.

C. Conservation of populations of rare waterbird species, increase of biodiversity with the breeding of new bird species, tripling of the total surface of their endangered habitats (wet meadows).

D. Dissemination of results and sensitization of the local people, the wider public, the state services and the visitors on wetland values, rare bird species, prevention of illegal activities and on the need to continue active wetland management.

E. Establishment of specific procedures at the administrative level, namely the Management Body of Prespa National Forest (MBPNF), concerning the implementation of a specific wetland management plan that will encompass: a) systematic management and monitoring of water parameters, vegetation and bird fauna, b) regulation of land uses around the wetland, and c) a process of annual evaluation of management interventions and related problems.

F. Establishment (at the local and national levels) of commonly accepted wetland values that have to be preserved and conserved through specific management practices.

G. Promotion of specific socio-economic benefits related to economic activities such as stock-breeding, fishing and tourism in the protected area stemming from wetland management.

H. Promotion and systematic presentation of problems on specific land uses or sites emerging from the implementation of management interventions with parallel formulation of solutions, that were approved by the MBPNF and related authorities and may be put into action progressively.

I. Participation of stakeholders to wetland management.

K. Creation and implementation of a model scheme of integrated wetland management in Greece based on the cooperation of NGOs, competent authorities and inhabitants. This scheme could be used as a pattern for the implementation of direct and institutional measures in Greece and at the neighboring countries in the framework of the Trans-boundary Prespa Park and the related GEF program.

L. Finally, through the production of the “Guideline Document on the Restoration and Management of Wet Meadows (2007-2012)” the LIFE project offered the potential for the continuation of project actions by the MBPNF and the SPP aiming at prolonging the conservation measures and improving the initial project objective beyond the project’s duration.