Transitions

Romania, Southeastern Europe

Unquiet Flows the Danube

by **Barbara Frye**
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TULCEA, Romania–Deep in Romania's Letea forest, well past the "no entry" signs, a forester who identifies himself only as Ioan leads four of us on a very unofficial tour. We creep through thick stands of oak, poplar, and flowering ash, out into open spaces of sand dunes and bamboo shoots. Tiny seashells, carried here from the Black Sea, crunch under our feet in the salty soil. "This area is different every meter," Ioan says.

Tucked into Romania's Danube Delta, Letea is an oddity: it's the only forest this far north that contains certain Mediterranean characteristics. It has quicksand and a Mediterranean creeping vine called periploca. Its nature is half coastline, half forest, partly because it floods every summer when the Danube swells to three or four meters above sea level, according to Ioan. Letea is jealously guarded by officials of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority, the steward of this area where the Danube River empties into the Black Sea. Tourist visits are kept to a few walking trails in the company of guides.

Still, it's not what it once was. Letea's flooding cycles have been altered by dikes erected in the late 1980s to protect neighboring villages. "The soil changed, and it's not so fertile anymore," Ioan says. The dikes, he says, "have been good for the homes but bad for the land." Those dikes are a small part of a massive effort undertaken by former president Nicolae Ceausescu to dam up the Delta's great wetlands to drain the land for agriculture. In the past decade, the reserve authority has taken down some of the Delta's dams and has worked hard to bring the area back to life.

That work has borne fruit, but recent threats to Letea and to the entire reserve may be more difficult to beat back than anything Ceausescu envisioned.

A SPECIAL PLACE

The Delta reserve is a 5,700-square-kilometer expanse of reeds, watery channels, pelicans, and birch and willow trees. No road network links its villages, and most transportation happens via boat. Some homes lack indoor plumbing. Digital phone service came only last year.

In the last five years, researchers here have identified 27 species of plants and insects new to science. UNESCO, which added the region to its World Heritage List in 1991, called it the "largest and best preserved of Europe's deltas." It's a breeding ground for tens of thousands of birds and sometime-habitat of several threatened species.

Post-Ceausescu restoration efforts have begun to show results. Since 1994, the reserve authority has reclaimed almost 10,000 hectares as wetlands (about one-eighth of the land that had been drained). Fish hatcheries have been set up, fishing has been more tightly regulated, and officials have cracked down hard on poachers. Industries upriver have closed down, and farmers are forbidden to use long-lived chemicals. As a result, some fish species that had disappeared from the Delta by 1990 have reappeared. In addition, the annual catch, which plunged from about 16,000 tons in 1986 to about one-quarter of that in 2000, has begun to level off. And the pelican population has increased to the point that there are now too many of the birds.

The story of the Delta's comeback, though, is still being written, and it doesn't have only heroes: There are villains as well, and a large cast of extras who may ultimately decide the area's fate.

DEEP TROUBLE

One threat lurks only a few miles to the east, where Ukraine has been deepening a channel in its portion of the Delta since May. Meant to provide a route to the Black Sea from depressed ports as far as 160 kilometers inland, the project has been condemned by environmentalists, the European Commission, and signatory

countries to an international wetlands convention, to which Ukraine is also a signatory. Romania filed suit in the International Court of Justice in The Hague in September to halt the project. Romania recently wrapped up its own environmental assessment of the works, which is soon to be published in English.

The most controversial section of the canal is an 8-kilometer stretch through protected wetlands that opened in August. The rest of the route runs along the most northerly of the Danube's three branches through the Delta, called Chilia, which serves as the border between Ukraine and Romania. Aside from supporting the port towns, Ukraine says a new route could save it from 1 million to 2 million euros annually in fees that it pays to Romania for use of Romania's Sulina channel, opened in the mid-19th century.

Among the most immediate problems is what to do with the soil, contaminated with heavy metals and pesticides, being scraped from the riverbed. Ukraine has been dumping it along the riverside and into the Black Sea. Already, environmentalists report that a generation of terns has been lost, as adult birds abandoned nests in the area, fleeing the noise of nearby dredgers. In Romania, reserve officials worry that the deeper channel in Ukraine will draw water from underground channels, including those that feed the Letea forest.

"If [the water] drops even 10 centimeters, it will make a difference. Not in two years, but in 10 or 15 years," Ioan predicts. The dropping water level could also endanger the largest colony of pelicans in Europe, according to Virgil Munteanu, governor of the reserve authority. He says fish have already fled the area around the dredging, leaving the 300 fishermen who depend on these waters with nothing to catch.

Some of those fisherman have their own ideas about the project. In Periprava, a tiny village that borders the Letea forest and sits on the Chilia branch, one old fisherman sits in the village pub, which is not much more than a shack with a few tables. Partly because of drink and partly because of the blaring Ukrainian-language television at the bar, he nearly shouts across the room that the canal will be a good thing because it will take cargo ships out of the local fishing waters. But in fact, the new route will take ships right past Periprava.

The next day, a few of the village's younger men, in their 30s, stand on a dirt road outside the forest talking about the canal. "Fishermen think this way, that maybe the fish will come back and cargo will drop," says Nicolae Graciov, a border police officer. But he fears the effects of wastewater that will be dumped into the Chilia branch, the intrusion of ships into the protected area, and the lowered water table. "Even small lakes [get their water] from the Danube," he points out. "Everybody has an angle. Some say it's a good thing, some say it's bad, according to their own interest," adds forester Mihalache Gheorghe. He takes an economic and geopolitical view. "Romania is very worried about this because the Ukrainians are not going to use [the Sulina channel] again, and they're not going to pay fees."

LOVING IT TO DEATH?

Some experts have suggested a way out, both for these fishermen waiting in vain for a return to the fishing of their youth and for the residents of Ukraine's depressed port towns. In a report released in late 2003, after an October visit to the proposed canal route, officials from the international Ramsar Convention on Wetlands wrote, "The development of environmentally friendly forms of nature tourism, as a source for local income, remains a socioeconomic priority for the benefit of local people in Vilkovo [Ukraine] … and should be seriously planned."

Munteanu agrees that tourism could be the right medicine for what ails the Delta. "About 32 percent of the inhabitants of the Delta are involved in fishing. About 2 percent of the active population is involved in tourism. This means the pressure on fishing resources is very high," he explains. Munteanu says the majority of people living in Europe's other natural reserves are involved in tourism, and officials in the Delta would like to replicate that pattern. The effect, he says, would be to boost incomes and give the fish population a chance to rebound.

Mass tourism is a relatively new phenomenon here, but it's mushrooming: One afternoon saw a wait of nearly 30 minutes on a fisherman's boat to sail down a narrow channel while large tour boats, including a floating restaurant and a disco, headed the opposite direction. Last year, pensions that belong to Romania's primary network of home-stay providers, ANTREC, hosted about 15,000 tourists in Tulcea county, which encompasses the Delta. By September of this year, they had already hosted about 25,000. Even in the last week of summer, pensions in the fishing village of Crisan were full, and residents were offering their spare rooms to out-of-luck tourists. At the same time, the number of Danube River cruises that typically start in Vienna or Budapest and end in the Delta has exploded, from six last year to 150 this year to 400 already booked for 2005, according to Munteanu.

It's difficult to hear those numbers and not worry, especially with so many wild places in well-traveled Western countries being loved to death. Can the Delta walk the line between conservation and commerce?

Silviu Gheorghe thinks so. He's the Tulcea county director of ANTREC. The network includes 38, or about 90 percent, of the pensions in Tulcea county, Gheorghe says, adding that the county has room for about 1,000 more. Those houses account for the overwhelming majority of accommodations in the region. Gheorghe says the Delta has only two or three hotels, and limited access and restrictions on construction mean there aren't likely to be more anytime soon. New building is allowed only within villages, compact areas typically with no more than 500 residents, and it must respect the local architecture.

For his part, Munteanu acknowledges that this effort to turn more fishermen into innkeepers has its perils. "We have to be very careful with this development. We have to keep [tourism] under control … because it could affect the natural landscape and the natural characteristics of the reserve." But Munteanu points to an arsenal of weapons at the disposal of the reserve authority. It must authorize any commercial activity in the

area; it decides each year which channels will be open for boats, allowing some overstressed routes to recuperate; it grants fishing licenses; and it can revoke the licenses of tour operators who flout the rules.

But safeguards or not, the financial incentive to develop tourism in the Delta is too powerful to resist. The experience of Petre Vasiliu, a fisherman-turned-law student-turned pension owner, shows why. Vasiliu, 30, grew up in Crisan. He was in law school several years ago, supporting himself by fishing. But in his third year he knew he didn't want to be a lawyer, and fishing was out of the question–the stocks were declining and so were the prices he was getting from buyers. So about six years ago he started taking in tourists.

In the beginning, he says, "It was a risky decision to make. At that time, it was nothing. There were very few tourists, but I thought it could work." And it has. In his first year, he estimates his pension was 20 to 30 percent occupied in the high season. This year, he says the figure is around 70 percent, and he already has some takers for new off-season packages. In the past five years, Vasiliu estimates, he has invested about 20,000 euros in his business, installing two bathrooms, creating a dining room and terrace, and buying a motorboat and several canoes. But he's earning more than the average Romanian and certainly more than his fisherman neighbors. Vasiliu says in a good year of fishing he could make about 2,500 euros, about 500 euros more than the average annual gross earnings for Romania in 2001, according to a Eurostat report released in September. In tourism, he says he makes twice that.

Lina Gheorghe, Silviu's mother, is another Crisan innkeeper who has just finished building a new pension. She won't say how much the work cost her, but she says the business has taken in about 500 million lei (about $17,000)–an astounding sum around here–during the summer season.

STARTING SLOWLY

But Vasiliu and Gheorghe had to spend money to make money, and that, more than any government restrictions, might be what keeps a lid on tourism. Grants are difficult to come by and many villagers just scrape by. ANTREC offers no direct financial aid but helps pension owners look for money from banks and international donors. It also provides free advertising by attending international travel fairs. ANTREC's Tulcea county branch receives about 50,000 euros annually, part of which comes from a 100 euro fee paid by each member. Last year, the reserve authority and a local organization called Forever Young used a 258,000 euro PHARE grant to build a floating, computerized training center for those interested in getting involved in tourism. Munteanu said about 2,000 people took part. Spokesmen for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank say those organizations have not provided any aid for tourism development in the Delta.

Nicolae Graciov, whose mother hosted us in Periprava one night, says most of the houses there aren't fit to welcome people. "You have to offer people something," he says, noting that his mother's house, for instance, doesn't even have a bathroom–we had used a crude privy out back and were offered water from an outdoor cistern for washing up.

Aside from money, efforts to build a tourism infrastructure face less-tangible obstacles. Crisan fisherman Macarencu Florea, 56, echoes Vasiliu's complaints about the dwindling fish population but won't give a thought to tourism. Florea says he earns about 2.5 million lei per month, about 732 euros per year. Three or four years ago, he estimates, he was making at least twice that. "Every year it gets more difficult," he says. But ask him about taking in tourists and you might as well suggest that he pan for gold. "It's not a business," Florea scoffs, meaning that he could never make a living from it. He says there are already enough pensions in the village–Crisan has six–and too few tourists. "If there are no clients, what do I do?"

But Florea clearly hasn't seen the latest tourism statistics, and his generation is giving way to Vasiliu's. The young people left in the Delta aren't as likely to wait patiently for a fish on the line while they see their neighbors making quick cash ferrying tourists around in fast boats.

Florea's friend Toader Dumitru chides him, "This is the future. This is how the Delta's going to be. Can't you see all the boats?" "Yes, but it's destroying the Delta," Florea responds. "The motorboats are destroying the Delta."

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