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# PRESPA

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## A WWF *One Europe,* *More Nature Pilot Project Site*

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WWF “One Europe, More Nature (OEMN)” has initiated an innovative pilot project in the transboundary “Prespa Park” region of Greece, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM). The project’s overall goal is to reduce the environmental impacts of intensive agriculture, primarily from Greek bean farmers, by introducing ecologically-friendly agricultural practises connected with the special environmental needs of the area.

The project mechanism is a new product labelling scheme that will commercially highlight the high environmental quality and origin of the products through the use of a “Prespa Park Products” label. This will give the farmers a marketing edge over their competitors and an improved market position through product differentiation.

# About the Project Area

## Location

The “Prespa Park” region is a single ecosystem located in a mountain plateau in the southern Balkan Peninsula. It includes parts of Greece, Albania and the FYRoM. The total surface area of the watershed is 1,386 km<sup>2</sup>. The area also encompasses two inter-linked lakes: Micro Prespa (45 km<sup>2</sup>) shared between Greece and Albania, and Macro Prespa Lake (265 km<sup>2</sup>) shared between all three countries. The OEMN pilot project focuses on the Prespa area in Greece.

## Significant landscapes, habitats and species

The area’s biodiversity-rich wetlands and mountains have outstanding natural beauty. Wet meadows are the “heart” of the Prespa wetlands – shallow lakeside areas of periodically flooded low vegetation that serve as a refuge for many aquatic organisms, spawning areas for fish and amphibians and feeding areas for rare waterfowl. They are strongly inter-connected with the reed beds surrounding the lake – as reed beds expand, wet meadows decrease. The lakes teem with 20 species of fish (most endemic) while over 260 species of birds can be found such as the rare Dalmatian Pelican and Pygmy Cormorant. The surrounding mountains are home to brown bears, wolves and other endangered animals.

## Human presence

The sparsely populated area consists of 74 villages. In Greece, this includes 13 villages with a low overall population density of 4.5 residents/km<sup>2</sup>. Over the past fifty years, Greece has experienced a substantial decrease in its Prespa population.

## Economic status

For all three countries, average per capita annual incomes are low and beneath national averages. In the Greek area, unemployment is 12%. The area is generally remote with inadequate services (e.g. education, public health) and infrastructure (e.g. roads).

Traditional practices in the sustainable use of local natural resources, applied by local people for centuries, contributed to the international importance of Prespa. This included working with reeds in littoral zones (lake banks) which contributed to the creation and maintenance of extensive wet meadows that were important for biodiversity. Examples include: grazing buffalo and cattle on reeds; cutting reeds to provide spawning and feeding grounds for fish and other species; and using reeds for the construction of walls, roofs and stables.

Agriculture remains the main economic activity and income generator in the basin. Greek Prespa has a well-developed and industrialized farming sector. The main crop and source of income is beans which are widely popular for their quality and excellent flavour. In 1998, the beans were awarded the EU’s Protected Geographical Indication designation. Stock breeding is also important and agricultural cooperatives are in operation. Other key sectors or resources in the area include fisheries, forestry and tourism.

# Problems



Significant changes over the last few decades resulted in the abandonment of many traditional activities that had contributed to the maintenance of biodiversity and natural resources. For example, cattle grazing and reed bed use declined and old fishing methods were abandoned.

In Greece, the introduction of intensive bean cultivation in the 1980s largely contributed to the conversion of littoral wetlands into agricultural land. It also damaged Micro Prespa’s natural environment through soil degradation and the improper use of pesticides and fertilisers – for example, the high use of agrochemicals (many toxic) is killing valuable wild plants, birds, fish and insects, and polluting the lakes through surface and underground waters. Furthermore, farmers lack collective marketing efforts. Most of their produce only reaches markets in nearby towns or cities without a certified indication of origin – allowing imported beans (e.g. Poland, China), often of lower quality, to be sold as Prespa beans. Farmers also get few agronomist services, and there are only a handful of them interested in organic production. All of the above factors, combined with the reliance on a single crop, create uncertain economic conditions.

Finally, the institutional protection of natural areas varies among the three countries. While some protection laws appear fairly strong, there remain problems related to: ineffective management; complex ministerial responsibilities; and low experience with training and planning.

# Solutions and Results



The project's overall goal is to reduce the environmental impacts of intensive agriculture by introducing ecologically-friendly agricultural practises. The project mechanism is a new bean labelling scheme that will commercially highlight the high environmental quality and origin of the products through the use of a "Prespa Park Products" label. This will give farmers a marketing edge over their competitors and an improved market position through product differentiation. The project has five steps as listed below: four for Greece and one for Albania/FYRoM:

## 1) Manage the labelling scheme

Under Greek national law, the newly-established public body, the Prespa National Forest Management Body (MB), has responsibility for granting quality labels to products and services produced in the area of its authority. As a first step, the project began working with the MB, encouraging it to manage the new labelling scheme. In June 2006, the MB decided to become the manager of the scheme in Greek Prespa, and a professional protected area officer-agronomist was hired in 2008 to advise and work with farmers.

## 2) Draft a Production Protocol and Regulation

In December 2007, the MB approved a draft Production "Protocol" and "Regulation", earlier formulated by the SPP, to properly develop the pilot phase and labelling scheme. The Protocol provides the policies and rules for cultivation so that the production process considers the special environmental needs of the area and ensures product traceability. The Regulation explains the scheme's procedures or "rules of the game" between the registered farmers and management. The drafts are now being discussed with key stakeholders including scientists, researchers, NGOs, public agencies, certification bodies and consumer institutes.

## 3) Testing through a Pilot Project

From April to November 2007, 10 farmers participated in a pilot project under the auspices of the MB and coordinated by the SPP. The pilot used conventional and organic practices on 57 hectares and 83 fields. Its goal was to assess the existing "distance" between current conventional agricultural practices and the future desired ecologically-friendly ones described in the Protocol. In the end, the evaluation helped determine the changes required to the farmers' practices (e.g. adjustments in the use of agrochemicals) and labelling scheme.

One result is that the MB will need to provide significant technical assistance (human and economic) and monitoring for the scheme to be successful. A positive outcome is that the farmers are now acquainted with the innovative idea, have started to realize its benefits, and are participating in the 2008 second pilot phase of the scheme for further developing the initiative.

## 4) Bringing the goods to market

The project continues to provide valuable assistance to the participating farmers in efforts to market their products to interested large-scale buyers such as international food retailers. Valuable experiences were recently gained through discussions with the French supermarket giant Group Carrefour. An initial shipment of pilot labelled beans also reached local shops in Prespa and small shops selling quality products in Athens.

## 5) Links with the UNDP/GEF project (FYRoM and Albania)

In FYRoM and Albania, the project concept is being promoted to stakeholders and potential donors. However, while interest is high, economic and development barriers in the two countries hinder progress. In this context, the UNDP/GEF project "Integrated Ecosystem Management in the Prespa Park Basin" is seen as a good vehicle to facilitate expansion. Through its regular communications, OEMN has provided UNDP/GEF with scientific support and OEMN-compatible activities have been incorporated into the UNDP/GEF project's transboundary planning (e.g. reducing fertilizer use). In Albania, UNDP/GEF supports the capacity of growers associations and agricultural extension services. In FYRoM, it supports environmentally-friendly agriculture through the training of farmers and practice in the field.



## OEMN Mission

WWF's One Europe More Nature (OEMN) project uses an innovative approach to forge unusual partnerships so that business and nature can co-exist. Its mechanisms lead to win-win solutions for all, allowing Europe's rural workers to make incomes from the countryside while protecting nature. OEMN, tested at many pilot rural locations throughout Europe, is now mainstreaming conservation into everyday European business life.

## Other WWF OEMN pilot project sites

Väinameri (Estonia), Tisza Floodplains (Hungary),  
Merja Zerga (Morocco), Gelderse Poort (Netherlands),  
Maramures (Romania), Sinca Noua (Romania),  
Doñana (Spain)

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## PHOTO CREDITS

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