



SOCIETY of WETLAND SCIENTISTS

Mr. Nikola Bakračeski
Mayor of the City of Ohrid
Dimitar Vlahov Street No. 57
6000 Ohrid
R. Macedonia

Utrecht, Netherlands, October 7, 2015

Respected Sir,

On behalf of the Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS), we would like to express our concern about the recent plans for the Studenchishta Wetland area. The Society has a world-wide membership of more than 3,000 wetland professionals whose mission is 'to promote understanding, conservation, scientifically based management and sustainable use of wetlands throughout the world' (see www.sws.org). We have been informed about the current plan for Studenchishta, which is a deviation from the earlier established General Urban Plan for the town of Ohrid and environs and the broader Spatial Plan for Macedonia, which proposed the area as a Natural Monument¹. We hope to make you aware of the current services and benefits provided by the wetland to the people of the region and the potential impacts any change to the management/protection of this area might incur.

We want to stress the importance of this wetland to the integrity of the Lake Ohrid ecosystem and for protecting overall diversity of plant and animal species, as well as, other benefits the wetland provides. Although the wetland is not particularly large (75 ha), it is one of the very few wetlands remaining on the shores of Lake Ohrid which retains its basic characteristic species and functionality². The major part of it is a peatland, with peat layers of 5 m. These peatlands could be in excess of 5,000 years old and have particular relevance because their storage of carbon has a cooling effect on overall climatic conditions. Recent studies have shown that such a carbon storage service can have significant monetary savings for municipalities³. Furthermore, given the historical and cultural importance of the Lake Ohrid area⁴, as acknowledged by the UNESCO World Heritage designation (2010)⁵, the peat deposits are likely to retain a record of palaeoclimatic and archaeological significance. Such intact peatlands have become particularly rare in this part of the world and thus are worthy of protection. The diversity of plants, butterflies, dragonflies and other fauna groups in the wetland have been found to be particularly high including many rare and endangered species. There are other benefits provided by the wetland, such as improvement of the quality of the water feeding Lake Ohrid, the presence of groundwater springs and the provision of feeding and spawning habitat for a number of characteristic fish species. As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, Macedonia has committed itself to the wise use and protection of all wetlands and as such should seek to avoid further loss and degradation of these important habitats.

We are aware that an initiative has been proposed to drain the Studenchishta wetland to facilitate building a large mass tourism facility. This appears to undermine the Ohrid General Urban Plan which identified the area as a special site to be protected. As documented above, the loss of this wetland would be an extremely unfortunate social and ecological development. The original intention to protect

the intactness of the Lake Ohrid area and its connected shoreline ecosystems was a wise decision that should not be changed. We want to urge you to reconsider the change of the General Urban Plan as far as the Studenchishta Wetland is concerned. We believe that this area needs to be protected. Furthermore, we recommend restoring the Studenchishta to its original extent and to explore opportunities to optimize the benefits that its biodiversity provides to the people of the Ohrid region. For instance, developing sustainable ecotourism, supported by a visitor center and good educational facilities, enhancing of the habitat value for fish, off-setting carbon emissions through peatland restoration and optimizing the ability of the wetland to clean water before entering Lake Ohrid.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter as a timely response to the situation at hand. While this letter presents a limited number of references to the published literature, we are planning to draft a "State of the Resource" report with an extensive review of the scientific literature on the ecosystem services of Studentchishta wetland. We intend to make this available to you by May 2016.

With our sincere respect and wishing you wisdom to come to a viable social and ecologically sustainable decision,



Jos T.A. Verhoeven, Ph.D., Society of Wetland Scientists Europe Chapter, President
Ecology and Biodiversity, Utrecht University
Padualaan 8, 3584 CH Utrecht, The Netherlands; j.t.a.verhoeven@uu.nl

Also on behalf of:

Kimberli J. Ponzio, M.S., P.W.S., Society of Wetland Scientists, President
St. Johns River Water Management District
P.O. Box 1429, Palatka, FL, USA 32178

James Perry, Ph.D., SWS Immediate Past-President
Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William and Mary
Gloucester Point, VA , USA 23062

Keith Edwards, Ph.D., SWS Europe Chapter, Secretary
University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice, Czech Republic

Matthew Simpson, Ph.D., SWS Europe Chapter, Treasurer
WWT Consulting, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, GL2 7B, UK

Rob McInnes, Ph.D., SWS Europe Chapter, Member
RM Wetlands & Environment Ltd., 6 Ladman Villas,
Littleworth, Faringdon, Oxfordshire, SN7 8EQ, UK

¹ Ohrid SOS Citizen Initiative, <https://ohridsos.wordpress.com/>

² ИНТЕГРИРАНА СТУДИЈА. ЗА СОСТОЈБАТА НА ОСТАТОКОТ ОД СТУДЕНЧИШКОТО БЛАТО И ПРЕЗЕМАЊЕ МЕРКИ ЗА НЕГОВА РЕВИТАЛИЗАЦИЈА - STUDY ABOUT THE CONDITION OF THE REMAINING STUDENCHISHTE MARSH. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/258498562/STUDY-ABOUT-THE-CONDITION-OF-THE-REMAINING-STUDENCHISHTE-MARSH>

³ Gouldson A, S Colenbrander, A Sudmant, N Godfrey, J Millward-Hopkins, W Fang and X Zhao. 2015. Accelerating low-carbon development in the world's cities. Working Paper New Climate Economy (www.newclimateeconomy.net); Blanco N, K Meek, R Gasper, M Obeiter, S Forbes and N Aden. 2014. Seeing is believing: Creating a new climate economy in the United States. Working Paper, World Resources Institute (www.wri.org).

⁴ Kostoski G, C Albrecht, S Trajanovski and T Wilke. 2010. A freshwater biodiversity hotspot under pressure – assessing threats and identifying conservation needs for ancient Lake Ohrid. Biogeosciences Discuss., 7, 5347–5382 <http://www.biogeosciences-discuss.net/7/5347/2010/bgd-7-5347-2010.pdf>

⁵ An important obligation associated with the designation is the protection and sustainable development of Ohrid Lake and its Basin as unique whole. To this end, the Law on the Management of World Natural and Cultural Heritage in the Ohrid Region (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no.75/10) was enacted in 2010.