

PROJECT **Neretva Delta Rural Tourism Strategy
(Draft 1)**

CLIENT **Regional Environment Centre (REC)**

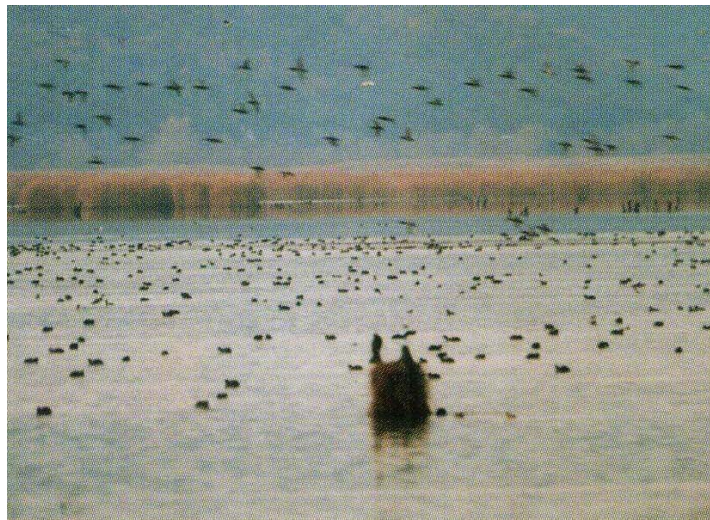
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1.0 Executive summary – to be completed



2.0 Introduction

This joint Rural Tourism Strategy for the Neretva Delta is a result of background study, research and conclusions emanating from the workshop of the Regional Environmental Centre (REC) for Central and Eastern Europe held at Metkovic in the Neretva Delta region, 2nd July – 4th July 2002. (Participants in the workshop are listed in Appendix 1 of this document.)

The Strategy seeks to address key problems which exist for the Neretva Delta region, in order to provide for future environmental protection, whilst at the same time allowing for local economic development via rural tourism. By definition, the Rural Tourism Strategy must come from sustainable development principles.

The Strategy analyses the existing situation, tests it according to a SWOT analysis approach (considering Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and provides the background ingredients to a robust future control and enhancement strategic policy approach.

It should be noted that the Strategy proposes local policy guidelines and a programme for regional tourism initiative project work. It does not provide for any specific land use planning policies, detailed design guidelines, detailed National Park and protected area management policies or financial studies and project costing work for the future – these matters will need to be the subject of future detailed project work.



3.0 Aims of Strategy

The key aims of the Neretva Delta Rural Tourism Strategy can be summarised as involving the following

1. **Biodiversity protection and environmental quality maintenance**

As described in Section 4 of this document, the Neretva Delta region and the existing protected areas offer a unique area of biodiversity and environmental quality. Its future protection and enhancement is a vital requirement to meet with central government policies for Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina and European-wide environmental policy.

2. **Improvement to area enhancement policies and projects**

Described in this Strategy document are future policy proposals and practical project work which can assist in the actual improvement and enhancement of the area. Key recommendations resulted from the REC workshop held at Metkovic in July 2002. The Rural Tourism Strategy must provide for positive future change in the region, which fits in with the goals of the area protection policies and, at the same time, actually enhances and improves on the existing situation.

3. **Provision of long-term local employment expansion and economic growth**

At present the region suffers from high unemployment (approximately 20%) with limited possibilities for a clear economic growth potential for the future. Medium term market image damage occurred as a result of the 1990's Balkans' conflict and regional tourism growth is a key policy requirement for the central and regional governments of both Croatia and Bosnia/Herzegovina.

4. **Local and community solutions**

The Strategy will seek to provide locally based project initiatives. Some of these proposals will be short/medium term, eg. provision of an interpretation centre, specific wildlife support projects, new signage etc (as described in Section 7 and 8 of this document)). Also necessary will be the need for educational projects for the longer term – it is vital that local children and young people become committed to and possess ownership of the environmental quality of the area and its improvement for the future.

5. **Sustainable policy approaches**

The provision of a rural tourism Strategy for the region should be undertaken in a “sustainable” way. The definition of sustainability which should be applied to tourism development for this Strategy is that it should involve

“All forms of tourism development, management and activity, which maintain the environmental, social and economic integrity and well-being of natural, built and cultural resources in perpetuity” (Travis and Cevallos–Lascurain.)

4.0 Description of Neretva Delta

4.01 Geographical situation

The Neretva Delta area is located at the borders of the countries of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Delta borders the Adriatic Sea at the southern extremity of the Dalmatian coastal region. It extends inland from the town of Ploce for approximately 20km joining onto the border boundary of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the lower end of the Neretva Valley. The Neretva Valley itself extends north-eastwards towards the nearby Bosnian town of Mostar. Included in the region are the towns of Capilijna, the central border town of Metkovic and the town Opuzen down-river to the west (see attached map). The area covers 12000ha of which 4100ha are terrestrial land with the remainder open lagoon and marsh water. The Delta itself covers 8km of coastline.

The Delta area includes the Hutovo Blato Nature Park at the eastern end of the region. It stretches 20km to the estuary and includes coastal salt marshes, saline lagoons, sand banks and wet meadows. The area is surrounded by Karstic hills and is generally overgrown with degraded forest. The Delta region is of key importance for waterfowl in the Adriatic coastlands and within the Nature Reserve area there are 6 smaller locations with special protection status.

The Neretva Valley itself consists of mesozoic Karst limestone with the bed of the valley being covered by younger alluvial deposits. Small Karstic lakes occur in a network form with a complex hydrographic system occurring throughout the wider 500,000ha Delta area. Some of the water in the area is oligotrophic and some is brackish in nature.

In terms of vegetation, evergreen forests occur on the valley sides with deciduous trees including hornbeam, forests of pubescent oak, Aleppo pine etc. In the water area itself, water lilies, varied reeds and water growth is prolific. On the higher land and hillside areas, vines, citrus trees and vegetables are cultivated.



4.02 Socio-economic aspects

The main town in the project area is Metkovic close to the border. This town has increased its population from 13,500 inhabitants in 1991 to 15,157 in 2001. Opuzen nearby, however, declined from 3500 inhabitants in 1991 to 3215 in 2001. Ploce, the second largest town in the area, declined in population from 11,500 inhabitants in 1991 to 10,739 in 2001. It is believed that settlements at the edge of the region are losing population, with the bigger regional cities and towns of the wider region are gaining. Approximately 85% of the total population of the wider study area lives within the Delta itself and 15% lives in remoter settlements at the outskirts of the region. Whilst the regions early 1990s conflict is likely to have accelerated the depopulation of the smaller villages, a much higher rate of birth has been reported in the country as whole.

Unemployment is understood to extend to over 20% of the working population. It should be noted that this rate does not take into account the “grey” economy of the working population.

Employment generally consists of a mix of agricultural occupations, together with fishing. Hunting and tourism are considered less important, but tourism employment has increased in recent years.

4.03 Biodiversity features and threats

Land reclamation has occurred since the 1880s and the digging of channels “(jendecenje)” to drain marsh areas and spread dug earth over land areas has gradually reduced the amount of available water coverage in order to obtain more arable land. Hunting, fishing and cattle rearing manage to survive on the marsh vegetation areas together with wine growing and fruit cultivation being important to the valley economy. The result of this change in the last 50 years has been that the prevailing wetland landscape has changed into a farmland one. More recently, the intensity of farming has decreased and some reclaimed land has spontaneously turned into wetland again.

Wetlands

The present situation represents only a fragment of the former large Mediterranean wetland area. Five sites with a total area of 1620ha are protected in the categories of ornithological reserves (Pod, Grodem, Prud and Orpak). Ornithological and fish reserves occur in the Neretva Delta landscape (Modroko and the Desene Lake) including crayfish, eels and carp and the entire Delta is expected to one day be protected via a Nature Park categorisation.

Water

A key factor affecting the Delta is the sea and bodies of brackish water which provide special habitats contributing to the biodiversity of this whole area. Aquatic habitats together with reed patches, wet meadows, beaches, sand-banks and salt marshes together with adjacent Karst overground and underground areas provide an invaluable and a wide variety of plant and life. Since 1995 Hutavo Blato has been protected as a Nature Park managed by the Public Enterprise Hutavo Blato.

Birds

The area represents a very important passage and watering area for migrant waterfowl and a breeding area for the pigmy cormorant, several species of herons, and egrets. The mallard and garganey, together with ferruginus ducks and rails are also present. In total 299 species have been recorded of which 92 nest in the area.

Problems that exist in varying levels include continuing hunting pressures, development around the town of Ploce and hydrographic control and regulation near the town of Opuzen at the river mouth and up-river to the north. There has been a continuing decline in waterfowl frequenting the Delta and a key problem is general pollution, water control and lack of bird settling areas.



4.04 Tourism situation

The numbers of visitors in the area in the year 2000 amounted to 5000 and then doubled in the year 2001 to 10,000. However, it should be noted that whilst 10,000 people are registered as staying overnight in the town of Opuzen and 6000 people in Metkovic, the Neretva Delta total only provided for only 4% of the total Croatian national tourism content.

As explained in Section 4.2, the tourism potential has been slightly increased in recent years via the return of tourists to the Dalmatian coast post the 1990's conflict. Visiting tourists tend to arrive to experience the variety of wildlife and the unique Delta environment. Travel agents advertise the Neretva Delta (popularly known as the "Croatian California") to a limited extent and traditional boat safaris occur in the "ladja and trupica" boats. Restaurant facilities are provided along the waterways and link to visit local sites of interest (including the Roman remains at Narona) do occur.

Cultural tourism is, however, undeveloped with little local regional goods or souvenirs being sold and marketed in the towns and villages. Local gastronomic tours are limited and wine related tourism is lacking. Only a limited local marketable identity exists at present.

An increasingly established series of shore excursions occur as a result of Dubrovnic cruise liner visits – these involve travel through the Elaphit islands, the bay of Zeton, the town of Ston and a stop at Neum, (which is just within Bosnia and Herzegovina). Travelling west inland into the Delta area, the established visitor route involves a visit to the village of Badule and a safari boat ride into the marshes on the "trupica" with restaurant visits

occurring. The problem with these visits for the local economy are that they do not involve actual tourist night-time stays within hotels in the area.

4.05 Existing protected area planning system structures

At present the Cantons for the Bosnia and Croatian portions of the area apply broad planning policies and recognise the Protected Area status of Hutovo Blato and other specific protected sites. Hutovo Blato is administered by APRO – Hercegovina from Mostar in Bosnia, whilst the sites on the Croatian side are administered in Metkovic.

The Croatian area of the lower Neretva is given a general planning policy at a regional level via the Carnton based in Dubrovnik. It should be noted that this planning policy structure is only weakly applied locally and is of limited value due to its lack of up-dated approach and development control enforcement.

The Municipalities attempt to control and regulate local building and land use changes via the local planning control system, but this is of limited effect. Due to a lack of regional cross-border policy linkages, funding, management plans and development control regulations, co-ordinated activity appears to be rare.



5.0 SWOT analysis

This method of testing and analysis helps to identify future rural tourism directions for the rural tourism Strategy.

5.01 Strengths:

- *Environmental quality of the area – biodiversity and landscape*; the wetlands provide a unique environment for birds and fish. This must be of key importance to European and international tourism for the future.
- *Local enthusiasm and recognition of nature values*, allied to an entrepreneurial spirit.
- *Common cross border identity and language*; the two nations join together close by north-east Metkovic.
- *Close to sea and beach resorts*; the major towns of Split and Dubrovnik are nearby.
- *Cultural potential – history, religion etc*; for example the local caves, Roman remains at Naron, the villages of Borvic, Dobranje, Hutovo, Bjelojevici, Dretrely and Provica Village etc.
- *Wine/food interest in area*; this is an untapped area of potential tourism growth.
- *Warm climate* (e.g. for winter bird visits), the mean temperature is 16°C, with warm moist winters.
- *Airports nearby* (Dubrovnik, Mostar); these will grow in importance for the future.

5.02 Weaknesses:

- *Lack of strong local identity* (rural character has declined) – a drift to towns has occurred.
- *Small national tourist market* – the two nations are still recovering from change and conflict.
- *State fund problems* – limited and in need of private/public support.
- *Border movement problems* – the border crossing is slow and complex.
- *No immediate nearby airport* (e.g. 30km from Dubrovnik)
- *Competition from other areas* – the Dalmatian coast itself takes tourists away from the focus of the Delta.
- *Lack of quality accommodation* – poor local hotels at present and a lack of small “family” hotels.

- *Environmental problems* – as described in Section 4.
- *Multiple government bodies* (two nations) and two Cantons.
- *Weak planning controls* - Municipal/County/National – the protected area enforcement is limited

5.03 Opportunities

- *Expanding national and international tourist market*; this could be enhanced via local improvements.
- *Future European Union membership* – expected eventually.
- *Interest in alternative and rural tourism*; ageing world population is keen on this – global tourism is currently 4.4% of world GDP.
- *International interest in biodiversity*. Grants, funds, support possible - Europe is committed to “green” policies.
- *New national identities* – the 2 nations are coming closer together again.



5.04 Threats

- *Other nations/regions* (Mediterranean, European, world) – recent international events may limit tourists to home or nearby destinations.
- *Unstable national identity/possibilities* – danger of future national alliance problems exist.

- *Serious local environmental damage* – further hydrographic and drainage fears.
- *Lack of government/municipal support* – this is still only limited in extent and funding.
- *Excess of beaurocracy* – as new controls are applied, entrepreneurial investment may be put off by an excess of control
- *Grants at government level are limited* and private investment responds according to the economic climate.



6.0 Strategy ingredients

6.01 Future protection of the area

- *Nature park resolution*

For the future, the establishment of a full Nature Park covering the study area will inevitably be required. As an interim measure the approach adopted known as “Natura 2000” may be considered more appropriate as a lead into full Nature Park designation. This will allow for coherent management plans and gradual establishment of stricter controls on agricultural and other tourism activities within the park area.
- *County Plan*

The Cantons of both the Croatian side and Bosnian side of the Delta area will need to prepare jointly compatible “County Plans” to properly allow for appropriate development, development and restriction in certain areas and coherent infrastructure arrangements. Dialogue between the two governments at Canton level will be necessary for the future in this regard and this Plan would link into the wider future Nature Park designation.
- *Management Plan*

In order to properly allow for the functioning of a Nature Park (or a Natura 2000 approach) for this area, a specific Management Plan should be adopted to combine wildlife protection, economic development and infrastructure development in a coherent and sustainable way.
- *Design guidelines*

It is important, as previously mentioned, to retain the character and appearance of this area and ensure that new development does not dominate the landscape or lead to environmental damage. Design guidelines documents could be prepared as part of future County and Management planning. These will provide guidelines for building height, shape and materials and form and combine to ensure that the character of the area is maintained.

6.02 Tourism action plan

- *Tourism coordinating body*

It is important to establish a “Neretva Delta Tourism Agency” which will properly co-ordinate the various initiatives, plans and activities of government and NGO in the lower Neretva area. The linking of Ministries, Municipalities and NGO’s together with tourism operators, is vital for a co-ordinated approach and future economic growth through tourism. Its key objective should be to undertake future plans and measures via a sustainable approach.
- *Heritage/activity trails*

A sequence of linked key sites which combine cultural, biodiversity, gastronomic centres, caves etc would be important for any tourism promotion enhancement. For example, the caves of Soltina jama, Perdlac, the Roman remains at Naron and Hutovo Blato Park could be combined in an activities/heritage trail. This would follow the “Garland and Rose” approach where, either a sequence of towns or villages could be included with overnight stops in each in the form of a trail, or a single centre could be identified with daily outward tourist visits to nearby attractions (as conceived by Michael Dower, past director of the Countryside Commission in England).

- *Publicity enhancement*

The co-ordinating body will need to prepare extensive leafleting, maps, press releases etc in order to properly advertise the area and promote tourism. At present a limited measures are undertaken and it will be necessary for the region to be properly promoted at local, regional and national and of course international level in order to encourage tourism for the area.

- *Local regional identity/signage*

This is very important for strong regional identities which at present are weak. The preparation of a logo for the “Lower Neretva” area will assist in creating a sense of place and “pride” in the area. Signage advertising attractions of a cultural, biodiversity and heritage nature are important. Agreement with the Municipalities on the style and positioning of these signs will be required for the future as part of the co-ordinating bodies work.

- *Interpretation Centre*

The building of a new interpretation centre to link local tourism with local education and schools activities is important. A single interpretation centre focussing on area of biodiversity and wildlife interest could be provided within the wetlands areas. This centre would be manned to provide tourism advice and information, issue leaflets and publicity material and work on the linkage of various “action” ideas (environmental improvement works, NGO activities etc.)



7.0 Policy guidelines

7.01 Conservation

The linkage of local initiatives for conservation work and biodiversity improvement is important and this directly relates to rural tourism facilities. The provision of new “floating bird islands” is considered important to ornithologists and the restoration of certain key water areas (eg. Modric Lake) should be an ongoing part of any link to conservation work. Construction of new “hives” and provision of common signage to key bird watching areas will be important.

7.02 Local design guidelines

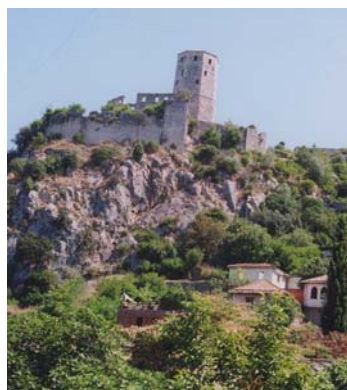
As previously mentioned above, the linking of design guidance with improved Municipality local authority control against unauthorised works and new design will be important. The proper “testing” of scheme proposals before their approval is vital and this can only be achieved if the Municipalities and the Cantons do have current design guidance documents to apply.

7.03 Legislation and planning policy

Legislation to control development in the Cantons Municipalities of the area is in need of enhancement. This could be carried out with a cross-border approach in order to rationalise existing legislation and improvement for the future. Linking this legislation with design guidelines (see below) will be necessary.

7.04 Education and training

A network of local/regional schools via individuals needs to be established to adopt a local biodiversity enhancement and support. School visits to particular key wildlife sites would assist in education and a local school children’s commitment to the area. An approach such as “adopt a species” (eg. otters at Modra Oko Lake etc) could occur, with school children’s competitions and prizes perhaps sponsored by tour operators or hotel owners in the area.



8.0 Programme for regional tourism identity and marketing

8.01 Possible test projects

The co-ordinating body once established, could apply local, regional and national funds into particular test projects to assist in the enhancement of the area for rural tourism in a sustainable form. This could focus on the following

- signage and a Lower Neretva logo
- publicity material and leaflets
- provision of key wildlife improvement enhancement measures (eg. floating bird islands)
- opening up of local caves at Metkovic with interpretation facilities
- establishment of the interpretation centre at a key central site, perhaps near good communications of a town such as Metkovic
- promotion of the area by international events (eg. handball matches, the marathon race, holistic health conventions, food/wine festivals etc.)
- The provision of local financial grants to tourism and conservation initiatives which are sufficiently rural and sustainable in nature.

8.02 Local partnerships – public sector and private

It is important to ensure that all initiatives are funded and provided for in the area have a local “ownership” and linking public sector bodies (Municipalities, Cantons and national government) together with tour operators and local hotel owners is vital.

The new co-ordination body will grow to apply a 10-15 year programme of activities in terms of joining various initiatives together, based initially on those of 8.01.

Eventually the image and identity of the area will be improved and enhanced via local and national government investment and will gradually grow private investment and sponsorship according to these initiatives. The important aspect of this Strategy is that all measures should be tested according to their sustainable qualities and their importance to priorities for the future.

