

Scientist Comments on Ohrid-Prespa Protection and Development

The quotations below relate to the campaign to protect the Ohrid-Prespa region of Macedonia from the development drive that currently threatens its unique ecosystem. Taken from emails received by Ohrid SOS, letters to authorities, and articles published in the Macedonian media, they make a compelling case for ANVR action.

"Pristine ecosystems such as Lake Ohrid and the Studenchishte Marsh provide a unique opportunity to study the natural history of our planet. They harbor biological diversity that needs to be protected at all costs, not only because it is the basis for life on earth, but also because it may provide information and cues towards medical therapies and biotechnological innovations of great economic value."

Dr. Tobias Lenz
Group Leader in Evolutionary Immunogenomics
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology

"I am writing to express my grave concerns about planned developments on the territory of Galichica National Park. This refers to the new expressway between Ohrid and St Naum, the new skiing centre, as well as tourist development zones near the villages of Ljubanishta, Stenje and Oteshevo. My expert knowledge on the subject leads me to believe that the planned projects will have extremely serious detrimental impacts on the social and natural environment of the region. This includes an irreplaceable loss of biodiversity, major geomorphological and landscape disturbances along the routes of the motorway and skiing centre, as well as hydrological impacts on the functioning of Lake Ohrid. As a whole, the five new developments will irreversibly destroy the unique natural and cultural features that have allowed for the Ohrid region to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site."

Prof. Stefan Bouzarovski
Director of the Center for Urban Resilience and Energy
University of Manchester

"I would suggest that Macedonia as a small European country must not follow the pattern of Russia, destroying a million-years old natural treasure of the continental value for sake of short-term economical profit."

Dr. Tarno Timm
Senior Researcher
Estonian University of Life Sciences

“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.”

**Letter to Macedonian Authorities
Dr. Jos T.A. Verhoeven
President of the European Chapter
Society of Wetlands Scientists**

“Sadly, for all over the world lakes are suffering much, even if they are ancient, even if they are listed by UNESCO as the World Heritage places. Money and business are always more important in this world as the beauty, unique creatures... With all of my heart I'd like to support your initiative to preserve ancient Ohrid and its environment.”

**Dr. Oleg Timoshkin
Head of Laboratory for Aquatic Invertebrate Biology
Limnological Institute Siberian Department
Russian Academy of Sciences**

*“Current research demonstrates that this diversity is particularly great in the vicinity of the lakes and their contact zones, where a high genetic variation of particular species (e.g. in *Pelophylax* spp., *Hyla arborea*, *Lacerta viridis*, *Natrix natrix*) is probable. We can assume that potential Pleistocene refugia were located there. Alteration in habitats can lead to the reduction of populations, then to the reduction of the genetic variability, and finally to the ability of species to survive.”*

**Daniel Jablonski
Herpetologist
Faculty of Life Sciences
Comenius University, Bratislava**

“The most pressing concern relates to urbanization plans for the marshland area “Studenchishko Blato” [Studenchishte Marsh]. This swampy zone functions as one of the largest filter systems for keeping harmful nutrients out of nutrient-poor Lake Ohrid. Moreover, the area itself is habitat for specialized plants and animals, including endemic species. The implementation of these development plans would ultimately

and irreversibly destroy this crucial ecosystem and thus strongly impact the hydrological system of Lake Ohrid.”

Dr. Christian Albrecht & Dr. Thomas Wilke
Department of Animal Ecology & Systematics
Justus Liebig University

“Ohrid is a natural jewel, a globally unique experiment in evolution, whose many endemic inhabitants have a fundamental right to persist. It is also a fantastically beautiful place, as I saw for myself on visiting around a decade ago. It is additionally a place which can and should be enjoyed through responsible tourism, as it has been for many years I believe. It strikes me that these proposals are not only highly environmentally damaging – they are also likely to destroy the very beauty and uniqueness which draw visitors to this area!”

Dr. David Bilton
Associate Professor and Reader in Aquatic Biology
Plymouth University

“Destroying the shorelines and the reed belts due to construction work, increased infrastructure, and a rise in the amount of tourism will lead to increased nutrient input to the lake, which may, in turn, cause destruction to large parts of the habitats of Lake Ohrid’s unique fauna.”

Dr. Bernd Wagner
University of Cologne

“Lake Ohrid is a biodiversity hot spot of global importance for nature and humans alike. International initiatives and agreements such as IPBES, Natura 2000 and the Water Framework Directive, among others, are only effective if we set clear priorities for conservation and sustainable management. Lake Ohrid is an ecosystem that deserves the highest priority in maintaining the unique fauna and flora of our freshwaters. If we are not able to maintain high-priority systems such as Lake Ohrid, international agreements to stop biodiversity loss would lose their credibility.”

Prof. Dr. Klement Tockner
Leibniz Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries

“Lake Ohrid is a unique aquatic ecosystem closely related to a unique karst hydrogeological system. As the chairman of the Commission on Karst Hydrogeology

of the International Association of Hydrogeologists (IAH), I express my deep concern that the planned infrastructure projects may damage this valuable karst hydro-geo-ecosystem.”

Prof. Dr. Nico Goldscheider
Commission on Karst Hydrogeology
International Association of Hydrogeologists

“I think that Ohrid Lake is facing an ecological disaster and if no steps are undertaken to stop the attacks on the lake shore in near future the lake will lose its beauty together with its nature relict status. This is because all the undertakings along the shore directly affect lake’s flora and fauna that is in the most part found precisely along the coast, approximately up to 10 meters within the lake. That is the habitat stretch of all the endemic flora and fauna that makes Lake Ohrid and Ohrid so famous.”

“Microphyte, underwater plants, algae, zooplankton, crabs, snails, lake worms, birds – they are rare and all live in the (Studenchiste) Marsh. Destroying the marsh and consequently all of them would mean great and unreplaceable loss for world biodiversity”

Prof. Dr. Trajce Talevski
Hydro-biological Institute of Ohrid
President of the Macedonian Limnological Society

“To conclude, the interconnected and ancient (3-5Ma) Prespa-Ohrid Lake system is a global hotspot of biodiversity and endemism and of key importance for European biodiversity conservation efforts. The lakes feed the Drim River and catchment water resources are of great socio-economic importance to Greece, Albania and FYROM (used for e.g. tourism, agriculture, hydro-energy, urban & industrial use). This system is severely threatened by the unprecedented scale of the proposed tourism developments that are utterly unsustainable, not based on any thorough scientific assessment criteria and carry great hidden costs for the wider society. It should be also be noted that this entire development plan arbitrarily re-draws boundaries of protected areas and will have an extremely damaging impact on the natural environment, even to the extent of destroying the natural beauty that forms the rationale of creating this development in the first place.”

Dr. Tim van der Schriek
National Observatory of Athens
Institute of Environmental Research and Regional Sustainable Development