

# MONITORING IN SHARED WATERS: DEVELOPING A TRANS-BOUNDARY MONITORING SYSTEM FOR THE PRESPA PARK

M. Gletsos<sup>1</sup>,  
C. Perennou<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Society for the Protection of Prespa, 530 77 Aghios Germanos, Greece*

<sup>2</sup>*Tour du Valat, Le Sambuc, 13200 Arles, France*

E-mail: [spp@line.gr](mailto:spp@line.gr)

Prespa is a transboundary basin in Southeastern Europe, shared by Albania, Greece and FYR of Macedonia. It consists of two lakes (Lake Macro Prespa, shared by all three countries, and Lake Micro Prespa shared between Albania and Greece) surrounded by mountain ranges up to 2,600m asl, and with a catchment area of approximately 1,400 sq.km. Prespa is a region of high biodiversity and endemism, where in excess of 1,500 plant species, 260 bird species as well as 8 endemic fish taxa have been recorded, indicatively. The wetlands of Lake Micro Prespa host rare and/ or threatened avifauna, including the largest Dalmatian Pelican breeding colony in the world. Four National Parks are located wholly or partly within the Prespa basin, as well as a Strict Nature Reserve (IUCN cat. I) and two Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance). The international biodiversity significance of the area and the need to manage the shared water bodies, led in February 2000 to the establishment of the *Prespa Park*, by a joint declaration of the Prime Ministers of the three littoral states. The Prespa Park covers the two lakes and their surrounding catchment basin and is considered to be the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans.

Transboundary environmental monitoring, a prerequisite for informed decision-making for the management, protection and sustainable development of the transboundary basin, has been a priority for the Prespa Park stakeholders for several years now. The need for transboundary monitoring has been explicitly mentioned in the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) for the sustainable development of the Prespa Park – the first trilateral strategy document for the transboundary protected area. This has also led to the inclusion of monitoring in the priority activities of the trilateral GEF/UNDP project on Integrated Ecosystem Management, which is being funded mainly by GEF (Global Environment Facility), and implemented by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) since 2007.

The Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), a local conservation NGO active in the Prespa Park process, has secured co-funding from private funds for this activity and in 2007 it initiated a project for the development of a transboundary monitoring system (TMS) for Prespa. Technical expertise is being provided by Tour du Valat Biological Station, France, a research centre with considerable long-term experience in the Prespa area, and expertise in environmental monitoring. The TMS project is being implemented by the SPP in full coordination and integration with the GEF/UNDP project.

The establishment of a Monitoring and Conservation Working Group (MCWG) by the GEF/UNDP project, in 2007, consisting of experts from Ministries, Academia/ Research, National Parks and the NGO sector from all three countries, is intended to satisfy the need to provide scientific and political guidance, ensure ownership of the TMS project, as well as tap expert resources from the three countries. The MCWG regularly convenes two to three times a year, with funding and support by the GEF/UNDP project.

The setting-up of a monitoring system with a transboundary perspective is particularly demanding. In the preparatory stage of the TMS project, Tour du Valat together with the SPP and national consultants from the three countries have investigated issues, indicatively including: Aims of the TMS; Geographical Scale; Significant Elements and Values to be Monitored; Stakeholders; Estimated Available Sources of Funding; Connection to EU Legislation and Policy; Guidelines on Indicators, the Institutions for Implementing the TMS, National Resources and Trilateral Administration, Equipment, and Training.

With a view to the inherent difficulties of transboundary cooperation and the significant institutional differences between the three countries, a broad participatory approach has been attempted. Project fact-finding missions resulted in consultations with over 30 public authorities (incl. Ministries), monitoring institutions, other scientific and research institutions, as well as donors (UNDP) in 11 towns in all three countries. This was a first indication of the dispersal of operations and responsibilities for monitoring, and of the complexity of the issue.

The TMS project also compiled a meta-database consisting of the environmental monitoring programmes active in Prespa, together with analytical description sheets for each monitoring programme or family of monitoring parameters. This resulted in the initial identification of 27 institutions implementing monitoring in the three countries and covering in excess of 400 parameters ranging from physico-chemical, meteorological, hydrological, biodiversity, land-uses to demographics and statistics. One-off monitoring projects or surveys were not included in the meta-database, which however could be further amended or enriched when needed in an on-going process.

The availability of the data monitored by the above programmes is varied. Some monitoring programmes publish data on the Internet or in printed reports, with varied regularity. Others make their data available upon request and free of charges - or subject to nominal fees. A few institutions charge high fees, or do not make their data available at all before their formal publication. Often only syntheses or processed data are made available to the public.

Subsequently, the outputs of the preparatory stage of the TMS project were reviewed and endorsed by the experts of the MCWG. The MCWG meetings took place in the Prespa region between October 2007 and June 2008, with the aim to achieve trilateral consensus - a prerequisite for a transboundary process - as well as provide scientific and political guidance. Indicatively, the MCWG endorsed the development of a TMS initially aimed at *Routine Surveillance*, to help establish baseline information at transboundary level as well as the usual range of variation for key parameters. This will evolve into a TMS for *Adaptive Management*, once management plans are in place for the Prespa Park.

The next stages of the process will include the development of a special study, with the contribution of trilateral thematic expert groups. The latter will indicatively work on: Databases; GIS/ Land-Use; Hydrology/ EU Water Framework Directive; Forests; Agriculture and Socio-economics; Aquatic Vegetation and Habitats; Fish, Fisheries and Waterbirds; and other Biodiversity issues. The special study will also recommend the institutions responsible for monitoring, in accordance with the National Legislations, the conclusions of the trilateral thematic groups, and the recommendations of, and the supervision by, the MCWG members. The development of the special study will be followed by the purchase and installation of equipment, training, pilot application of the TMS, final adjustment, and will culminate in endorsement by the supervising bodies and approval by the national authorities. The TMS project is expected to be finalized by 2011.



Figure 1: National Protected Areas in the transboundary Prespa Park basin (Map provided by SPP)

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