

14. Neretva Delta – Croatia



Neretva Delta is the estuary of Neretva River, the longest river that crosses the Adriatic coast. Its largest part crosses Bosnia and Herzegovina. Three relief and morphological sections can be identified in the delta, i.e. (i) the karstic frame on both of the river's banks, (ii) the low-lying area along the mainstream and its tributaries and (iii) the coastal belt consisting of sand. Before 1881 the river flowed into the sea through 12 branches, while today they have been reduced to three. The biodiversity of the site is of great significance as it hosts more than 300 different species of birds (112 of which nest in the area), 34 species of freshwater fish (three endemic), more than 100 marine fish, seven species of amphibians, 16 species of reptiles and 52 species of mammals. Given that it is a resting and wintering place for migratory birds, Neretva Delta is considered one of the most important wetlands in Europe.

Neretva has been the 'river highway' of the area, establishing trade with the surrounding regions. The first traces of human habitation date back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Stone forts and enormous burial stone piles, built by the Illyrians, the first residents of the district, have been found in the area. Greeks inhabited the islands of Vis (Issa) and Hvar (Pharos) and they also built a port in the 4th century AD, which later developed into the port of Narona, where today the village of Vid stands. In the 2nd century AD Narona passed to Roman hands and became a Roman colony (Colonia Julia Narona).

The region was prosperous for four centuries, but during the 7th century AD Avarian and Slavic raids led to its decline. In the 15th century the site was invaded and occupied by the Ottomans, who destroyed many of the churches. In 1685 they were succeeded by the Venetians, then by the French and later on the area fell under Austro-Hungarian rule. The entire delta area is full of settlements, whose ruins are unfortunately below water level. The Ministry of Culture decided to support the building of a museum in Vid to house the finds from the whole region.

Those who occupied the estuary were all interested in exploiting its resources. The Venetians used their experience from similar sites in Italy and established intensive fishery practices, creating large fishponds in the lagoon. The Austro-Hungarians developed a transportation infrastructure, in order to facilitate the efficient trade of raw materials. Therefore, a railway and a port in Metković were constructed and the flow of the Neretva was regulated, which has had a devastating impact on fisheries. During the second half of the 20th century a rapid development of agriculture and its associated downstream industries were developed.

Illegal land reclamation, pollution and the deterioration of the hydrological balance are considered as the main current threats to the area's ecosystem. The distinctive traditional way of agriculture that is still practised in many parts is currently endangered. Its development under the current principles of sustainability will greatly add to the enhancement of the site.

The Maraton Ladja (the Ladja Marathon) is among the most famous events in Croatia and is held under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Croatia on the second Sunday of August every year. This rowing competition of traditional sailing vessels serves the need of preservation of the old customs and traditions and constitutes a major tourist attraction. The region is also well known for its gastronomic specialities, such as eels, black water-hens and frogs legs.