

Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Standing Committee

Recommendation No. 221 (2023) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 1st December 2023, on the negative impacts to Lake Ohrid and Galichica National Park candidate Emerald Network sites due to infrastructure and urbanisation developments (North Macedonia):

The Standing Committee to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under the terms of Article 14 of the Convention,

Having regard to the aims of the Convention to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats;

Recalling that Article 1, paragraph 2 of the Convention calls on Parties to give particular emphasis to endangered and vulnerable species, including endangered and vulnerable migratory species;

Recalling that Article 3 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of the habitats of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species, especially endemic ones, and endangered habitats;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 1 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the conservation of the habitats of the wild fauna species, especially those listed in Appendix II to the Convention;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 2 further stipulates that Contracting Parties, in their planning and development policies, shall have regard to the conservation requirements of the areas protected under the preceding paragraph, so as to avoid or minimise as far as possible any deterioration of such areas;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 4 further states that Contracting Parties undertake to co-ordinate as appropriate their efforts for the protection of the natural habitats referred to in this article when these are situated in frontier areas;

Recalling that the Lake Ohrid (MK0000024) and Galichica National Park (MK0000001) have been officially nominated as candidate Emerald Network sites in 2011 in accordance with national legislation, and as such, are subject to [Recommendation No. 157 \(2011, revised in 2019\)](#) on the status of candidate Emerald sites and guidelines on the criteria for their nomination, requiring national authorities to “take the necessary protection and conservation measures in order to maintain the ecological characteristics of the candidate Emerald sites” until their full inclusion in the Emerald Network;

Recalling [Recommendation No. 208 \(2019\)](#) on detecting, reporting, assessing and responding to changes in the ecological character of Emerald Network sites;

Noting that the Lake Ohrid and Galichica sites, which as such constitute a UNESCO World Heritage Site, include other international and national protected areas, including a UNESCO Transboundary Man and

Biosphere Reserve, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, a Monument of Nature corresponding to the IUCN Protected Area category III, a National Park corresponding to the IUCN Protected Area category II, and potential future Natura 2000 sites.

Noting the parallel processes of other multilateral environmental agreements operating in the area, notably the joint Reactive Monitoring Missions of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, International Council on Monuments and Sites and International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2017 and 2020 and their recommendations;

Considering that the Ohrid and Galichica regions contain rare and endemic species and habitats of European importance that are conservation priorities and which North Macedonia has undertaken to protect;

Mindful of the need to balance the economic benefits gained from tourism in the region with ensuring that the fragile ecosystems of world importance are preserved for future generations;

Taking note of the report of the on-the-spot appraisal carried out by an independent expert on 25-27 April 2023 to which representatives of the Ramsar Convention and UNESCO World Heritage Centre were present as observers (document T-PVS/Files(2023)31), and pointing to supplementary subject-specific recommendations which have been included therein;

Recalling its [Recommendation No. 211 \(2021\)](#) on conservation measures within national parks in North Macedonia, including in relation to Mavrovo National Park and Lake Ohrid and Galichica National Park, the implementation of which is expected to continue and noting that the present Recommendation complements this text;

Recommends to the Government of North Macedonia to:

1. Establish the legal basis for the whole Ohrid Region World Heritage site to be declared as a protected area with locations such as the candidate Emerald Network Sites and biodiversity hotspots nested as special protected areas within this wider scope.
2. Establish a professional management body for the new World Heritage Site protected area, staffed with members of appropriate expertise and accorded in law with the power to make and execute management decisions.
3. Conduct an expert evaluation with a public consultation procedure of both the *Management Plan for the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region 2020-2029* and the *Strategic Recovery Plan for Revitalisation of Ohrid Region natural/cultural values* to identify actual and potential weaknesses in their design and implementation, using the information gathered to upgrade each document.
4. In conjunction with the evaluation of the *Management Plan for the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region 2020-2029*:
 - a) complete up-to-date spatial and urban planning documents to ensure that all future constructions in the Ohrid Region are aligned with Outstanding Universal Value, including those for which unmaterialised construction permits and other related permissions have already been issued; and
 - b) put in place an effective moratorium on all constructions, except for essential basic needs like wastewater infrastructure and emergency services, until Recommendations 3, 4a and 12 have been adequately completed.
5. Harmonise the legislation for urban planning and construction with nature protection laws to ensure that conservation of habitats and biodiversity are prioritised in protected areas and World Heritage sites, by placing stringent controls on definitions such as temporary buildings and urban equipment, by upgrading quality requirements for impact assessments in protected areas, and by eliminating potential weaknesses from overly extensive definitions of state importance that can allow construction of tourism development zones and hydropower facilities in the World Heritage site.

6. Establish a zero-tolerance policy for any new illegal constructions by streamlining the process for their removal in law, increasing the penalties for transgression of urban planning rules in World Heritage Sites, and reinvigorating the staffing, procedures and professional standards of relevant inspectorates.
7. Revise the proposed zoning concept as well as permitted and prohibited activities in the *Valorisation Study for Lake Ohrid* prior to the adoption of the *Law for re-proclamation of Lake Ohrid as a Monument of Nature*, as well as the *Draft Management Plan for Lake Ohrid*, to effectively address the actual threats, ensure protection and connection with Studenchishte Marsh and comply with international (IUCN) standards for protected areas.
8. Revise the proposed zoning and list of permitted and prohibited activities in the *Valorisation Study for Studenchishte Marsh* prior to the adoption of the *Law on Proclamation of Studenchishte Marsh as a Nature Park* and preparation of the *management plan* for the Marsh, to allow for the inclusion of a buffer zone covering the Gorica North area where new construction is not to be permitted, as well as to ensure connection with Lake Ohrid and compliance with international (IUCN) standards for protected areas.
9. Proceed to aligning each protected area in North Macedonia with the IUCN guidelines for 75% to be primarily managed for nature conservation, including by revision of permitted activities in line with the findings of this report, and establish a regular, annual mechanism for the delivery of state funds to protected areas for general management purposes.
10. Implement thorough monitoring of key species according to scientific principles throughout the World Heritage site, but particularly at biodiversity hotspots and core habitats, using the information to inform management decisions, national Red List classifications, and action plans for the conservation of endemic species.
11. Accelerate the procedures for the designation and full adoption of Emerald Network Sites and the establishment of a connected Network in accordance with the provisions of the Bern Convention and in cooperation with neighbouring countries.
12. Urgently upgrade and expand the system for the collection, treatment and maintenance of wastewater in the whole of the Lake Ohrid watershed with a priority for action at the vicinity of biodiversity hotspots such as Saint Naum Springs.
13. Ensure that provisions allowing for construction and agriculture in the Studenchishte Marsh are removed from the final version of the *Law on Proclamation of Studenchishte Marsh as a Nature Park*, spatial/urban planning documents, and management plans, with narrow exceptions for traditional mowing and small livestock populations for habitat maintenance and restoration purposes.
14. Relocate and reimagine current and planned visitor facilities and restaurants at Saint Naum Springs, in particular facilities at the proximity of the Strict Protection Zone (especially the Ostrovo restaurant) and put in place improved mechanisms to control visitor volumes and flow, including appropriate paid entry.
15. Design and implement, together with the interested public and NGOs, a comprehensive awareness-raising campaign on the importance, standards and methods of protecting the natural and cultural heritage throughout the Ohrid Region which should be recognised as a national treasure.