Cultural heritage of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve within the sustainable development policy

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Summary

The relationship between the Danube Delta and its people involves a rich cultural heritage that has evolved over time. The traditional water and land-use management practices that have sustained human populations throughout its history are its main form. It was the population that passed through or settled here throughout the centuries, within different social and political contexts, and the natural elements of the delta, which generated cultural values: the architectural style of the houses, the way of life of the people, the archaeological remains of the past, and other values with historical, religious, laic, or artistic/creative significance. The traditional fishing practices, for instance, fully controlled by the local people in the past, sustained populations for generations by providing a source of food and income. Subsequently, traditional practices gave way to centralised management methods, which partly contributed to the degradation of the natural ecosystems, and ultimately led to the breakdown of traditional lifestyles. Since 1991, research programmes and management plans carried out by scholars, practitioners, decision-makers and researchers regarding the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve have tried to identify a way to revive, stimulate, encourage, and support the traditional activities of the local people as a part of the sustainable development policy.

Introduction

Since the Danube Delta came into being, its settlers have lived in close contact with it, have used its natural resources, and have managed their water in a variety of ways. This close and long-standing relationship has resulted in the evolution of strong cultural links and structures that have developed from the social dynamics of each century.

The relationship between local people and their environment is one of the most significant aspects of a local culture, as it reveals what people think about their resources and how they manage them. Defining culture as composed of behavioural patterns, material objects, ideas, values and attitudes, the local culture of the delta is made up of:

– Spiritual values: religious customs, traditions.
– Material values: the traditional architecture of the houses, historic buildings such as old churches, folk creations (costumes, folk music), traditional food, and trade tools (fishing gear and boats).
– Traditional economic activities: fishing (the main economic activity in most of the villages of the delta), agriculture, cattle-breeding (free stalling), and reed harvesting serve as the livelihoods of the local people.

Status of the area

The Danube Delta became a Biosphere Reserve in 1991, and comprises an area of 580,000 ha of different functional areas (Figure 1):

– Core areas: no economic activity, just research; areas with outstanding ecological value and landscapes.
– Buffer areas: temporary settlements, traditional activities
– Economic areas: permanent settlements, industrial fishing and agriculture.

The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve is a Natural World Heritage Site inscribed on the World Heritage List of UNESCO, and also a Ramsar Site, important for its water birds. The area is also recognised as a ‘special environment’ by the World Bank, the World Wild Fund for Nature, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature; it is of special interest to ornithologists. In recent years, the Ramsar Convention has recognised the need for a greater, widely shared understanding of the interrelationships between the natural and cultural values associated with wetlands.

Decisive elements in populating

The Danube Delta, located in the south-east of Romania, came into being 11,500 years ago.

At that time, several decisive elements facilitated or restricted the inhabitation of the Danube Delta:

– Physical-geographical conditions such as geographical position, accessibility, climate and soil conditions, presence and type of aquatic surfaces, and hydrological-morphological conditions.
– Social-historical elements – migrations, colonisation.

Physical-geographical conditions played a role in the process of populating the area:
The hypsometric feature; the average altitude of the delta is 0.52 m height, the highest altitude of the delta is on its levees; 12.4m on Letea Levee and 7m on Caraorman – the high levees being the least susceptible territories to flooding, and therefore preferred for building; 20.5% of the area is under sea level and 77.5% of the total area spread between 0 and 3m altitude.

Historical background, population and ethnic structure
Archaeology has proved that the territory of the Danube Delta has been populated since ancient times (centuries before Christ) and that the population that provided continuity here was the Romans and their ancestors. Each stage of population had its features generated by the political, economic and social frame of the times and territories.

As the Danube Delta is the youngest territory of the Dobroudja Province (11,500 years old), the age of settlement traces are young in comparison to those on the Dobrodjan plateau; they belong to the Bronze Age and are identified as funeral hillocks discovered at Murighiol and Chilia Veche. It has been proved that at the end of the first Iron Age (6th – 5th centuries BC), Letea and Caraorman Levee were popu-
lated settlements that continued to exist in the second Iron Age. Evidence of this is provided by ceramic pieces, tumulus, and shards.

After the Thracian Carpathian-Balkan ethnic group came into being from a mixture of aboriginal people and Indo-European tribes, a series of population stages succeeded one after another, which are reflected onto historical epochs across the centuries. The Greek stage was featured by Greek colonisation between the 7th and 5th centuries BC and the founding of Greek cities such as Histria and Orgame (Dolosman Cape) on the continental edge of the Delta. This was followed by the Roman and Roman-Byzantine epochs (the 1st to 7th centuries BC, and the 7th to 14th centuries AD) and Turkish domination (from 1417 to 1878).

For the four centuries of Turkish domination, the historical and social conditions of the times caused the Turks, Russians, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians to come and settle in the Danube Delta. The Russians settled here in the beginning of the 18th century. They obtained the right to fish in the best fishing areas of the Delta in exchange for the support they had to offer the Turkish powers to defend the province. The Ukrainians left the mouth of the Dniepr for military and political reasons, and arrived here in the 18th century. They harassed the Russians in order to take over the fishing areas. Their main trade was fishing. The Bulgarians settled in the Dobroudja Province after 1833. Some of them were shepherds and they came from the regions of Cotel, Sumla, Stara Zagra and Steven. After 1842, German colonists established themselves in the province.

When the province rejoined the country (in 1878), the ethnic structure of the population changed substantially. The Turks, Bulgarians and Germans emigrated. After 1878, during the first decades of Romanian administration in the province, a land reform took place, and many Romanians from Romanian provinces – Transylvania, Moldavia, and Oltenia – immigrated towards the Dobroudja Province. This migration had a maximum intensity during the years 1880–1912, and a lower intensity from 1912–1948.

All of the Romanians and ethnic groups that settled in the Delta brought with them a cultural inheritance (among them, cultural diffusion and also a preservation of the elements of cultural identity, such as language and traditions). Once arrived, they also developed a re-

![Figure 2. Churches in Donaueschingen, Germany, at the spring of Danube and in Chilia Veche, Romania, at the river’s mouth.](image)
relationship with the wetland of the Danube Delta and its resources, which generated new cultural values. Nowadays the population of the Delta is 79% Romanians, 11% Russians/Lipoveni, and 9% Ukrainians.

Cultural material values

Historical buildings

Historical buildings reflect the social and spiritual life led by the local people in the Delta throughout the centuries: Christian Orthodox churches of the Old and the New Believers, Muslim mosques, old social edifices.

Similar architecture can be observed in the two Christian churches located at the spring (at Donaueschingen, Germany) and the mouth of the Danube (in Chilia Veche, built in 1854 by Romanians). This stands as proof of cultural diffusion.

Traditional architecture of the delta villages – customs related to house-building

Traditional architecture has survived here and there. People used to build their houses out of clay bricks and reed roofs, the available resources in the area. Good quality timber or limestone had to be transported on the water from outside the Delta, which made building a house very expensive. Good timber has not been available either, because the dominant tree species are the willow and the poplar. Some people used to skip the limestone basement (for economical reasons – the house was cheaper this way), but that made the houses wet. The air is wet, as are the walls at flooding periods when the water level increases.

Although reed is abundant in the delta, covering a house with a reed roof has recently become increasingly expensive as compared to other industrial materials. However, some of the rich newcomers who have built vacation houses in the Delta have a taste for the traditional style and prefer the reed roof. Some tourists who visit the Delta are looking for a traditional lifestyle, and tourism companies currently active in the delta offer both modern and traditional architectural styles.

Several specific architectural elements give distinction to the houses and the villages. The porches are narrow and built on two sides of the house, along the facade and towards the street, with thin wooden pillars, a clay floor, and no parapets. There are applied fret-sawed timbers under the eaves, and the blue paint on the window frames specific to Russian houses.

Temporary shelters (reed huts) created real small cultural landscapes in some places. They are for fishermen, and are frequently encountered outside the villages in the natural fishing areas of the Delta.

There is a large diversity in the aspects of houses, which are due to many factors: the variety of land conditions, the ethnic affiliations, the origin of the Romanians who migrated from different provinces, the variety of occupations, the urban influence, and the absence of an imposed plan.

Cultural material and spiritual values

Other cultural values are in folk creations: costumes, folk music, and traditional food.

Traditional folk Romanian costume is lost and can now only be seen in museums, exhibitions or special Orthodox religious events. The Ukrainians have partly preserved their traditional costume, which they only wear during religious events and holidays. The Russians, as Orthodox Old Believers, have preserved their customs related to different life events (weddings, funerals, birth ceremonies) or Christian holidays.

Economic traditional activities

Exploiting the natural resources of the Delta has called forth the creative talents of people for centuries, with their need to develop special tools and housing, as well as modes of transport for fishing and agricultural activities. This has fostered a rich and diverse cultural heritage in the forms of working tools.

Fishing supports livelihood in the villages where people do not have land to cultivate. The tools of the main trade in the wetland of the Delta are fishing gear: fishing equipment and boats. Fishing is a primary activity in the Danube Delta and it is associated not only with effectively designed boats, but also with a wide range of capture tools. Nets and traps predominate, ranging from gill nets and seine nets, to nets used in lakes, channels, and the main branches of the Danube. Again, the design and construction reflect local water conditions and available materials, as well as the characteristics of the species being exploited.

Cattle breeding used to be an activity employed largely by many local inhabitants when the territory of the Delta had different ownership. Agriculture support is the livelihood of the villages, mainly those located on the continental edge of the delta. Technological factors play an increasing role in changes in agricultural practices, from traditional to modern ones.

Cultural change in the Danube Delta

The phenomenon of cultural change in the Danube Delta has been brought about by the interaction of a number of different factors: environmental, political,
Integrating cultural heritage into the living city

social and economic. As the Delta’s landscape evolved and suffered major transformations, so did the relationship of people with their environment and the available natural resources: fish, reeds, and pastures. First works were carried out at the end of the 19th century, when they cut channels for navigation. Other works followed at the beginning of the 20th century.

Gradually, the Delta underwent natural transformations (channels, embankments, and intensive resource exploitation), alongside political-economic changes:

- The period during the European Commission of the Danube (1856–1940).
- The period of PARID – Fishery and Floodplain Administration on Danube (1910–1944).
- The communist period, 1948–1989, when during the programmes exploiting the Delta’s resources they built fishponds and reed, agricultural and forestry arrangements through embankments and cutting channels.

Thus, by the beginning of 1990, approximately 30% (100,000 ha) of the Delta’s area had been lost. The degradation of the natural ecosystems, including the extinction of fish-spawning areas and radical alterations in ownership, has contributed to the breakdown of the traditional lifestyle.

The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve aims towards:

- Ecosystem preservation and wise/sustainable use of natural resources.
- Developing traditional activities which do not disturb the ecological balance.
- Research and continuous supervision of the protected ecosystem components.
- Developing public awareness of the necessity to preserve and protect plant and animal species, and their habitat and landscape.
- Integration in the ‘World network of protected areas’ and exchange of information about the conditions and scientific value of these areas.
- Integration of economic activities within the Biosphere Reserve in a way that does not unbalance ecological conditions.
- Harmonising inhabitants’ interests with the main objective/task of the Biosphere Reserve: preservation.
Workshop 1

Current trends
The ongoing research programmes and the ones designed for the future attempt to focus on and understand the cultural elements that trigger behavioural patterns towards the environment, or the environmental and social factors that lead to behavioural patterns.

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