

Project Update: June 2021

In May 2021, we had our first trip. Until that point, we undertook several promotional activities (designing the project logo and printing promotional material) and educational activities at the Faculty of Biology, University of Belgrade and via the Serbian Herpetological Society. These included lectures as well as workshops with students directly in the field, which showed them the practicalities of working with snakes and tortoises and the importance of paying close attention to common species that can give us insights into worrying problems in ecosystems. We also started the Facebook and Instagram pages for the project.



Once again, we had tremendous help from our colleagues from the Macedonian Ecological Society (MED) who provided us with logistics and expertise during our field trip. Unfortunately, the COVID situation in North Macedonia did not allow for greater educational and promotional efforts among the local populace, but we've managed to tour several important sites around the Prespa Lake area. During our stay at Konjsko village before our trip to the island, we heard some good news about the start of official management of tour rides to the island. The 'Galičica' National Park staff have put into motion organising reception centres at the nearby villages which should put a stop to, or at least dampen, the illegal boat rides and rogue tours to the island. Apart from that, this could prove a good tourist checkpoint to leave our promotional material and get logbooks of how many tour rides are organised. More troubling, however, was the notion that the poaching was again on the rise.

Although the local fishermen are hesitant to provide further information, our long-term contacts did confirm that illegal activities were once more on the rise, especially on the Macedonian side, after the COVID restrictions got weaker. Although fishing is prohibited both on the Macedonian and Albanian sides, the implementation and control of this prohibition is lax on the Macedonian side. Because of that, all of the poachers gather on this side of the Prespa Lake where no government officials can control or stop them. During our travels to and from the island we noticed several nets planted around the

lake as well as remnants of poaching and smuggling activity on the island beaches. From our talks with the locals, we could see that there is a clear problem emerging; most of the communities around the island are fishing communities, with their only source of income being fishing. It's obvious that our future efforts should be on sustainable fishing and the implications that these unhealthy habits may lead to (such as the collapse of the highly endemic fishing communities in the lake). The other sources of seasonal income are tours to the island, which were active even now. We counted 11 tour rides during our stay on the island, with one boat averaging about 4 to 6 people. Apart from the usual negative effects these could potentially bring to the island, we unfortunately found another one. Little snakes and tortoises tend to hide under the rocks on the beaches. This leaves them vulnerable to stomping from tourists that roam around the island, and poachers and smugglers that visit the island. Our team has plenty of experience were exactly these kind of areas around the island and we tend to walk carefully. A good effort would be to put signs on where to avoid walking and to follow specific paths on the island.



Both the two snake populations and the tortoises seem stable. We processed around 400 tortoises, 200 dice snakes and around 30 vipers, all of which were in a healthy condition and well fed. There were lots of juvenile snakes and tortoises, which have not been seen on the island for some time. All in all, there were plenty of good signs for the reptile communities of the island. In a strange way, the strict curfew that spawned from the COVID restrictions may have benefited the island as a whole. We may have arrived precisely at the start off an increasing poaching and tourist activity, and we have a good chance of stemming the negative effects that may arise.

Our colleagues at MED were very hard at work monitoring the nesting season of swifts, gulls, cormorants and herons while additional efforts are being made to monitor the bat population of Golem Grad. During our work, we noticed another worrying sign. We are almost certain that nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) has somehow reached the island and is reproducing there. This highly invasive species, originating from South America,

although an herbivore has destructive eating and burrowing habits and presents a potential future danger to this fragile ecosystem.



We also had two unique opportunities that arose during this field trip. First of all, two student volunteers from France and Germany that were present with the MED team heard about our project and were willing to offer help and spread the word further. Second, some of our colleagues from Albania, that also heard about our project and the greater efforts of MED in the Prespa Lake area, commenced talk with us about Mal Grad, another island in the Prespa Lake, apparently facing the same threats as Golem Grad. This also can be a foothold into further conservational activities in the whole Prespa area.