

The Ulcinj Salina in Montenegro – outstanding natural values at risk

Report on the current situation of the Ulcinj Salina

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euRONATUR FOUNDATION



Save Ulcinj Salina –Summary

The Ulcinj Salina is one of the most important stopovers for migrating birds along the Adriatic Flyway. The ongoing destruction of the Ulcinj Salina in Montenegro jeopardizes tremendous European-wide efforts for improving the conservation status of threatened migrating bird species as Spoonbill, Dalmatian pelican and Garganey.

Therefore we call on the Government of Montenegro to ensure that the Ulcinj Salina will receive immediately a permanent and effective conservation status. As long as no protection is guaranteed, there will be always attempts to destroy the natural values of the Ulcinj Salina through the construction of infrastructure such as resort facilities, a marina or a golf course.

It seems that the Government of Montenegro is not aware about its responsibility for the protection of a significant part of the European natural heritage. We are afraid that the Government of Montenegro will not guarantee the designation of the Ulcinj Salina as protected area and in consequence will not meet its own international obligations. Being a candidate country as EU Member State, Montenegro cannot afford to allow further destruction of a future Natura2000 site. Already in 2007 the Government of Montenegro nominated the Ulcinj Salina as Emerald site and in the meantime no appropriate measures were taken to guarantee the protection of its natural values. Furthermore the Ulcinj Salina qualifies as Ramsar site and although all documents were prepared years ago, the Government of Montenegro did not apply for the nomination of Ulcinj Salina as Ramsar site.

The conservation status itself will not ensure the protection of the biodiversity of Ulcinj Salina. Therefore the salt production should be re-established. If this will be not possible in near future a durable ensuring of water circulation management is needed. The elaboration of a sustainable and successful protection concept is urgently requested.

Why Ulcinj Salina needs a protection status?

Natural and cultural values

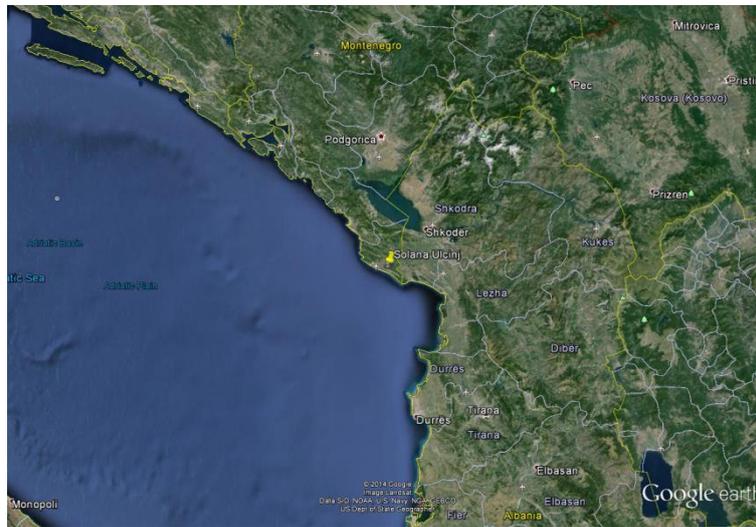


Figure 1 – Location of Ulcinj Salina at the east coast of the Adriatic Sea

Ulcinj Salina is situated at the south-eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea in Montenegro and covers large areas of a former inland lagoon. The saline represents an integrated element within the network of interconnected alluvial and coastal wetland habitats of the Bojana-Buna Delta. With a surface of 14.9 km² Ulcinj is one of the largest, operative salines in the Mediterranean region.

The regular flooding of the salt-pans with seawater and saline waters which is needed for the salt production is essential for preserving the unique wetland habitats of the area. In Ulcinj Salina the difference between the sea level and the saline level is significant. Therefore tides cannot assure the continuous flow of sea- and rainwater through the salt-pans, it can be done only with the support of pumping stations. The continuous flow of sea- and rainwater through the salt-pans and the presence of permanent waters are important factors for maintaining the biological diversity of the saline: a third of its total surface area is regularly flooded or permanently covered by water. In particular, open, but regularly flooded mudflats in the evaporation basins are very characteristic for the saline.

The sheer extent of the wetland habitats and the high species diversity of its fauna and flora are unique for the Eastern Adriatic region. Ulcinj Salina is the most important resting, wintering and breeding site for many species of waterbirds along the Adriatic Flyway. The saline is visited by at least 250 bird species. One quarter (more than 50 species) of the total number of breeding birds of Montenegro also nests in the saline. Except for the birds, Ulcinj Salina is a habitat for many endangered species of fish, amphibians and reptiles, as well as plants of saline habitats.

Despite the importance for biodiversity and the economy of the state, the saline is part of the region's cultural and historical heritage because it has been a driver for the development of the municipality of Ulcinj for almost 100 years.

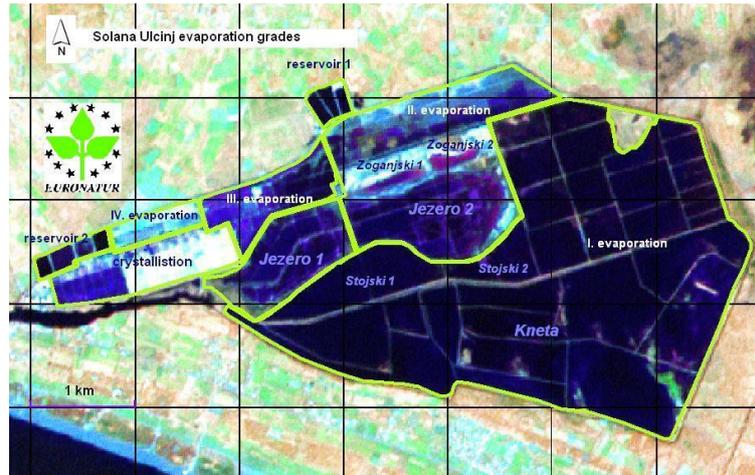


Figure 2 – Ulcinj Salina

Protection status and strategies

In 1989, following rules of the Bird Directive of the European Union, Grimmett&Jones¹ and BirdLife International² identified Ulcinj Salina as an Important Bird Area (IBA “Ulcinj salt pans – Ulcinjska solane”, 1.350 ha).

In 2003, EuroNatur and CZIP established cooperation with the former public enterprise Ulcinj Salina "Bajo Sekulic". The joint aim was the preservation of the saline as one of the most important stop-over sites for migratory birds along the Eastern Adriatic. In consultation with the management of the public enterprise EuroNatur and CZIP pushed through a ban on bird hunting. In 2004, the Board of Ulcinj Salina proclaimed it as the first private nature park in Montenegro.

In 2007, Velika Plaža and Ulcinj Salina (2'839.46 ha) were designated as Emerald Site 11 “Velika Plaža with Ulcinj Salina” by the joint meeting of the Ecological Networks Committee of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg³.

Since 2008 the Ulcinj Salina is part of the list of potential Natura2000 sites in Montenegro.

According to the presence of 15 species which reach the 1 % threshold of the Ramsar Convention (1971), Ulcinj Salina is a wetland of international importance. EuroNatur and CZIP completed the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for the area already back in 2006, translated it into local language and forwarded it to the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and the Institute for Nature Protection in Podgorica for nominating the Ulcinj Salina as a Ramsar site. Nevertheless the Montenegrin authorities have still not applied for the protection of the site under the Ramsar Convention.

¹ GRIMMETT R. F. A. & JONES T. A. 1989. Important Bird Areas in Europe. – ICBP Technical Publ. 9, International Council for Bird Preservation, Cambridge, U.K.

² HEATH M. F. & EVANS M. I. (eds.) 2001. Important Bird Areas in Europe: Priority Sites for Conservation. Vol. 2, Southern Europe. – BirdLife Conservation Ser. 8, BirdLife International, Cambridge, U.K.

³ EMERALD. 2007. Progress of the CARDS South-East Europe programme by the end of 2007. Final Project Report Montenegro. – Joint Meeting of the Ecological Networks of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg (France), 18–19 October, 2007.

According to the approved Nature Act of the Republic of Montenegro, for all protected areas of the country a Management Plan (MP) will be needed. Ulcinj Salina is the first site for which a MP was prepared in cooperation of EuroNatur with local stake-holders in 2008.

In the Spatial Plan of Montenegro⁴ Ulcinj Salina was listed as an important representative of the most characteristic landscapes of the country. The elaboration of the Spatial Plan was supported by the German Government, f. e. experts from the GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation) helped with technical assistance to prepare the documents. The aim of the original version of the Spatial Plan was to open up new economic perspectives to Montenegro through sustainable development. Later on, a scandalous amended version submitted to the Parliament for voting was passed in 2007. This amended version clearly diverged from the one that underwent the environmental impact assessment and was presented to a public hearing shortly before. In the amended version, the designation of new protected areas was deleted; this also applied for Ulcinj Salina. In the contrary the saline was earmarked for tourist land use, including the construction of new accommodation facilities. And so the important wetland Ulcinj Salina was turned into a potential building site. This decision increased the financial speculation value many times.

After the privatisation of Ulcinj Salina (2005) and after cancelling the designation of Ulcinj Salina as a protected area in the Spatial Plan of Montenegro, the major stake-holder Eurofond decided to sell it to big investors which would develop the area for mass tourism. Still it is not absolutely clear whether Eurofond is holding the complete ownership rights of the Ulcinj Salina or just the using rights. Currently Eurofond has started a law case against the Montenegrin state in order to gain the full ownership rights. In December 2011, when the plans to divert the saline into a mass tourism destination became public, massive protests organized by CZIP took place. In June 2012 the Montenegrin Ministry of Tourism and Sustainable Development proposed that Ulcinj Salina should be protected, with the exception of the existing buildings and crystallisation basins. In July 2012 this proposal was confirmed when parliament adopted a new version of the Spatial Plan of Montenegro.

This new Spatial Plan of Montenegro regulates that the site is to be designated as a nature reserve in the municipal land-use plan and that salt production is to be continued. According to the new version of the Spatial Plan, the Ulcinj municipal authority has to implement the national guidelines in their own land-use plan. So far this step has not been taken, but it is still unclear which party is hampering the process.

In December 2014 Eurofond announced a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg against the Montenegrin state, i.e. decision of Parliament of Montenegro that the land of the Ulcinj Salina is not allowed to be used for construction of a touristic complex, but only to be used for salt production.

The main threats for Ulcinj Salina

In the course of privatization in 2005, the company Eurofond acquired 75% of Ulcinj Salina business for just 800'000 EUR from the State of Montenegro, including the Ulcinj Salina area. Since 2011 Veselin Barović, who controls Eurofond, tried to sell Ulcinj Salina several times to large investors and

⁴ MINISTRY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT – REPUBLIC OF MONTENEGRO. 2008. Spatial Plan of Montenegro until 2020. – Republic of Montenegro, Podgorica.

asked for prices between 179-256 million EUR. In addition, Eurofond is suing the Montenegrin government with the aim to change the right to use the Ulcinj Saline to the right of complete ownership, including the right to transform it into a construction site.

In 2014 Eurofond run down the salt production, already in 2012 its company AD Solana “Bajo Sekulić” producing salt went bankrupt. Today, a bankruptcy proceeding is ongoing. The bankruptcy manager tried to sell the saline too. The last public bidding for the sale of Ulcinj Salina assets was scheduled by the bankruptcy manager in November 2014. The price was lowered to 179 million euros. It was already the 11th and unsuccessful attempt to sell the saline.

Since the saline went bankrupt the situation is continuously getting worse. The salt production could continue in 2013, but in the end of 2013 Electric Power Company of Montenegro (EPCG) cut the electricity due to an unpaid bill of 21.000 EUR. Workers went on strike and were dismissed in 2014, the salt production was stopped. Extra to the problem with the electricity another problem appeared. In spring of 2014 important pumps were destroyed by unknown criminals, so that the circulation of the water could not be ensured. Although it is legally obliged to protect the property of Ulcinj Salina, the Bankruptcy administration is just a silent observer of the collapse of all vital machines of the factory. The repair of the pumps would be very costly and there is still the danger of further sabotage. Although by May 2014 an appropriate infrastructure for nature tourism in the Ulcinj Salina was prepared (Museum of Ulcinj Salina, construction of watchtowers, a souvenir shop), the Bankruptcy administration has banned the entrance to the Ulcinj Salina for CZIP and tourists in the period from June until September (including for bird monitoring). Infrastructure for birdwatchers on the territory of the Ulcinj Salina prepared by Euronatur and CZIP is damaged or destroyed in the meantime.

This situation hampered the opportunities for those companies f. e. for the Syndicate of the former saline workers, which wanted to apply for the rental of the saline, which was announced by the bankruptcy manager. Without pumping the continuous flow of sea- and rainwater through the salt-pans cannot be ensured and the biodiversity of the saline is at risk.

Not only that the seawater could not be pumped in. The heavy rains in 2014 were an even bigger problem. The rain water could not be pumped out and the water level rose dramatically. Most of the year the dykes were under water what caused big damages. Large investments for repairing of these damages will be needed in the future.



Figure 3 – These nests of Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) were wilful destroyed in summer 2013

This situation brought many negative consequences for birds. In May 2014 due to high water level flamingos had to give up their breeding. It was all the more sad that more than 1,500 animals were at the time in the saline. The Ulcinj Salina filled with freshwater does not have such as high biotope's diversity and does not produce the same amount of biomasses of arthropods and other invertebrates as a functioning saline, so that the food supply for wildlife is lower. Despite the fact that in 2014 heavy rains caused problems in next years another problem may occur. Namely that there is too little water in the summer and that succession will overgrow the Saline.

Due to absence of workers in the Ulcinj Salina and thus also surveillance of the site, illegal hunting and poaching increased. EuroNatur and CZIP reacted to this situation with an intensification of visits within the framework of the project Bird Crime Monitoring in Ulcinj Salina. CZIP reported that the presence of poachers is now significantly higher than in last hunting season.

In addition, another problem has occurred during the debate about the new hunting law. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development declared that the Ulcinj Salina will not be added to the list of hunting ban areas. Detailed examination of documentation recently showed that in 2010, without any public debate, a land registry of hunting areas in Montenegro was accepted and within the Hunting Area of Ulcinj, one part of Ulcinj Salina is declared as a hunting area with the right to hunt on Sundays. Despite the fact that even the bankruptcy management indicated that the saline is to be hunting ban area the Ministry is not willing to change the registration of hunting areas in Montenegro.

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