

Danube~Delta

Landscape of the Year 2007-2009



Landscape of the Year 2007-2009
Final Report





Landscape of the Year 2007–2009

Danube~Delta



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The Danube Delta – An Overview

The Danube Delta is situated in the borderland of Romania and the Ukraine, a tiny part extending into Moldova. Eighty per cent of its vast area of more than 5,000 square kilometres is situated in Romania. The region is a nature paradise in the truest sense of the term, and has no equal worldwide: It is Europe's most extensive wetland and home to 5,400 animal and plant species, including such rare migratory birds as the Dalmatian Pelican – which is the delta's figurehead. It is also known for its wealth of fish – with the sturgeon as the “showpiece” – and it boasts the largest unbroken expanse of common reed (1,800km²).

Life between river and sea, bearing the imprint of many cultures

The delta is not merely rich in animals and boasting a magnificent flora, it is also known for its cultural diversity. For thousands of years it has been a place of settlement, passage and refuge. With as few as 15,000 inhabitants, the delta is sparsely populated, but the people who live there in peaceful coexistence trace their origins to many different cultures and ethnicities. In their majority they stem from Russia, the Ukraine and Romania, but the delta is also home to Turks, Italians, Greeks and Aromuns. All of them have one common trait – the strong bond with nature and water: Many of them depend on the Danube for their livelihood (fishing) and, to this day, many villages are accessible by boat only.

Endangered World Natural and Cultural Heritage

Thanks to its immense biodiversity and cultural variety, the Danube delta is – by international standards – a very special place. This is why, in the 1990s, it was designated both a biosphere reserve and a UNESCO world natural and cultural heritage. Currently, the close relationship between people and nature is at a crossroads. The delta and its residents are threatened by environmental degradation, encroachments into the landscape and by unemployment. It has become practically impossible for the local population to subsist on traditional breadwinning activities, such as fishery and agriculture, and more and more young people leave their home villages. **The objective pursued with the Landscape-of-the-Year project has been to help open up new prospects.**

Legend

- National Border
- Border of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve
- Strictly protected areas (totalling: 50 600 hectar)
- 1. Roșca-Buhaiova
- 2. Letea
- 3. Răducu
- 4. Nebunu
- 5. Vătafu-Lunguleț
- 6. Caraorman
- 7. Sărăturile-Murighiol
- 8. Erenciu
- 9. Popina
- 10. Sacalin-Zătoane
- 11. Periteașca-Bisericuța-Portița
- 12. Capul Doloșman
- 13. Grindul Lupilor
- 14. Istria-Sinoe
- 15. Grindul Chituc
- 16. Rotundu
- 17. Potcoava
- 18. Belciug
- i Visitor Centre





Landscape of the Year 2007–2009 – United for a sustainable Danube Delta!

Ever since 1989, the Naturefriends International (NFI) has designated border-crossing European regions of outstanding ecological value as Landscapes of the Year, with the objective of helping to boost sustainable development. In the Danube delta we have now been active together with Naturefriends Romania and other partners for almost four years.

We intended to stimulate action by efforts at the strategic level and by practical measures. The fact that our plans have come off is essentially due to the consistent application of one single principle: **open and dependable communication and cooperation designed to gather people from diverse organisations around one table.** The matrix for new ideas and innovative solutions is made up of diverging perspectives, experience gained, information, and contacts. The involvement of international experts translated into 'networking' in the best and most helpful sense of the term.

Hence, all practical measures had the character of pilots or models. Though not perfect, they were successful and proof of the fact – that after all, it works!

Sustainable development is work in progress. This is why this Final Report is an account of both things achieved and (potential) starting points for follow-up – so that things will move on!



What is due at this point is a big thank-you for the excellent cooperation to all those whose commitment was absolutely crucial to the success of the project: to our partners, sponsors, promoters, and private donors.

Christian Baumgartner
Secretary General
Naturefriends International

Stefanie Röder
Project Coordinator
Landscape of the Year

Tiberiu Tioc
President
Naturefriends Romania

Silviu Covaliov
Local Project Coordinator
Naturefriends Tulcea



“The matrix for new ideas and innovative solutions is made up of diverging perspectives, experience gained, information, and contacts.”





Preparatory Stage

The project was supported throughout by a **project group** consisting of Nature-friends International, Naturefriends Romania, the **Administration of the Biosphere Reserve of the Danube Delta (ARBDD)**, the **Danube Delta Institute (INDD)** in Tulcea, the **Tulcea County Council (TCC)**, the **Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER)**, as well as the **German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ)**, and the **World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)** in Romania.

Unfortunately, efforts to involve also Ukrainian partners in this ongoing work process came to nothing. As a result, any aspirations to a consistent border-crossing approach were reduced to isolated incidents in the course of the project.

At the very first meeting, the **three contextual priorities emerged in clear relief: sustainable tourism, environmental education & biodiversity as well as the sustainable use of reed.**

The first major **meeting of stakeholders**, attended by representatives of authorities, institutions, NGOs, the business world, the areas of culture and ecology as well as of the media, was held in Tulcea on 27 September 2006. This was the occasion on which the idea, the order of events, and the options of the Landscape-of-the-Year project as well as the envisaged areas of emphasis were presented and everyone was invited to participate.

With successful outcome: Before the end of November, a **delegation including decision-makers** from the Danube Delta **visited the two Austrian National Parks *Neusiedler See and Seewinkel*** (Landscape of the Year 1990) and *Donauauen*, to gather information about strategies and methods of visitor information and channelling. Background motif: At the time, a new ecotourism centre was being planned in Tulcea, and several visitor centres in the Delta were in the pipeline.

The participants in the trip acquired important know-how and were familiarised with salient ideas, especially as regards the function, concept and design of visitor centres. Moreover the trip served the exchange among the participants themselves, who engaged in unblinkered talks and discussions – for example between mayors and the Governor of the Biosphere Reserve – that would hardly have taken place in a formal context.

During this stage, **public relations** activities covered the full range from media contacts – including an **ex-ante tour for international journalists** in September 2006 – to the generation of PR and information material.

The **brochure** “Life between River and Sea” – an introduction to the Danube Delta Landscape of the Year in English, German and Romanian – appeared just in time for the kick-off event.



“At the very first meeting, the three contextual priorities emerged in clear relief: sustainable tourism, environmental education & biodiversity as well as the sustainable use of reed.”



Kick-off and Conclusion

A festival to start with (2/3 June 2007) ...

On 3 June 2007, NFI President Herbert Brückner formally opened the Landscape-of-the-Year project in Tulcea, in the presence of leading regional politicians, of a Ukrainian delegation and of the President of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), Lucia Varga.

Since that day, the sculpture of a pelican in the harbour has recalled the Landscape-of-the-Year project 2007–2009 with inscriptions in Romanian, Ukrainian, English, and German to signal border-crossing rapprochement.

The opening ceremony was embedded in a two-day, colourful festival under the motto *Fish & Culture* – a reference to the fish as a symbol of life and to the cultural diversity in the Danube delta. The latter was impressively demonstrated by folklore ensembles and culinary specialties served by the various local minorities. The project partners as well as schools and initiatives took part, mounting exhibitions and actions.

... and a conference by way of conclusion (23 September 2009)

Promoting Sustainable Economy – The Key to Conserving Nature and Biodiversity in the Danube Delta was the motto of the closing conference almost two-and-a-half years later, at the end of September 2009.

Taking the examples of tourism and the use of reed, two important branches of economic activity in the delta, attention was deliberately drawn to the fact that in times of economic crisis sustainable strategies will invariably pay off.

While the topic of reed was raised in order to introduce a broad public to the potential for its innovative use, the panel discussion entitled “Tourism in the delta – quo vadis?” was intended to follow the course of sustainable tourism from the conceptual to the concrete level of implementation, including the role of the responsible stakeholders (see p. 15, p. 19).

The conference was rounded off with a call to action and ‘perseverance’, fashioned on the below-described projects, measures and activities that had been realised over the previous three project years.



“Sustainable strategies will invariably pay off.”



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Commitment to sustainable tourism ...



Tourism is a cutting-edge topic in the Danube delta from the economic perspective and from the perspective of nature protection. This is why both the Tulcea County Council and the Administration of the Biosphere Reserve run projects designed to improve the tourism infrastructure and tourism marketing as well as the visitor management in the Biosphere Reserve.

At the conceptual level this signifies that two diverse points of view need to be united in a common perspective: The Administration of the Biosphere Reserve is tasked with ensuring the preservation of the natural environment and the biodiversity of the Danube delta through appropriate visitor management. **The main interest of the County Council and of the local communities is to upgrade tourism and make it a powerful economic factor in the region.**

Against this background and in the sign of the Landscape of the Year, **Naturefriends committed themselves in both conceptual and practical terms to a sustainable tourism development that would answer both purposes by protecting nature and boosting local sources of income.**

Sustainable tourism strategies – the conceptual level

The focus was, first and foremost, on creating awareness of the fact that, in the long run, the Danube delta's tourism potential could be safeguarded and put to optimum use only through

concerted unidirectional action – in the absence of which it was at risk of being forfeited within in no time at all.

Crucial related aspects were put up for discussion and thrashed out with stakeholders and decision-makers on the basis of best practice examples.

Visitor management: Visit to Austrian National Parks (November 2006)

During the visit of a delegation from the Danube delta to the two (Hungarian-)Austrian National Parks *Neusiedler See und Seewinkel* (A/HU) and *Donauauen* a wealth of suggestions for sustainable visitor management were generated, in particular with regard to the following aspects:

- function, concepts and design of visitor centres
- involvement of local communities by way of economic incentives
- soft mobility achieved by cooperating with the providers of public and private modes of transport
- the special potential of cross-border cooperation

These discussions also marked the start of a lasting cooperation with the two National Parks in the form of both joint projects and conceptual consultancy on ongoing projects and of a cross-institutional strategy designed by Alois Lang, tourism expert of NP Neusiedlersee and Andrei Blumer (AER).





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In addition, this interaction yielded

- guidelines for designing visitor centres, taking the example of the **new Eco-Tourism-Centre**, and
- the rough draft of an interpretation strategy for the visitor centres in the Danube delta.

Transport and mobility management: International seminars in Tulcea (2 / 3 October 2008)

On 2 and 3 October 2008, **two contextually synchronised seminars** were held in Tulcea in cooperation with the County Council. Both were registered as activities of the *Open Days 2008 – of the European Week of Regions and Cities*. The **target groups were (inter) national and regional stakeholders, decision-makers and NGOs.**

At the seminar on *Transport and Mobility Management at the Danube Delta Destination* instruments and international examples of **soft mobility in tourism** and their application and implementation in the Danube delta were put up for debate. The key propositions are summed up below:

- Efforts to improve accessibility and mobility need to take into account the profile of the Danube delta.
- In this context a distinction must be made between recreational use and (overnight) tourism.
- Nature and culture in the Danube delta will reveal their treasures only to those opting for a slow approach, which translates into the provision of slow-down products and the shunning of speed-up products.

- Private and public stakeholders should jointly address mobility management, even though a legal basis for “public-private-partnerships” is still lacking in Romania.

These conclusions were matched by the recommendations that formed part of the “Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism in the Delta Region”, presented by WES, a Belgian consulting company, at the subsequent seminar on **Sustainable Tourism in Wetlands and Coastal Areas**.

It remains to be seen, how this strategy is received by the people who are ultimately meant to benefit from it. Examples from the Landscape of the Year demonstrate, how it can be done:

Involving the local population – interaction as a strategic principle

Sustainable tourism development in the interests of the people living in the region is conditional on their cooperation. It is, therefore, crucial to actively involve them early on – by taking up and responding to their concerns.

Training and advanced training, such as courses for Nature Guides or for people running boarding houses, does not end with the upskilling of individual participants, but is an incentive to discussions at the local level and frequently the upbeat to concerted action, encouraging people to have their say and to join in. Not to mention that it generates the required feedback for the conceptual level.



“Recreational use signifies that people make use of the infrastructure, bring their own food and leave their litter, but no money. Overnight visitors are the only ones that generate any local income worth mentioning. This is why it is of paramount importance to come up with “slow-down” products. The new airport at Tulcea, on the other hand, is bound to speed up delta tourism, unless counter measures are taken in the form of special products for this target group.” *Alois Lang*





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All this was targeted with the measures put in place by Naturefriends and their partners.

Practical implementation: pilot measures in support of sustainable tourism development

From the very start it was clear that not just words but also deeds would be required for the Landscape-of-the-Year project to be effective – always keeping in mind that its role would be limited to stimulating a continuative development. The focus was on (advanced) training and on the cross-border model tour – the Tour d'Horizon.

If at all possible, the village of Crişan was involved in all the measures taken: Centrally placed in the delta, the location of an ARBDD visitor centre and of other tourism facilities and products, such as fishermen's boarding houses and boat tours and rentals, Crişan has the potential for becoming a sustainable tourism model community – which was to be deliberately promoted.

Crafting certified quality standards and occupational qualifications

Course for Nature Guides (April 2007 – April 2008 / January 2009)

The delta's greatest tourism potential lies in its fauna and flora, but there is a lack of trained nature guides who speak foreign

languages and a lack of relevant training programmes. This is why Naturefriends Romania together with AER and CEDES, the state certification institute, organised a pilot course, which drew 20 participants from Tulcea and the Danube delta, who were trained as "Nature Guides".

The idea was to come up with an officially recognised certificate course, which would form part of the regional tourism development. The new skills acquired open up new job perspectives to the local population and upgrade the quality of the services offered – which is eventually of benefit to both visitors and nature.

Sequence of events

All theory modules of the course – including the officially recognised CEDES exam for tourist guides – were offered as block courses in the spring and autumn of 2007. April 2008 saw the concluding practice-oriented part of the programme – which took the form of a several-day field training, during which the fledgling guides were familiarised with the technical and organisational requirements to be met in the delta. The training was rounded off by an optional, intensive German language course (October – January).

Outcome

- 20 trained guides
- a standard curriculum and a course reader, which are supposed to be regularly updated



“From the very start it was clear that not just words but also deeds would be required for the Landscape-of-the-Year project to be effective.”

Starting points for follow-up

- An ongoing EU project, run by the regional tourism agency *PromTour*, under which jobless persons are upskilled for the tourism sector and which will draw on the experience and teaching material of the course.
- Possibly a EU project devoted to the subject of knowledge networks for sustainable tourism; the project has been applied for by NFI and would involve the Danube delta.

Eco-label Workshop (December 2007/ March 2008)

The purpose of this two-part workshop was to harmonise the criteria for the EU eco-label for tourist accommodations with those for the Romanian eco-label – in the crafting of which AER had played an instrumental role – and to come up with an eco-quality label for the Danube delta.

In the first part, experts engaged in a detailed discussion of the criteria; in the second part they addressed stakeholders in the Danube delta, seeking to inform them and to create awareness.

The specialist workshop was arranged at an enterprise near Brasov that had been certified by AER. EU eco-label expert Dagmar Diwok assisted in crafting an info leaflet with jointly agreed basic criteria for the environmentally friendly running of tourism enterprises.

The leaflet served as the starting point for the two-day workshop in Tulcea, which was attended by more than 30 participants from the tourism sector and from authorities concerned with tourism matters. Key subjects were

- the trends on the international (eco-)tourism market and the conclusions to be drawn for the Danube delta in terms of target-group-specific recommendations, e.g. regarding the environment, safety and publicity;
- the EU flower and the AER eco-label as two complementary quality labels: criteria, certifiable services and the resulting benefits.

During a “pre-audit” at the Delta Hotel, the participants were invited to put the criteria to the test, then and there.



“The new skills acquired open up new job perspectives to the local population and upgrade the quality of the services offered.”



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Outcome / Starting points for follow-up

- info leaflet featuring the tourism eco-quality label
- Awareness of the topic in the region was reflected in subsequent events:
 - in a seminar mounted by the County Council, which was inter alia, attended by Ukrainian stakeholders (October 2008);
 - at a course for people running boarding houses in Crişan, organised by Naturefriends with GTZ and an accredited training institute (see below).

Certificate course for people running boarding houses in the Danube delta (October 2008 – December 2009)

The local population draws most of its income from tourism by providing accommodation, which does not always meet accepted standards, however. Frequently guest rooms are not registered to dodge taxation.

To find an ultimately expedient solution for all those concerned – hosts and guests – was the objective of a certificate course for the providers of tourism accommodations, which was launched in the delta community of Crişan in October 2008. The run on the seminar tells its own tale: Within no time at all, the 28 places were filled and there were still many names on the waiting list.

The course consisted of several modules that covered all the relevant topics, also and in particular aspects relating to the

environment and to energy as well as to the designing of sustainable products – altogether over 700 periods of theory and practice. The modules were adapted to both the local conditions and the previous knowledge of the participants, who were thus enabled to immediately apply what they had learned and to take an active part in crafting sustainable tourism products.

To pass the final exam means to acquire a recognised qualification. For private enterprises this is an important and also financially rewarding step towards certified quality standards.

Outcome

- at least 20 qualified persons running boarding houses
- 200 manuals for tourism enterprises (in Crişan/in the Danube delta)
- more officially registered and reliably classified tourism enterprises in the delta
- synergy effects with the Nature Guide course, introduction of a certified (EU) eco-label

Starting points for follow-up

- launching a local tourism initiative
- EU project for job-oriented upskilling in the tourism sector (see p. 11)
- EU project on the subject of knowledge networks applied for by NFI (see p. 11)



Cross-border cooperation in the field of tourism

The claim to cross-border cooperation was put to a tough test. A Ukrainian delegation did indeed attend the kick-off event, but in the follow-up, communication was anything but easy. This situation persisted until the beginning of 2008, when contact was established with Lower Danube Euroregion, which acts as coordinator on the Ukrainian side.

Meeting of stakeholders in Izmail / Ukraine (15 –18 April 2008)

In April 2008, stakeholders gathered for a first meeting in Izmail, where the Landscape of the Year was presented and common options, especially in the field of tourism – which topped the agenda – were discussed.

The meeting was attended by more than 30 participants, representing regional and local authorities, travel agencies and boarding houses specialising in nature and eco-tourism, business promotion and vocational education & training institutions as well as local and regional NGOs.

This meeting, which received extensive coverage in the regional media, sounded an upbeat message regarding cross-border cooperation, especially in the fields of culture and training as well as the crafting and marketing of products. The Tour d'Horizon offered opportunities for deepening contacts and impressions.

Model Tour d'Horizon

(2–12/14–24 June / 1–11 September 2008)

For each Landscape of the Year, Naturefriends design a model tour – hallmarked Tour d'Horizon – that meets the requirements of soft, border-crossing tourism. Thanks to the lively response, not fewer than three Tours d'Horizon were run, which took visitors to both the Romanian and the Ukrainian part of the delta.

Beyond excursions to the delta's singular natural environment, the ten-day programme gave insight into the millennia-old cultural history of the region. During several days spent at fishermen's boarding houses in Crişan, participants gained an impression of how people in the delta pass their daily lives.

Entering and leaving Ukraine turned out to be somewhat time-consuming. In the absence of scheduled ferry transport across the northern branch of the Danube, which constitutes the borderline, the road through the Republic of Moldova is currently the commonly used route. The repeated border-crossings took several hours and put passengers' patience to the test.

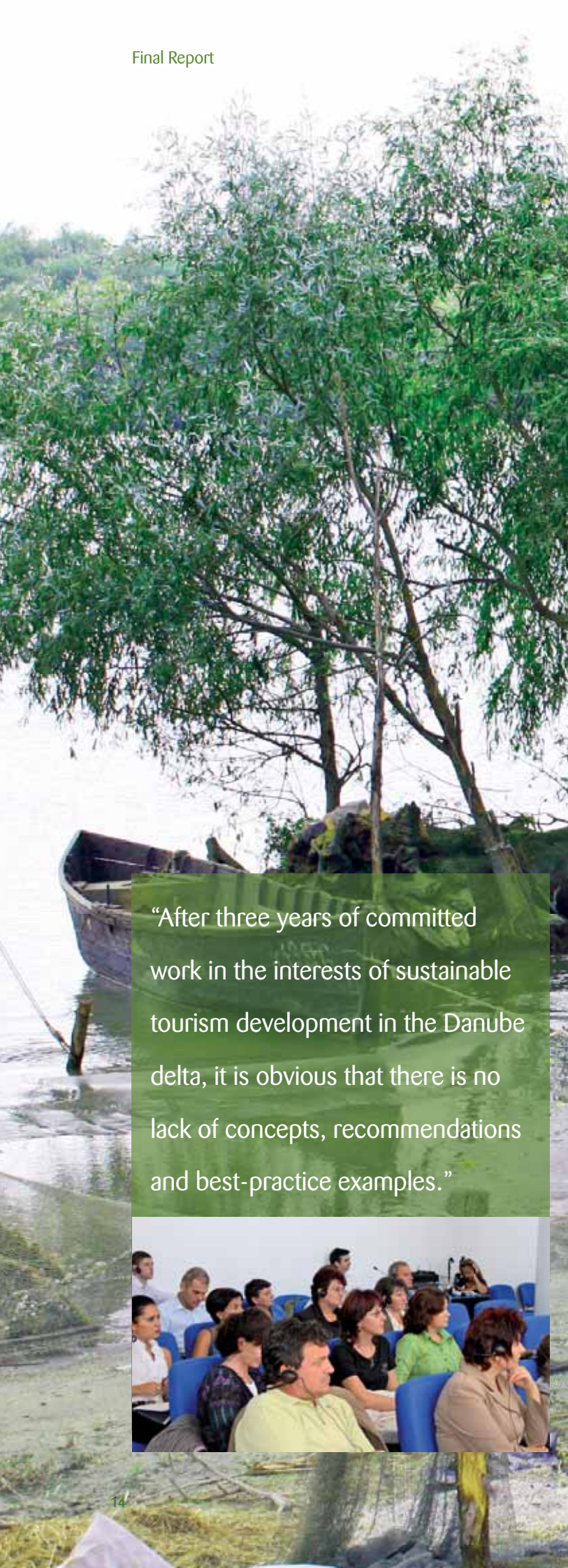
And yet, all (of the altogether 60) participants were agreed, that the excursion into part of Ukraine was clearly a valuable addition to the Tour d'Horizon. And it helped to dismantle barriers – at political borders and in people's minds.

Outcome

- contacts ensuring continued cooperation with Ukraine
- three successful Tours d'Horizon serving as models for future cross-border programmes



“The Tour d'Horizon helped to dismantle barriers – at political borders and in people's minds.”



“After three years of committed work in the interests of sustainable tourism development in the Danube delta, it is obvious that there is no lack of concepts, recommendations and best-practice examples.”



Starting points for follow-up

- a modified NFI Tour d’Horizon for disseminators active in the environmental field (May 2010)
- crafting and marketing of cross-border standard tours (especially once the scheduled cross-border ferry transport is resumed)
- cooperation on upskilling measures for guides and providers of accommodation and tours
- Fish & Culture – regional cross-border cultural festival modelled on the kick-off festival; annually alternating between the Romanian and the Ukrainian sides; a way of attracting growing numbers of (inter)national visitors and of consolidating the region’s identity as well as of creating a common cultural “linchpin”.

Status report – and outlook: Concluding discussion (23/9/2009)

After three years of committed work in the interests of sustainable tourism development in the Danube delta, it is obvious that there is no lack of concepts, recommendations and best-practice examples. However, they can only be put to good use, if the regional stakeholders definitely opt for the route to sustainability.

The panel discussion on *Tourism in the Danube delta – quo vadis?* was all about taking this fundamental decision. Involved in the discussion were the two principal stakeholders – the Biosphere Reserve and the County Council – as well as regional, national and international experts concerned with the development of tourism in the Danube delta¹.

This discussion formally concluded the Landscape-of-the-Year project (see also p. 6).

From idea to implementation

To start with, Andrei Blumer (AER) outlined how to systematically tackle and implement sustainable tourism development. The key elements are²:

- a regional coordination and service point, where all stakeholders are equally represented;
- a clear-cut profile of the Danube delta as one of Europe’s top destinations for rare nature experience;



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- and eight distinct zones for different target groups and activities – in the interests of both visitor channelling *and* marketing.

Since the fundamental – sustainable – approach was uncontested, the discussion focused on the roles of the individual stakeholders.

The Administration of the Biosphere Reserve considered the consistent professionalisation of the visitor management as the task cut out for it, believing that it could be achieved, *inter alia*, by devising more interactive instruments.

Since the County Council is bound to manoeuvre between different interest groups, its position appeared less clear-cut. Still it could point the way, and for instance, initiate private-public partnerships as pilots in the field of sustainable tourism – even though the regulatory framework is still missing.

In both cases it is essential to get the local communities in question actively involved, e. g. in developing tourism products. In each and every case the objective must be to arrive at jointly agreed solutions that result in mutually beneficial synergies. Such synergies, however, are conditional on the realisation that engagement in cooperation is tantamount to added value.

This is a critical point, where Carmen Chaşovschi, tourism expert of GTZ Romania, perceived pent-up demand on all sides: “People must come to value cooperation as something worthwhile.”

Outcome at the conceptual level

- sensitisation to the different aspects of and criteria for sustainable tourism
- enhanced awareness of the profile – and potential! – ‘naturally inherent’ in the Danube delta destination
- improved communication and cooperation between all the institutions and stakeholders involved
- know-how transfer and networking by and among experienced international experts

Starting points for follow-up

- joint declaration of intent by all the stakeholders concerned: a resolution in favour of the sustainable development of tourism in the Danube delta, which contains the key steps towards implementing a sustainable tourism strategy (proposal see p. 25)
- involving the Danube delta in the European Landscapes-of-the-Year Network under the umbrella of Naturefriends International

- 1 Andrei Blumer, AER; Carmen Chaşovschi, gtz Romania; Liliana Ivancenco, ARBDD; Alois Lang, NP Neusiedler See und Seewinkel (A); Octavian Motoc, TCC; Eugen Petrescu, Romanian Ornithological Society (SOR); moderation: Christian Baumgartner, NFI.
- 2 Benabdallah, J./ Blumer A./ Lang A.: Recreation and Tourism Zoning Strategy for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve – A tool for nature conservation and local development commissioned by the World Wide Fund for Nature, Danube Carpathian Programme, Romania, 2009



Commitment to Biodiversity & Environmental Education



“Schools and/or school children (and by implication also their parents) can play a vital role in leveraging environmental awareness.”



Working very closely with the department for environmental education of the Biosphere Reserve Administration and with the schools and initiatives cooperating with it was a prime objective.

Two projects run at Sf. Gheorghe, a village where the southernmost branch of the Danube flows into the Black Sea, deserve special mention.

“Waste in Water hurts our Health” (December 2006 – June 2007)

“Waste in Water Hurts our Health” was a project launched in December 2006 in cooperation with the NGO *Health & Environment Alliance*, the Administration of the Biosphere Reserve in Tulcea and the school in Sf. Gheorghe.

The school children explored the water quality in and around Sf. Gheorghe: Based on water and soil samples and on interviews with experts, such as the local doctor, they analysed and documented the impact of environmental pollution on the health and quality of life of the local population. A videotape, on which the different stages of the project were recorded, impressed the value of clean water on both children and adults. The film was shown at regional and national environmental events and disseminated to the entire delta region by the school authority.

The project also scored an international success: At the *WHO Intergovernmental Conference* in Vienna (June 2007) it received the “Best Practice Award” of CEHAPE (Children’s Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe) in the “young people’s” category.

Natura Trail Sf. Gheorghe (June 2008 – June 2009)

The Natura-Trail concept has been developed by Naturefriends International, especially with a view to opening up natural areas and in particular also NATURA 2000 sites to low-impact exploration and with a view to offering visitors – as it were in passing – a live experience of biological diversity. The use of local infrastructure and the involvement of the local population in Natura-Trail projects help to showcase the positive aspects of EU environmental legislation in a comprehensible manner.

The scheme has been successful throughout Europe, and so the idea of implementing it also in the Danube delta and to lay out the first Romanian Natura Trail immediately suggested itself. Partners in the implementation were the 9–14-year-old „Eco-Scouts“ from the Ecological Club of the school in Sf. Gheorghe.

The landscape in the Danube estuary is a mosaic of swamps, embankments, offshore islands, sand dunes and kilometres of beach – habitat for numerous animals and plants, among them many rare and protected species.

In a first step, this landscape was explored in theory and practice together with the children. Next, the information gathered was edited into a leaflet in English and Romanian under the motto “Experiencing Nature between River and Sea”, which is now available free of charge at the Biosphere Reserve’s visitor centre and in the boarding houses and hotels in Sf Gheorghe.



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At the starting point – the landing stage for passenger boats – holidaymakers are invited on a bi-lingual info board to explore the 6km-Natura Trail.

The Natura Trail was formally opened on World Environment Day (5 June) 2009: Guided by highly motivated “Eco-Scouts”, some 60 international guests walked the Trail.

Outcome

- understanding ecological contexts by actively exploring the personal environment
- reflecting on the value and the protection of nature and biodiversity
- disseminator function: processing information for others
- information for visitors and residents in English and Romanian (leaflet and info board)

Starting points for follow-up

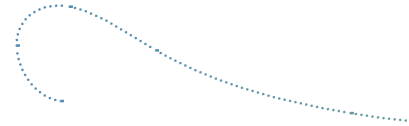
- training as „Visitor Guides“ for children/youngsters from the Eco-Club in cooperation with Naturefriends Romania (Tulcea)
- guided walks during the tourism season
- other Natura Trails in the Danube delta and environs (e.g. in the nearby Macin Mountains National Park)

“The kids thought it brill to newly discover their environment. In the process they became aware that they live in a very special place and that it was vital to preserve it. They are all immensely proud of the outcome.”

Headmistress Adnana Pătrașcoiu



Commitment to the sustainable use of reed



The Danube delta boasts the largest unbroken expanse of common reed worldwide, and within living memory reed has figured prominently as a raw material. Though its economic importance is currently restricted to the exportation of quality reed for thatching. As a result, large quantities of “low-grade” reed are no longer harvested and a process of nutrient enrichment and gradual silting-up has set in that is bound to seriously change the character of large parts of the delta.

Processing non-exportable reed into innovative, marketable products would make sense in ecological terms and would open up an economic opportunity for the region. Very early on, the idea was born to exchange information with the Lake Neusiedel region – Landscape of the Year 1990 and trailblazer for innovative reed products – and to initiate a know-how transfer.

Starting point: a specialist meeting at Lake Neusiedel (11 – 14/3/2008)

In March 2008, everything was at the ready: For two days, 15 Romanian and Austrian reed experts – including representatives of reed exporting and reed processing companies, scientists from the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve and from the Lake Neusiedel National Park as well as Austrian architects specialising in eco-construction methods – presented and discussed specially adapted ways of reed harvesting and processing, innovative products and the way they are marketed.

Marketable, innovative reed products, such as multifunctional hardboard panels of varying thickness and composition: Owing to the physical properties of reed, they are very stable and yet light, heat insulating and sound absorbing. These are

qualities that also come into play in combination with clay, timber or concrete. The panels have meanwhile become stock-in-trade in modern, energy-efficient and ecological construction technology.

The experts were agreed that these products would also hold potential for putting in place a sustainable, regional economic cycle from harvesting via processing and marketing in the Danube delta.

On the other hand, they pointed out what was still lacking: First of all, disseminators from the construction sector, in particular architects, as well as a certified EU quality label and publicity that is capable of transforming the “poor” image of reed into an “innovative” one.

Follow-up-Seminar in Tulcea (19/9/2008)

Six months later, Silviu Covaliov, Landscape-of-the-Year coordinator and expert on reed at the Danube Delta Institute, presented the outcome as well as practical examples and the ideas generated at the specialist meeting which formed part of the Institute’s International Symposium in Tulcea. The upbeat outlook prevailed despite a number of reservations about the “poor” image of reed, doubts about the durability of the structural elements and the possible overexploitation of reed stands.

This was ample reason for making the matter more widely known, and the closing event under the motto *Promoting Sustainable Economy – The Key to Conserving Nature and Biodiversity in the Danube Delta* provided a fitting forum.





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Seminar „Traditional and Innovative Use of Reed“ (23/9/2009)

With competent support from Austrian experts and in cooperation with the Eco-Tourism Centre in Tulcea, Naturefriends organised a seminar and an exhibition featuring the theme.

Approximately 50 participants – among them mayors from the delta, regional stakeholders, entrepreneurs engaged in the reed business, teachers and students from secondary schools of engineering – gathered to listen to Rudolf Denk, long-standing expert on reed from Lake Neusiedel, who had brought structural elements and tangible examples, and expanded on the fascinating uses of this multi-material called reed.

Silviu Covaliov led on to the ways reed is currently managed in the delta and to the ecological consequences. He suggested that low-grade reed could be processed into insulation material, such as granular plates and cellulose flakes.

A flood of questions and a lively debate evidenced the enormous interest but also the doubts about costs and quality assurance. What is beyond doubt is that only best-practice examples on the ground bear conviction. There again, the Lake Neusiedel region could serve as an example:

It was there that the management of the National Park opted for the subsequent insulation of the visitor centre with reed in the interests of quality and cost effectiveness – and the outcome serves as a best-practice-example to visitors from at home and abroad.

Touring exhibition „The Green Gold – Traditional and Innovative Use of Reed“

The bi-lingual (EN/RO) exhibition that juxtaposes the traditional utilisation of reed in the delta and innovative construction material made of reed, is intended to spread the word about the potential of sustainable reed management in the region (and beyond). Sustainable in the truest sense of the term, as it links up tradition and innovation, economy and ecology.

The exhibition was opened at the end of the seminar. It will be on display at the Ecotourism Centre in Tulcea till January 2010. Subsequently it is intended to be shown at other places in the Danube delta, e.g. at the visitor centres of the Biosphere Reserve and at other public facilities.

Outcome

- readily accessible specialist contacts and information
- discussion on the topic launched in the region – in specialist circles and among the broad public
- touring exhibition that can be shown at visitor centres, schools, universities, fairs ...

Starting points for follow-up (ideas)

- use of innovative reed products in the construction of planned visitor centres
- an open-air museum where both traditional and new applications can be shown side by side
- a regional information centre where domestic construction materials are presented and promoted



“Why export ecological construction material from Austria to Romania, when the required raw material is growing on your doorstep?”

Rudolf Denk



Public relations



Press relations and PR activities have been consistently and in many different ways built into the Landscape-of-the-Year project:

PR and information material

in particular the brochure “Life between River and Sea” (DE/EN/RO), a map of the Danube delta with extensive information on ecology, flora, fauna and safeguarding provisions (DE/EN/RO), a leaflet and an info board for the Sf. Gheorghe Natura Trail (EN/RO), and the poster exhibition on reed (EN/RO).

Media relations

In addition to the press work in the context of highlights and events and to articles placed in specialist publications, two **info-tours** were organised for international journalists:

- an info-tour for journalists preceding the start of the Landscape-of-the-Year project (19–23 September 2006) in cooperation with AER (sponsored by USAID)
This tour inspired numerous articles and programmes in prestigious German media, inter alia, a multi-part series on Austrian Radio (can be downloaded for later listening at Multimedia: www.nf-int.org/audio/01_DD.mp3).
- an info-tour for journalists and travel agents (August 2008) as part of the County Council's EU project *Danube Delta in Europe*

The participants came from all over Europe. Outcome: numerous articles in the international press and entry into the catalogue of travel agencies.

Info-Letter and annual reports

Three (digital) **Info-Letters** in English and Romanian, some also in Russian, and two annual reports (2007, 2008) in German, English and Romanian carried information on the activities under the Landscape-of-the-Year umbrella.





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Internet

Latest information and extensive reports as well as photographs and publications as downloads can be accessed at www.landscapeoftheyear.net/danubedelta (DE, EN, occasionally FR).

The www.sustainable-danubedelta.net website (EN, RO, occasionally RUS) was designed as a regional Landscape-of-the-Year platform, but is also open to other initiatives as a forum for sustainable development. This site could be continually upgraded.

Guest appearances at (tourism) fairs ...

Every year, the Landscape of the Year was represented at the major conventional tourism fairs (Berlin, Munich, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Zurich) and at the *Reisepavillon* („International Fair for Alternative Travel“), on occasion in close cooperation with the German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) in Romania and with the Romanian tourism agencies in Berlin, Munich and Vienna (Romania was the official partner country at the 2007 Vienna Holiday Fair and at the 2009 Stuttgart CMT).

At the invitation of GTZ Romania, Naturefriends Romania presented the Landscape-of-the-Year Danube delta project at the **Euregia 2008 in Leipzig**, from 27–29 October; Euregia is an international trade fair with the focus on (transnational) regional development in Europe.

... and in the European Parliament

At the invitation of the Social Democratic and the Liberal Groups in the European Parliament a meeting was convened on 2 and 3 December 2008 devoted to the role of the Danube delta and its sustainable development in the European context. NFI Secretary General Christian Baumgartner was one of the speakers.

The event was concluded with the signing of a resolution in which the participants called upon the EU to specially commit itself to the Danube delta.

NFI Photo Championship 2008 and Photo Exhibition

To showcase the role of the Danube as a connective element between countries, landscapes and people, NFI mounted a photo championship featuring the theme “The Danube and its Tributaries” as part of the Naturefriends Photo Championship 2008. Co-organiser was the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR).

On 10 December, the prizes were awarded at the Vienna International Centre – the UN headquarters in Vienna. The award-winning photographs and an additional 80 pictures were on display there, throughout the month of December.

In 2009, the exhibition toured to Stuttgart (CMT, January), Budapest (Hungarian Environment Ministry, fringe event on Danube Day, June/July) and Tulcea (Danube Delta Museal Eco-Touristic Centre, September – December).



“Press relations and PR activities have been consistently and in many different ways built into the Landscape-of-the-Year project.”



The snags encountered



As repeatedly underlined, the Landscape-of-the-Year project is not a one-off event run on a fixed plan and budget. It is much rather a process-oriented initiative banking, first and foremost, on cooperation and communication. Activities and measures are planned and implemented in the given context together with the partners on the ground and coordinated with other projects and activities in the region.

This approach opens up new paths, but reaches its limits when cooperation and communication fail to materialise or falter or need to be rebuilt over and over again and eventually remain noncommittal because of personnel changes.

In the Danube delta it was the unstable political situation in Romania, characterised by frequent elections, that again and again triggered such **stages of change** (the Biosphere Reserve, for example, went through three governors during the project period, and the Romanian Tourism Ministry was not once, but repeatedly restructured). This implied that, in the best case, project planning and implementation were delayed, and in the worst case, agreements or project applications became meaningless.

The idea to build a bird observation station that would fit in with the plans of the Administration of the Biosphere Reserve and of the County Council, was amongst those that foundered against bureaucratic 'vicissitudes'. What happened was that after repeated modifications regarding both the concept and the location, the money already provided by sponsors had to be paid back.

The planned **cross-border cooperation** with Ukraine turned out to be a particularly thorny problem. Bureaucratic hurdles (such as the visa requirements imposed on the Ukrainian partners after Romania's entry into the EU), the time-consuming access trip as well as language barriers made it difficult to establish contacts and cooperation.

To be sure, the Landscape-of-the-Year project was presented in Ukraine, personal contacts were established and the Tour d'Horizon was successfully organised as a joint activity. But there was neither enough time nor capacity to bring to fruition a number of excellent project ideas. These are still options – provided partners can be found on both sides, that take them up and follow them up with a degree of stubbornness.



“The amicable note was of great moment, as it opened up new communication channels between individuals, institutions, the local population, and decision-makers. Less bureaucracy, more interpersonal exchange. There was a personal touch even to the cooperation among institutions.”

Cristian Mititelu, ARBDD





Funding is a decisive factor in every project. The blueprint for the Landscape-of-the-Year project provides for measures and activities to be (co)financed from European, national and regional funds, which implies that funding programmes have to be identified and applications filed. If applications are turned down, a lot of work has come to nothing.

A case in point was a project in the course of which schools in the Danube delta were to cooperate with a German school. The idea was to set them up as disseminators in matters of climate protection and energy efficiency. The plans are still in place and could be used in a new attempt.

Human resources were still another critical element: The Landscape-of-the-Year projects depend on the (voluntary) support of all those concerned. There are limits to such commitments, especially when those concerned are working to capacity in their jobs proper, as was the case in the Danube delta and more than once resulted in bottlenecks. What has been achieved in the face of this is all the more impressive.

Conclusions

Actually, much has been achieved over these three years:

- greater awareness among local and regional stakeholders of the fact that the natural environment in the Danube delta holds notable potential for regional development – over and above tourism; and at the same time a heightened sensitivity as regards the touristic marketing and the preservation of this potential
- targeted advanced training of disseminators and of the local population in the field of sustainable tourism
- enhanced cross-border cooperation as an opportunity for the entire delta region
- international awareness of the fact that the Danube delta is a great sustainable tourism destination



“We are now better able to identify the problems on the ground and, thanks to the Landscape-of-the-Year Network and to the efforts of those involved, we are able to propose appropriate answers and solutions.”

Liliana Ivancenco, ARBDD





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But also and in particular: better communication and cooperation among all the organisations, institutions and administrative levels involved, especially thanks to the direct and personal exchange within the project group and to the fact that (inter)national experts were called in. For many this was a new and especially welcome experience which will continue to impact on future cooperation.

Ensure continuity – how to move on?

Professional regional counselling, modelled on what is already provided in many rural regions in the EU, inter alia under the LEADER+ programme, would certainly come in useful in the Danube delta:

A contact point staffed with two to three regional managers, acting at the interface between the various levels and seeking, for instance, to identify suitable cooperation partners and funding for project ideas or to come up with the required capacity-building measures.

Naturefriends (International and Romanian) will remain bonded with the Danube delta by way of the **Landscapes-of-the-Year Network**, which has been set up for the purpose of facilitating the internal exchange of information and joint touristic marketing in Europe. Setting up a Naturefriends group in the Danube delta would be still another idea to be followed up.

“People have
come to notice
that there is an
other way!”

*Carmen Chaşovschi,
GTZ Romania*

The notion of a “common strategy” for the development of sustainable tourism has been the leitmotif of diverse seminars, discussions and concepts. Sustainable solutions are now on the table, and the real challenge is to initiate practical steps and to move on to consistent implementation.

The most important steps are summed up in the **Resolution on Sustainable Tourism Development in the Danube Delta** (see next page). By signing and implementing this resolution, the key stakeholders would send a trend-setting signal to the Danube delta and beyond.



Landscape of the Year – the Danube Delta

Resolution on Sustainable Tourism Development

Tulcea/Vienna, September 2009

The Danube Delta was proclaimed Landscape of the Year 2007–2009 – in an initiative based on a close partnership between Naturefriends International, Naturefriends Romania, the Administration of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (ARBDD), the Danube Delta Institute, the Tulcea County Council, the City of Tulcea, the Association for Eco-tourism in Romania (AER), the German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Romania.

The items listed below have emerged from a number of conferences, workshops and training courses held in the Danube Delta region throughout the period of 2007–2009. They were discussed and summarised at a final conference in Tulcea, on 23 September 2009.

In light of the partnership that underpinned the Landscape-of-the-Year project, the undersigned organisations consider the five conclusions given below as both the outcome of the project and as the valid basis for the future development of tourism in the Danube Delta:

1. Positioning on the European market

The Danube Delta has the potential to position itself on the European tourism market. The regional – as opposed to the European – stakeholders have the task and the opportunity to decide on this position and to take appropriate action.

Marketing ought to focus on products that meet the criteria of sustainability and local value added.

2. More local value added thanks to slowing down

Tourism stakeholders have to devise products and programmes that are designed to lengthen the sojourns of guests and thus to increase the local value added, as opposed to the short-term stays that generate profits for foreign tour operators and investors only.

The suggested zoning of the Danube Delta for leisure and tourism (see *Recreation and Tourism Zoning Strategy for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, WWF 2009*) should serve as a basis for the regional tourism development.

3. Consistent professionalisation

Tourism in the Danube Delta depends on consistent professionalisation, which implies the crafting of USPs (*Unique Selling Propositions*) and brand marks that designate the delta as a singular European destination. A singularity that is based on the delta's rich biodiversity and culture.

Periodic training courses are supposed to consistently upgrade all tourism services.

4. Regional Tourism Board

A board (or committee) of all public and private regional stakeholders in the tourism sector – including the ARBDD, interested NGOs and in particular the SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) – ought to be set up. This body should be service-oriented and not state-run, and should provide a level playing ground for both local and regional authorities. It could be structured as a PPP (Public-Private Partnership) and be tasked with

- networking the stakeholders concerned
- crafting tourism products designed to create local value added and to preserve the natural and cultural assets of the Danube Delta
- providing advanced training with a view to upgrading the quality of services in the tourism sector
- developing and marketing the Danube Delta brand.

5. Carrying capacities and monitoring

The (leisure and tourism-related) carrying capacities of various parts of the region ought to be analysed, monitoring instruments for (diverse) leisure and tourism activities should be developed and applied.

The findings obtained should be reflected in periodic updates of a sustainable tourism strategy jointly developed for the Danube Delta by all the stakeholders.



Project Management and Partners

Landscape of the Year is a project of Naturefriends International, so overall responsibility lies with NFI. Executive partner in the delta were Naturefriends Romania, with its President Tiberiu Tioc acting as coordinator. Local project coordinator in Tulcea: Silviu Covaliov (since September 2007).

Partners and members active in the Project Group: the Romanian Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (ARBDD): Liliana Ivancenco, Cristian Mititelu, Monica Cacencu; the National Danube Delta Institute (DDNI) in Tulcea: Silviu Covaliov; the Tulcea County Council: Elisabeta Dobrişan; the German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) Romania: Carmen Chaşovschi, Ioana Dobrescu; the Romanian Eco-Tourism Association (AER): Andrei Blumer; the Danube Carpathian Programme of the World Wide Fund for Nature (DCP WWF) in Romania: Cristian Tetelea; Andreia Petcu (National Water Agency/Polytechnical University Bucharest)

Additional cooperating partners

The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the National Park Neusiedlersee und Seewinkel (A), the Tulcea Danube Delta Museal Eco-Touristic Centre, the school of Sf. Gheorghe, the City of Tulcea, the Romanian Ministry for the Environment, the Romanian Tourist Offices in Berlin, Munich and Vienna, and on the Ukrainian side the Regional Agency for Crossborder Cooperation “Lower Danube Euroregion”, the Union for Rural Green Tourism Development, Pelican Tours Vilkovo, and Salix Eco Tours.

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Project Period & Funding

The Landscape-of-the-Year project was officially set to last three years (2007–2009); in actual fact it extended over 4 years, including one year of preparatory and follow-up work plus evaluation. Funding has been mainly provided by NFI with support from the European Commission (DG Environment) and from the German Society for Technical Cooperation (GZT) in Romania. Funds were also provided by various sponsors, donors and under diverse aid schemes.

Current information ...

on activities in the Danube delta at:
www.landscapeoftheyear.net/danubedelta
www.nf-int.org
www.sustainable-danubedelta.net



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Landscape of the Year – the Philosophy

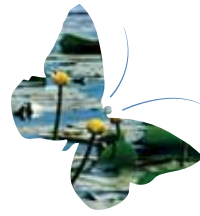
The guiding principle of Landscape-of-the Year projects is to preserve selected natural and cultural landscapes in Europe and to trigger sustainable border-crossing development. Invariably, the idea is to interlink economic, social and ecological objectives, for example by promoting sustainable tourism. Another key objective is to encourage cooperation and dialogue within the region and to involve all stakeholders. The objective pursued at the European level is to make the public as well as decision-makers aware of the region selected: This is how Landscape-of-the-Year projects draw Europe-wide attention to the diversity of the continent's regions while generating awareness of Europe in the regions concerned, and how they build bridges between countries, people and regions. Moreover, experience exchange is boosted between previous Landscapes-of-the-Year (Network of Landscapes of the Year). Taken together, all this is supposed to trigger lasting change, i.e. initiate activities and processes that will show effect beyond the Landscape of the Year's official duration.

For detailed information access www.landscapeoftheyear.net



“Landscape of the Year is supposed to trigger lasting change, i.e. initiate activities and processes that will show effect beyond the Landscape of the Year's official duration.”





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