

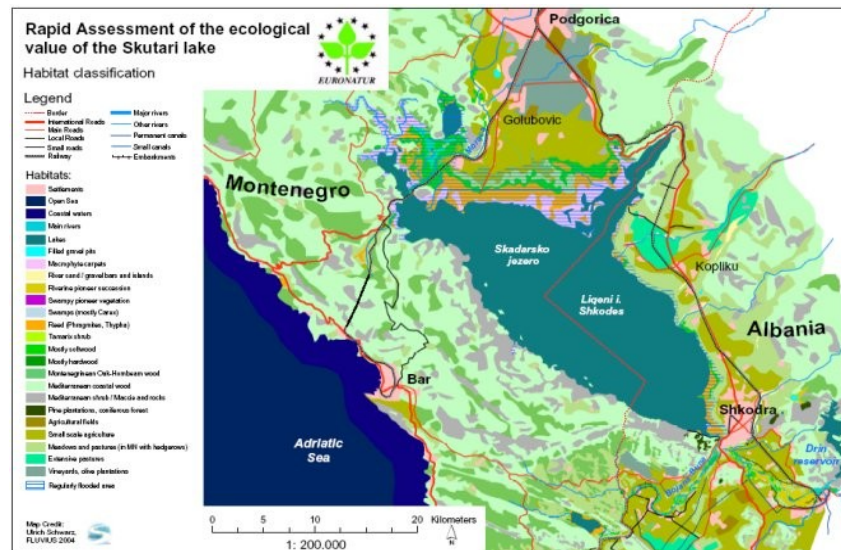
TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION THROUGH THE MANAGEMENT OF SHARED NATURAL RESOURCES: THE CASE OF THE SHKODER/SKADAR LAKE

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Whether one considers the global or the very local scale, finding a balance between development and conservation of natural resources is perhaps the central dilemma of today's human communities. When communities directly depend on natural systems that are shared by two or more countries the issue becomes even more complicated, and cooperation among different sides of the border becomes an additional factor of key importance. On the other hand cooperation on the topic of natural resources' use – one that is rather neutral still essential for all – can bring local communities together, increase internal coherence and actually lead to the formation of new trans-boundary communities.

The cross-border site of Skadar/Shkodra Lake lies within its 5,500 km² large trans-boundary basin, shared by Albania (20%) and the Republic of Montenegro (80%). The area targeted by the project is the home to some 350,000 people, living in five municipalities – the municipalities of Shkodra and Malësia e Madhe in Albania and Podgorica, Cetinje and Bar in the Republic of Montenegro.



The lake, considered the largest of its nature on the Balkan Peninsula, is located in the utmost south of the Republic of Montenegro, in the Skadar-Zeta Valley and in the karstic terrain of the south-eastern Dinaric Alps in Albania. The lake has a tectonic origin: it used to be a bay of the Adriatic Sea (just like today's Kotor Bay), separated from sea as a result of tectonic movements in the Pliocene period. Its surface varies between 540 km² in winter and 370 km² in the summer, and its shoreline is 168 km long, with a 110.5 km long section lying on the territory of Montenegro and 57.5 km within the jurisdiction of Albania. Skadar/Shkodra Lake has an open drainage basin, receiving most of its waters through the 99 kilometres long Morača River and emptying in the Adriatic Sea through the 44 kilometres long Buna/Bojana River (outflow: 320 m³/s).

Waters of the lake are considered mesotrophic with tendencies towards eutrophic during the summer. The southern coast of the lake, defined by the ridges of the Mountains of Lovćen, Sutorman, Rumija and Tarabosh, is steep and rugged, while the northern and eastern shores, lying in the Zeta Valley and the Shkoder lowland, are flat, gradually descending towards the lake's bottom.

As a natural lake, with mostly unregulated water levels and natural shores Skadar/Shkodra Lake hosts a very diverse set of different habitats with unique biodiversity, which is recognised at both national and international levels. Open water surfaces with floating algae communities are surrounded by large

wetlands with rooted and floating Euhydrophytic vegetation of white water lily (*Nymphaea alba*), yellow pond lily (*Nuphar luteum*) and water-chestnut (*Trapa natans*). Reed beds, flood forests with poplar and willow species, and periodically flooded tufted sedge (*Carex elata*) vegetation are also common in the area. Driest parts of wetlands are overgrown with Skadar oak (*Quercus robur scutarensis*) and Caucasian ash (*Fraxinus oxycarpa*) forests, while the dry slopes of surrounding mountains are covered by sub-mediterranean pseudo-maquis vegetation with *Carpinus orientalis*, *Punica granatum*, *Paliurus spinachristi*, *Ficus carica*, and others.

This large variety of habitats supports a rich assemblage of species: 726 vascular plants, with more than 30 rare species, more than 50 fish species (15 of them endemic to the water system), 15 amphibians, 30 reptiles, 271 bird species (90% of them migratory species of international conservation concern), and 57 mammals.

Corresponding to its natural richness, by today most of the lake and adjacent wetland areas are under official nature conservation and are also recognised as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar convention. In 1983 a National Park has been established on the Montenegrin side of the lake, on an area of 40,000 hectares, while the Albanian side – some 23,027 hectares – received the status of managed nature reserve in November 2005. The Ramsar diploma has been awarded to the lake in December 1995 for its Montenegrin side and in February 2006 for the newly established Albanian protected area.

The Skadar/Shkodra Lake region is not only rich in natural values, but it also has a very long history with a lot of remnants visible even today. There are more than 20 old monasteries and archaeological sites on the Montenegrin side, while on the Albanian side Shkodra castle named “Rozafa”, with its more than 2500 years of history is the most significant historical value.

Agriculture, fishing and tourism are the most relevant economic activities of the population around the lake. Fishing is naturally among the most traditional sources of living, fish stocks being exploited even today at a considerable level. The catch is composed mostly of common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), bleak (*Alburnus alburnus alborella*), perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) and eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and shows a downward tendency due to overexploitation. According to past data, annual fish catch reached more than 700-1000 tones per year. In the lake basin both intensive and extensive forms of farming occur, however small scale subsistence production of vegetables and dairy products is more widespread. Products like the famous “Vranac” grapes, Shkodra tobacco, “Zeta” white corn or white goat cheese are very typical to the region and have both an economic and cultural value.

Although not so widespread, the processing of reed, willow and other plants into baskets, boxes and other handcraft products is another traditional activity. Due to its richness in (often unexplored) tourism attractions – i.e. nature and landscape values, historical monuments and traditional crafts/products – the lake region has a great potential for tourism development. Different forms of tourism, such as cruising, fishing and recreational tourism, eco/nature tourism, and others, are receiving more and more attention as a real opportunity for developing alternative income sources. However, capacities to explore these opportunities are still relatively weak.

The Skadar/Shkodra Lake region has unique assets of significant conservation value, which also represent an important resource for the local population. The need to treat these with special care is also underlined by the recent enlargement of protected areas around the lake. However, this needs to be address also when development opportunities are being exploited for the benefits of the local population. There are several environmental problems, and pressures from human activities, which represent a threat to values of the region, and if not addressed well and in time, they could become real obstacles for the sustainable development of the area.

One of the first actions on the transboundary level an extensive process of gathering and analysing available data and information has been conducted; directly involving relevant local players and an as wide group of stakeholders as feasible and the studies on local socio-economic conditions and joint surveys on different aspects of resource use have been carried out in transboundary level.

Surveys provided a direct input to facilitated discussions among local actors aiming to identify common priorities for cooperation. Several workshops were held, and stakeholders expressed their will to cooperate on issues such as water management, hydrological dynamics and biodiversity values, environmental threats and impacts of economic activities, education, etc.

As a direct follow-up to earlier efforts towards setting priorities, environmental planning initiatives have been launched that always reflected the local development context. Joint strategies have been developed and environmental planning processes have been launched. Workshops on the development of topic-oriented action plans or dedicated to building local capacities on concrete environmental topics have been held. These initiatives were the first actions in the project where local stakeholders addressed details of concrete resource management topics, and took steps towards identifying measures.

Creating cooperation mechanisms to promote cross-border dialogue on the management of shared natural resources following the principles of democracy and transparency is among the key aims of the project. To this end Trans-boundary Forums have been established in all three sites. They function as informal cooperation bodies and neutral cross-border coordination platforms gathering key local stakeholders to discuss project activities and progress both on the nation and cross-border level. Forums were functioning in the context of the project – as for e.g. local project advisory bodies – but they were launched with the idea that on the long term they become a real player in local development processes and promoters of the sustainable development of the sites.

Even informal body, Forum provide institutionalised trans-boundary dialogue. It still following a common concept, and in some cases became body to promote trans-boundary dialogue in the future. Its role and scope of work significantly expanded from initially being a project planning and consultation mechanism to becoming real actor in the planning and implementation of regional and cross-border policy.

The local stakeholders in both Albania and Montenegro countries were involved in cooperation activities through three main objectives as followings:

1. Promotion of cooperation in management and protection of key trans-boundary sites
2. Promotion of local organizations and cross- border exchanges between local organizations and people in the interest of managing shared resources
3. Promotion of technical networks on the regional level

For the time being all studies and activities carried out has been implemented in bilateral level engaging homologue institutions and experts within the same structure, methodology and communication strategy which has been drafted at start-up working.

During 8 years cooperation between Albania and Montenegro countries through management of shared natural resources of Shkodra/Skadar Lake the following bilateral agreements has been signed between government and non government institutions:

- Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between homologue AL-MNE Ministries of the Environment has been signed (9th May 2003) with main purpose to support and cooperate on sustainable development of the shared natural resources Lake Shkodra/Skadar in particular as well as field of environment in general.
- Declaration on the Occasion of the Designation of “Lake Day” for Shkodra/Skadar Lake signed between homologue Ministries of Environment (18th June 2006) designating the third Saturday of June as the Shkodra/Skadar Lake Day
- Shkodra Lake Albanian Side proclaimed protected are (IVth IUCN category) (5th November 2005)
- Shkodra lake Albanian Side proclaimed Ramsar Site (2nd February 2006)
- Joint Declaration of Transboundary Forum of Shkodra Lake signed (2nd February 2006) with main purpose continue cooperation and working on bilateral level for sustainable development and benefit for local population living in Shkodra/Skadar lake region.
- Statement of Cooperation between Municipalities of Shkodra (Albania) and Cetinje (Montenegro) has been signed with main purpose to establish cooperation between local level authorities in the field of environmental protection with special emphasis to the Shkodra/Skadar Lake as well as in the field of tourism, economy, culture and all other segments of life and work.

- Transboundary Shkodra lake Forum was legal registered as independent organization to work in bilateral level for the joint management of Lake Shkodra/Skadar.

Based on these tangible achievements there were carried out several measures for the management and protection of the lake Shkodra in bilateral level mentioning here the joint Strategic Action Planning (SAP) prepared and implementation started –up

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