

Address by Anne Burill, EC, DG Environment, International Affairs

Good morning Mr. Deputy Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Honoured Guest,

I am very pleased to be with you this morning, to say a few words on behalf not only of the European Commission, but of the many international organisations who are here today, and contributed to the preparation of this conference.

The Danube Delta undisputedly forms a culturally and geographically unique region in Europe. It is home to a great mix of communities with different histories, languages, religions and traditions who live peacefully together.

As speakers before me have noted, the Danube Delta is strategically situated for international water transport on the Danube connecting the Black Sea with major parts of Europe. This increases the region's potential for transport and processing industries as well as related facilities (harbours, shipyards, etc).

The economy of the Danube Delta is currently mainly oriented towards fisheries, agriculture and animal husbandry, but could rapidly change into a more service-oriented economy, based on activities such as nature tourism and organic products, for which there is a booming market.

It is important to remember, however, that while providing economic opportunities, the Danube Delta is one of the most natural river deltas in the world with an outstanding richness of habitats and species.

In order to be able to provide long-term economic benefits, regional development of the Delta must be planned and undertaken in a sustainable way. It should respect and encourage the region's aspiration for social and economic prosperity, while striking an optimal balance which respects ecological limitations.

The success of such a vision for the future of the Delta can only come about through close cooperation among the three countries sharing this area: Moldova, Romania and Ukraine. A major step towards such a sustainable future can actually be taken by you here today, by setting a firm basis for this collaboration.

The wetland ecosystems in the Danube Delta region are formally recognised under a number of international treaties and programmes: the Bern Convention on European Wildlife and Habitats as well as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which are relevant for the entire Delta; the World Heritage Convention which concerns the Romanian side, the UNESCO Man and Biosphere transboundary biosphere reserve that involves both Romania and Ukraine, as well as the Council of Europe's European Diploma on Protected Areas in Romania... In addition, the World Wide Fund for Nature designated the Delta as one of its Global 200 Sites. This overwhelming acknowledgement of the Delta's richness encompasses also an important degree of responsibility and obligations.

Whatever is your preferred “vision of the future” for the Delta, whatever mix of instruments or measures that you will argue for here today in one of the workshops, special attention needs to be paid to these international obligations.

On behalf of the international organisations for whom I speak today, I wish to highlight a couple of key mechanisms that we would like to put forward in our vision for the future.

The conservation and sustainable development of the Danube Delta requires strategic assessment and a plan for the whole Delta region, as well as scientific monitoring programmes to ensure that social and economic activities and developments are undertaken in a way that respects the ecological functions and processes and the natural balance of the Delta. The Danube delta region needs a common, transboundary management mechanism supported by all three countries: Ukraine, Moldova and Romania. Any infrastructure development should clearly be preceded by strategic planning and an assessment of environmental impact over the entire region.

In addition, we consider that a trilateral concept for the protection of natural resources and ecosystem services should be advocated as a precondition for steering investors and international funding towards sustainable projects.

Moreover, we would also like to consider the further elaboration of sustainable transboundary management plans and initiatives – in particular within the framework of the existing bilateral biosphere reserve and its extension to a trilateral biosphere reserve.

In this context, I would like to point out that potential platforms for trilateral cooperation in the field of nature protection already exist. Under the aegis of the Council of Europe, and with regard to their obligations under the Bern Convention the three delta countries signed an agreement in June 2000 “for the creation and management of a cross-border protected area between Moldova, Romania and Ukraine in the Danube Delta and the lower river Prut nature protected areas”. This will enter into force as soon as it has been ratified by all parties. This shows willingness to cooperate as the parties have undertaken to harmonise their management methods and coordinate all development projects, which should lead to a comprehensive management action plan, aimed at ensuring the sustainable development of the delta region.

But in all honesty it should be said that some important navigation projects have not been subject to such coordination. So, I wish to take this opportunity to call on Moldova, Romania and Ukraine to fully adhere to the 2000 agreement and engage in dialogue and cooperation on all issues affecting the biological diversity and well-being of the Delta.

Another trilateral instrument that we wish to lift to the forefront is the Council of Europe Resolution 144 of 2005. This resolution encourages the three countries to cooperate for the best management of the Delta, and to pay particular attention to accommodating the objectives of economic development with imperatives of environmental and landscape protection. This legal framework represents a useful tool to implement a regional sustainable strategy for the entire Danube Delta.

We furthermore wish to reiterate that the entire Danube Delta is a designated Ramsar site. The Convention on Wetlands provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. In the Danube Delta, there are two adjacent Ramsar sites covering the main part of the Delta – the Kyliiske Mouth in Ukraine and the Danube Delta in Romania. But four additional Ramsar sites are linked to the Delta situated along the Danube River, including also territorial parts of Moldova. In our “joint vision”, we wish to propose that all of these areas in the three countries concerned should be managed as a common “Transboundary Ramsar Site”, which is totally compatible with other initiatives.

Another instrument for the integrated protection of surface and ground waters within a framework for water resource management is the EU's Water Framework Directive. The Directive requires that River Basin Management Plans be developed by 2009. These plans should include a detailed description of measures based on a comprehensive assessment of environmental and economic impacts. These measures aim at achieving "good status" of each river section which is described in ecological, chemical and quantitative terms and which will ensure the functioning of the ecosystem on the basis of sustainable human development.

Although the Water Framework Directive is legally binding only for EU Members, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine all have obligations under the 1992 UNECE Convention on Transboundary Water Management. Furthermore, the contracting parties of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (the ICPDR) have recently decided to declare the Danube Delta as its own management unit – a so-called Sub-Basin District of international importance. This decision is particularly important since some of the measures to protect the Danube Delta will have to be taken upstream in the Danube basin, in particular measures to control pollution. Upstream pollution is being particularly addressed through the DABLAS process. However, a trilateral transboundary coordination in the sub-basin region of the Delta between Ukraine, Romania and Moldova will be an essential contribution to the international Danube River Basin Management Plan that is planned to be endorsed by a Ministerial Conference of the ICPDR Contracting Parties in December 2009.

Furthermore, this International Conference should look in particular at the possibility of strengthening the Danube Delta Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, which was designated in 1998, made up of biosphere reserves located on each side of the border in Romania and Ukraine. Biosphere reserves were specifically designed to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with economic development, backed up by the best scientific research and monitoring. Biosphere reserves should be used as a platform for dialogue amongst all the actors concerned to address the dual inter-related issues of environment and development. This is also true of transboundary biosphere reserves, for which a special set of recommendations exists since the year 2000.

It is therefore obvious that the notion of sustainable development and how to promote it through a transboundary biosphere reserve is at the heart of the International Conference today.

In 2004, the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere International Coordination Council recognised that the transboundary dimensions of the Danube Delta biosphere reserve were non-functional and requested the UNESCO Secretariat to facilitate cooperation to mitigate this situation. To do this, the UNESCO Secretariat would like to propose that work should commence within existing legal frameworks and agreements. Consideration could be given to ideas such as:

- a) strengthening the mandate of the Dunaisky Biosphere Reserve in Ukraine in the field of sustainable development;
- b) obtaining an official high-level political agreement between Romania and Ukraine to formally establish the transboundary biosphere reserve;
- c) subsequently formally establishing a long-term special transboundary coordination structure;
- d) fourth, inviting the Moldovan authorities to contribute towards establishing a large-scale trilateral biosphere reserve;
- e) and finally, setting up a long-term financial mechanism for the future trilateral transboundary biosphere reserve.

Among other things, this transboundary biosphere reserve would ensure a coherent management of the relevant Ramsar sites – as a coherent transboundary wetland system.

- UNESCO has prepared a background document to help this Conference to discuss such ideas.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is our firm belief that it is possible to conciliate the conservation of the Danube Delta with its sustainable development. All deltas around the world are rich repositories of biological diversity. As they are traps for sediments and nutrients, they are amongst the earth's most biologically productive ecosystems. This means in turn that all deltas around the world are highly coveted sites for development of all kinds, for agriculture, fish farming, navigation, industries and human settlements. In consequence, the natural hydrological cycles of deltas are generally radically altered through activities such as the regulation of natural river arms, the construction of canals, polders and fish farms, and drainage for agriculture. All deltas are also subject to upstream water extraction and upstream pollution from domestic wastewater, industry and agriculture.

For centuries, the Danube Delta has been influenced by all of these types of human activity. Hence, in this first decade of the 21st century, the question is not to simply preserve or restore the Delta of the Danube in quasi-pristine state. It is a question of collectively deciding as to what is an acceptable trade-off in terms of conservation and future development. It is a question of arriving at this decision in an open, inclusive and transparent fashion, putting forward the pros and the cons. Given the number of stakeholders and their divergence of views, this decision will not be arrived at easily and in the short time of an International Conference such as this.

But I hope that my account of some potential mechanisms that could be used for drawing up a joint “future vision” for the Delta – together with those that you will bring forward today - will provide a first decisive step. The international organisations believe that the process that I have just described could and should be coordinated under one umbrella that in its entirety assemble a plan for sustainable development of the Danube Delta. We are willing to work jointly towards this end.

All we can do here in this conference is to set the process in motion, to point to the directions to be explored and the types of mechanisms that can help facilitate making an agreement.

Fortunately, the Danube Delta still essentially retains its outstanding ecological qualities. Decisions on which developments are necessary and on how and where to build harbours, canals and industrial sites are largely still to be made. The chance is still there for us to seize and to make the right choice of sustainable development within the carrying capacity of the natural ecosystems in the area.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honoured Guests

– thank you for listening to me this morning. I have tried to outline some of the mechanisms which might be used to ensure that the Delta area is managed sustainable, and with respect for the interests and needs of the three countries concerned: Romania, Ukraine and Moldova.

I am sure you have also come with your ideas and solutions which I hope you will share in a constructive manner over the next day and a half. I hope together, you will build a path towards a sustainable future for the entire Delta region, for this outstanding region that brings us all together.