

Wetland Protection and Management in the Lower Oder Valley National Park (Germany)^{*)}

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Of course it would be presumptuous to compare Europe's biggest estuary, the Danubian-Estuary with the mouth of the Oder river. But apart from the obvious differences - the difference in size being the most evident one - there are also some parallels between these two. Today I would like to talk about these parallels and differences between the Danubian- and the Oder-Estuary.

First of all I have to say that I don't represent the governmental national park administration today, but the private (non-governmental) national park foundation Lower Oder Valley. Like in other countries it is also in Germany quite special to have a national park foundation (by German Civil Code), a national park association and a national park company Ltd. next to the governmental administration. All three are supporters of nature conservancy and are organized under private law. In principle all of them have similar duties and feel obliged to nature conservancy, ecological agriculture, environmental education and scientific research but on the other hand they also have their own accentuation:

The non-profit company Ltd. operates the Brandenburg Academy which organizes conferences and additionally it maintains a wilderness school and a national park laboratory for pupils and students in the center of the national park.

The national park association represents the nature conservancy under private law to the public, produces a national park newspaper and is a strong voice in the public discussion about infrastructure planning.

The national park foundation leases fields and meadows to private farmers with nature conservancy restrictions, publishes the scientific national park yearbook and promotes research in the national park region. It offers in cooperation with our partner organizations - the two zoos of Berlin, the Museum of Natural History and Science Berlin and the universities and research institutions of the region - an excursion program to visitors. This excursion program is free of charge, very challenging on the one hand but at the same time presented in a way that can be understood by all.

The forth leaf of the cloverleaf, the eco-agricultural company Ltd., cultivates its own fields and meadows by itself. At the moment 100 ha grassland belong to this company which is extensively grazed by Heck cattle (15 male/25 female) and 11 horses (exmoor and koniks). Just a few years ago this area had been used

intensively - remember that riparian areas are very fertile - but in the future we want to have only grassland, water and forests but no fields. It's not only the hooved animals that feel comfortable on the areas that were transformed from fields to grasslands but the number of birds and insects in the area has also increased enormously as our research shows.

Up to now around 6000 ha are private property of the national park association and national park foundation. These areas are being leased under nature conservancy restrictions to local farmers. They are only allowed to use the land extensively, normally after June 30 and with a lower livestock density (one cow per ha). In this way at least most bird species are able to raise a large part of their hatch before the mower comes into the area on July first. For corncrakes (*Crex crex*) and aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) later dates exist. The areas where these rare bird species have been heard are not allowed to get mowed before the middle or end of August.

With the agricultural company Ltd. we wanted to show that an extensively and ecologically run agro-business can be economically successful as well. There does not necessarily have to be a discrepancy between ecology and economy. Nonetheless, I have to admit that the yields per ha as well as the number of jobs are of course smaller than in the intensive farming - for example in vegetable cultivation and dairy farming. Moreover, this ecologically suitable approach of an extensive suckler cow husbandry is only economical due to the EU agricultural support which accounts for 300 € per year and ha. Of course I know that these subsidies are a lot less in eastern European countries - due to their later accession date - but so are the labor costs.

But why do we have - next to the governmental administration - this widespread, very active initiative of private nature conservancy that is run by volunteers? This constellation is also in Germany quite extraordinary but we find similar ones more often in southern Africa and in South America. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990 the young Land Brandenburg was founded on the ground of the former GDR (which is another parallel to other countries of the Comecon). The GDR was - as you all know - not a nation and consequently there were no national parks either. But when the young Land Brandenburg decided to found its first and only national park in 1992, the necessary funding was lacking. Of course it was a lot easier for a private association than for the young federal state to acquire this funding via the subsidies of the Federal Government. Up to today the national park administration of the comparatively poor Land Brandenburg is poorly staffed, a lot poorer than the other 15 national park administrations in Germany.

The cooperation between the public administration on the one hand and the association, foundation and company Ltd. on the other is already working very well in a lot of areas of expertise. There could only be some improvements in the political sphere where the quite ideological question that is also being discussed in other political fields arises, namely: Which tasks can better and cheaper be dealt with by a privately run in contrast to a governmental institution? But this is a wide field.

The national park itself is only 10.500 ha large and is shielded by an 18.000 ha large protected area to the west. It is located between two Oder arms whereby one of them

has been enlarged and straightened 100 years ago. You will be familiar with this - although in a much bigger scale - from the Danubian-Estuary.

But it is not only the wetlands with their oxbow lakes that belong to the national park with its reeds and sedges, its meadows and pastures and the main stream but also the forests. Those forests that are located on the hillsides of the valley which was shaped by the last ice age have survived very naturally also due to their inefficient forest management. The people in the Middle Ages had been clearing areas and kept sheep and goats on the xeric grasslands on those hillsides, just as we are doing it today, in order to preserve the extraordinarily diverse, during summer beautifully blooming vegetation and to prevent scrub encroachment. On this relatively small area (just a few square kilometers!) we can find very diverse habitats, Germany's driest and moistest so to speak.

However we do not have natural wetlands in the Lower Oder Valley - at least in the southern German part - but nearly natural wetlands. Between the two river arms the wetland region is diked, approximately half of it permanently and the other half only in summer, because these areas are flooded in winter. This is possible by gates in the dikes, which allow the river water to inflow or outflow in spring resp. autumn. Our goal is to leave the doors open as long as possible so that we will have a natural water level for as long as possible. For the northern part of the German national park this seems to be possible in the near future - just as it is already the case since 1945 in the Polish part.

But up to now the polder areas still get pumped out in summer when the gates are closed in order to provide better conditions for the agriculture. This harms the breeding birds, for example the black tern (*Chlidonias niger*), the whiskered tern (*Chlidonias hybridas*) or the white-winged tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*). The terns stop breeding when the water is being pumped out. Another consequence is that the predators get easy access to the nests then.

The national park area is surely a bird sanctuary but you can also find there all the other animals that live in a middle European river flood plain. On my last excursion to the Danube Estuary I have seen within just a few days all the regional herons, admittedly a few more species than we have in our national park in Germany.

Our national park foundation has also supported important scientific works, for example the planting of alluvial forests. Alluvial forests had been covering two thirds of the area in the Middle Ages and today it has almost completely disappeared from the area. The scientific works also include the resettlement project for the European sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*) or an electronic monitoring project for bird voices in the core zone. The installed technique makes it unnecessary to have ornithologists - of which we have less and less in the voluntary sector anyways - to walk around all the time in order to see, hear and count the birds.

Apart from the birds there are also large mammals that are kept in the Lower Oder Valley as domestic or wild animals. There are the recreated aurochs, called Heck cattle whose wild ancestors had been walking through the forest of the Lower Oder Valley (15 males, 25 females). Then there is Europe's last wild cattle the wisent (2 males, 2 females) - even if they are being kept in a big fence out of consideration for the residents' safety. A growing herd of water buffalos (16 males, 33 females) is

being kept in swampy grassland - as a matter of fact by a private farmer who makes good profit with it.

But there are more similarities between the Danube and the Oder-Estuary such as the border situation. After the Second World War the midstream of the Oder became the border, north of Mescherin the border changed to the western site. Consequently nature conservancy in the Oder area is always a border-crossing issue.

In the communist era the so called socialist sister countries Poland and GDR did not get along too well but after the opening of the border the cooperation on the historically heavily burdened border in the area of nature conservancy worked very well. The national park Lower Oder Valley is therefore a cross-border nature reserve including two other nature reserves on the Polish side: the Nature Reserve Zehden (72 ha) and the Nature Reserve Lower Oder (9.488 ha). Overall there are 10.444 ha under nature conservancy in the Lower Oder Valley.

But what is our goal, you might be asking yourself now. According to the national park law from 1995, amended in 2006, 50 per cent, which amounts to over 5.000 ha, are supposed to be taken out of the utilization, the remaining 50 per cent (again around 5.000 ha) are supposed to be used extensively. A long-drawn-out land consolidation is supposed to organize the land in such a way that only the Land Brandenburg and the national park association will own the land within the national park and the private property owners will in exchange get equivalent land elsewhere. This would surely simplify the nature conservation work as well as the ecological agriculture immensely. Such a land consolidation proceeding in such a big area is of course very laborious and tedious and I have to admit - even if only in a very general sense at this point - that the Brandenburg (federal state) government in charge has not done this very skillfully yet.

Of course the foundation and association accept the government requirements. The 50 per cent of the area - almost 6.000 ha - that do not belong to the zone I (core zone) should preferably be used by private farmers as extensively as possible. It should be used just enough to ensure that the farmers get their subsidies and preferably in a similar way as we can imagine how the Lower Oder Valley must have looked like 2.000 years ago when the aurochs, wisents, wild horses and the elks were grazing there. These days the large mammals are frequently excluded by a nature conservancy approach that aims to restore the conditions of the 19th century, although the large mammals have always been characterizing the landscapes in the middle European riverside wetlands.

Due to its vast private land ownership and its tremendous voluntary engagement the association and foundation is provided with a good basis for co-creating the development of the Lower Oder Valley.

Therefore, I would be delighted if these estuaries of European lowland rivers will remain closely linked, via the people who work and research in the deltas and who protect and love their sanctuaries.

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