

Constraints and Challenges in the Creation and Public Use of the Protected Areas within the City. Case Study: Lake Vacaresti – Bucharest City

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Abstract

The area that made the subject of the case study overlaps a "sui generis" landscape unit lying inside the built up area of the Romanian capital: Lake Văcărești. This territory could become in the near future an urban protected area. Named by specialists the "Capital's Delta" or the "Delta showroom", it occupies about 180 hectares, inside the 4th district of Bucharest, stretching on a former marsh, suggestively called in the past, the Wailing Valley. During the communist period, the wetlands reclamation and landscaping have begun; thus, from the vast area of the dirty Wailing Valley remained only the Văcărești Pit, despite the Ceausescu's intention to transform it into a lake. After 1990, the abandoning of this project has allowed the emergence of a unique ecosystem in the lake basin of the former Văcărești pit, which now serves about 100 species of birds, reptiles and mammals. Accidentally discovered by photography enthusiasts, biologists, ecologists and geographers, this space has recently come to the attention of the NGOs and the Ministry of Environment, which make efforts to turn this territory into a protected area. **The aim** of the study lies in anticipating / identifying the human-environment conflict situations that the future nature reserve and the urban planning of the Văcărești Lake will generate in the first phase, consisting in the implementation of the statutory protection and conservation measures. The **research methodology** is based on the mapping method, the direct and indirect observation and media monitoring. The authors' intention is that the results would support the efforts to create the Lake Văcărești Natural Urban Park.

Keywords

lake Văcărești, natural urban park, constraints, protected area

Introduction

The setting up of a protected area generates multiple conflicts of interests, especially when the respective territories lie in the proximity or, even more important, in the perimeter of human settlements. Under the circumstances, in order to prevent the failure of the protection and conservation measures required by the creation of a protected area, it is compulsory to identify all possible conflicts that may divide the stakeholders, both in the designing phase and in the operational one.

The natural parks and the nature reserves must be seen as a complementary form of anthropogenic intervention on the environment, oriented towards the restoring of its balance, by removing the visible causes of its degradation. In this category, one may include the landscapes resulted either from a traditional practice of territorial planning, implemented by a socio-cultural group, or from other practices of preserving the natural and semi-natural landscapes surrounding the cities (MANEA 2003). At the same time, however, one must also take into account the semi-natural urban quarters, whose initial function was abandoned, but which should be preserved as such in the interest of the people, for leisure and tourism activities.

According to the German ecologist Michael Succow (quoted by DEPRAZ 2008), the urban natural parks must be "objective parks", allowing a gradual riddance of the landscapes from the human pressure. The purpose is to achieve on a medium term a condition as close as possible to the natural one (renaturalization, ecological restructuring of the environment).

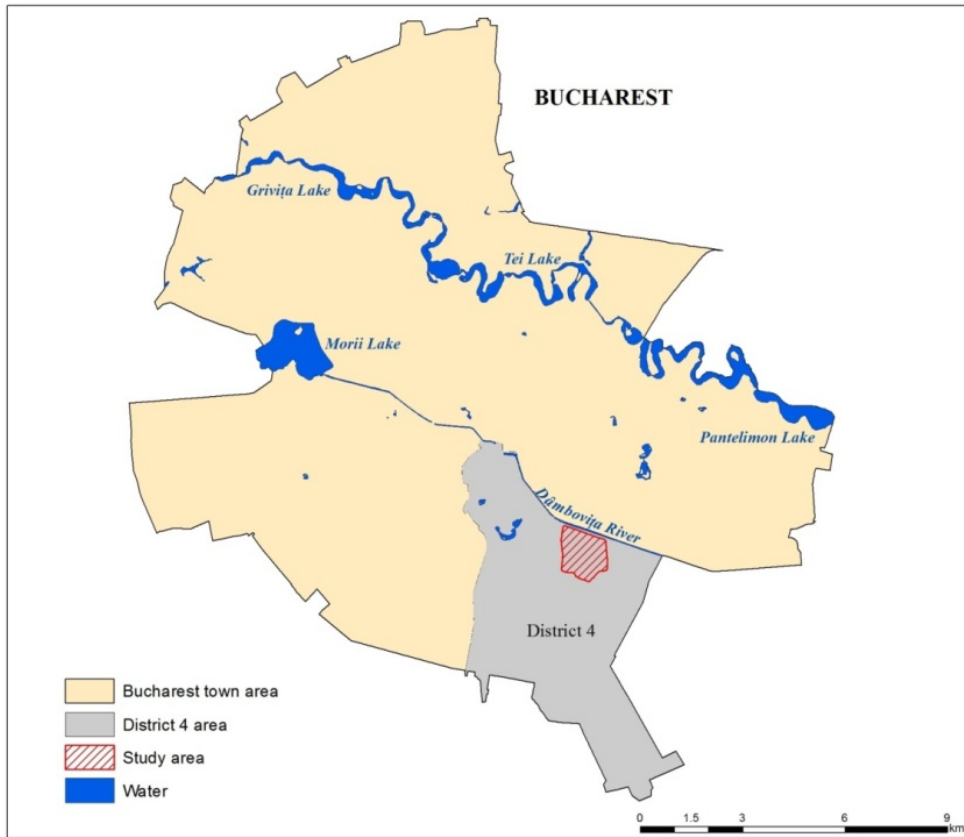
The aim of the study is to anticipate/identify the conflict situations that may occur between man and environment in the design and implementation of Lake Văcărești Urban Natural Park, and also to assess the opportunity of its capitalization through sustainable tourism. The paper is inspired by the media conflict that burst among the various stakeholders involved in the creation of the Lake Văcărești protected area, namely the local authorities, the government, the NGOs, the landowners, the residents living nearby, and the residents of Bucharest as a whole.

Study area

The investigated territory overlaps a "sui-generis" landscape division lying in the built up area of the Romanian Plain, a place that might become in the near future an urban natural protected area. This realm that occupies

about 180 hectares in the southern part of Bucharest City overlies a former dirty swamp, suggestively called in the past the Wailing Valley.

Geographically speaking, Lake Văcărești overlaps the Cotroceni-Berceni field, which is a subdivision of the Bucharest Plain. The Cotroceni-Berceni field is delimited to the north by the Dambovitza Valley, while to the south it stretches up to the River Sabar. From the altitudinal point of view, the hypsometric steps of 70-80 m and 80-90 m are prevailing (Cocos 2006) (fig. 1 and 2).



Figures 1,2: Geographical location of the study area (Designed by Roxana Cuculici, 2013)

The reclaiming works and the improvement of the swampy areas began during the communist period. Consequently, from the vast and dirty Wailing Valley only the Văcărești Pit survived. In the 1980s, President Ceausescu was willing to turn it into a recreational lake and sports grounds. In the last 20 years, the project was abandoned, which led to the formation of a novel ecosystem in the sink of the former Văcărești Pit (fig. 4), which presently shelters about 100 species of birds (hawks, wild ducks, and pheasants), reptiles (water snakes, newts, water turtles), and mammals (foxes, ferrets, otters and muskrats). Haphazardly discovered by photography enthusiasts, this space has recently caught the attention of the NGOs and the Ministry of Environment, which initiated the procedure of declaring this territory a protected area.

The research methodology was based both on collecting historical data, with the purpose of performing a diachronic analysis, and in monitoring the media articles and the opinions expressed on the social networks, in order to get the perception of the local authorities, the scientific community, the residents living nearby, and the landowners, with regard to the future destiny of Lake Văcărești.



Figure 3: Wildlife on Văcărești Lake



Figure 4: Văcărești Swamp

Source: <http://arhivadegeografie.wordpress.com/2012/03/30/explorare-urbana-in-lacul-vacaresti>, accessed on 17.03.2013; Iuliana Vijulie, 09. 2012

Results and discussion

The direct observations performed in the field during the interval August-September 2012, the analysis of cartographic documents (topographic maps, edition 2001, of scale 1:50000, aerial images of Bucharest City, edition 2008, resolution 0.5 m, scale 1:5000, maps in Stereo70 projection posted at <http://geoportal.ancpi.ro/inggis/services>), the monitoring of the media articles and the discussions on the social networks, as well as the talks with civil society representatives, all allowed us to identify the constraints that the creation of the protected area in the investigated perimeter must take into account. Likewise, we were able to understand the advantages that such an urban protected area would bring both to the environment and to Bucharest residents.

The constraints to this approach come, on the one hand, from the civil society (especially the landowners and the skeptics - some of them even in the academia) and on the other hand, from the entrepreneurs and real estate investors, who are attracted by the lower price of the land in comparison with Bucharest real estate market (MATEI 2007). But the positive aspect of improving the environmental quality is highly appreciated by the NGOs, the people in the proximity, the representatives of the central environmental authority and most academics.

At present, the situation identified in the field is dramatic, inasmuch as the vacant land status of the study area worsens the conflict situations between man and environment. For the time being, the “real” users of the territory adjacent to Lake Văcărești are the homeless people, who built their *favelas*-type shacks on the lake banks. These inhabitants harvest the nearby trees and bushes for fuel and even hunt with slings the bird species (according to eyewitness testimonials).

The stray dogs and the ones bread in the improvised households are a threat for the bird species. Besides, the so-called tourists, priers and anglers negatively impact the biotope and biocenosis in the study area, through the fragmentation of herbaceous cover, the accidental or intentional burning of stud and read (in order to create access trails to the pools) and the destruction of hydrophilous and hygrophilous species.

The comments made in virtual environment with respect to the future functional role of the vacant land adjacent to Lake Văcărești are virulent, their authors standing on both sides of the fence. The most active ones are the landowners, who are reluctant to agree that the land adjacent to Lake Văcărești be turned into an urban protected area. These people seek to obtain short-term benefits by selling the land to the potential real estate investors. As a matter of fact, part of the land was already sold prior to the real estate crisis and now the respective area is occupied by the “Asmita Garden” residential complex (fig. 5 and 7).



Figure 5: Lake Vacaresti (Romania)



Figure 6: Costanera Sur (Argentina)

Source: Gabriela Manea, 09. 2012; blog.birdingbuenosaires.com/2010/11, accessed on 15.09.2012

The urban environment, characterized by the prevalence of artificial and artificialized natural components, by a high density of population and constructions and by a high degree of chemical, physical, biological, and even moral pollution, may and should include representative samples of city quarters reintegrated in the surrounding nature, either through the agency of urban regeneration actions or through the ecological reconstruction of the degraded landscapes. In reality, besides the well-known functions (industrial, commercial, administrative, services etc.), the urban ecosystems may also serve valuable ecological functions. These may be put forward by declaring/creating urban protected areas, as models of sustainable ecological management, capable of lending economic value to the protected areas (MUNASINGHE & MCNEELY 1994). Examples in this respect are rather numerous. We can mention here the Ekoparken Urban Natural Park in Stockholm, which has been criticized from the perspective of the city sprawl, because it hinders some urban development works (industrial and/or residential projects). For this reason, Ekoparken is one of a kind in Sweden. Other examples are the urban natural parks Hämeenlinna (2001), Heinola (2002), Pori (2002) and Hanko (2008) in Finland, as well as the urban natural protected areas lying in the hinterland of Buenos Aires (Costanera Sur, Vicente Lopez) (fig. 6). In Bucharest City, the future Lake Văcărești Urban Natural Park (fig. 3,4,5,7) might fulfill a double function: protection and enhancement of the landscape through sustainable tourism.

Conclusions

If Lake Văcărești were turned into a protected area, Bucharest would have the following advantages:

- Urban regeneration of a territory that is now nonfunctional and unhealthy;
- Ecological reconstruction of a semi-natural biotope;
- Creation of a leisure space for nature enthusiasts and an open air laboratory for scientists and students;
- Diversification of tourist offer for the city's residents;
- Better ecosystem services;
- Higher quality of life;
- Light tourist infrastructure;
- Higher tourist attractiveness;
- Improvement of metropolis brand;
- Implementation of organic urbanism or bio-urbanism concept;
- Social-economic benefits

If the present status-quo is maintained, the risks are the following:

- Lack of interest for protection and conservation on behalf of the authorities;
- Real estate transactions meant to support the building of residential complexes;
- Extinction of aquatic ecosystem

Recommendations

- Organizing workshops with the target groups involved in the management and scientific assessment of the investigated perimeter, as well as with people from abroad, who are dealing with the creation and management of the urban natural parks from other countries;
- Raising the awareness of local population by presenting examples of good practice;
- Involving the authorities (the Ministry of Environment, Bucharest Town Hall and the Town Hall of the 4th sector of the capital) in solving the litigations with the landowners, in order to identify the sustainable planning practices for the study area



Figure 7 – Lake Văcărești
Source: http://4.bp.blogspot.com/DSC_8951pp.jpg, accessed on 28.03.2013

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