

Plitvice National Park, World Heritage Site, and the Wars in the Former Yugoslavia

Today we all know about events in Croatia and Serbia. Some know about the self-declared Republic of Krajina, and a few have heard about Plitvice National Park as a World Heritage Site in danger. In Zagreb only the white UN vehicles signal the fact that war is being waged as near as Karlovac, some 30 km to the southwest, where the evil that Man has let loose is evident in smoking shells of houses and gutted churches. There is no respect for the works of humanity!

Around 100 km further south lies the former 'economic engine' of the region, Plitvice National Park and World Heritage Site (WHS). With some 700,000 visitors a year, Plitvice grossed US \$50,000,000 yearly, but today the border is closed and there is no civilian traffic. Nor is there any postal service or other means of communication.

United Nations Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) patrol the area — first a Czech battalion and then a Polish battalion. Traffic is minimal and the Park is relatively calm. The surrounding area continues an uneasy slumber, with long-distance (20 km) artillery lobbing-in shells to keep up a psychological war.

Journalists write that Plitvice is being logged, that the wildlife is being slaughtered, and that the Park has been pillaged. In reality this is false propaganda.

Unharmful State of the Park and WHS

In September 1992 and again in the Summer of 1993, a World Heritage Monitoring Team were invited by the warring parties to monitor the Site (Fig. 1). We met with former Park officials in Zagreb and with senior military and elected officials in Knin. We were given military escorts and full access to the Plitvice World Heritage Site, and viewed all but one small and unique sector of the Park — a virgin forest that is believed to be mined.

There has been vandalism to some of the Park's facilities, but nothing that cannot be repaired. Both the Croatian and the Serbian authorities have respected the unique tuff dams, waterfalls, forests, and wildlife, of the Park. In fact, Nature is resting and healing after many years of heavy tourism!

Human Inhabitants Suffering

There is, however, little respect for the people who lived in the area. Some are refugees in exile, while those who remain are still being shelled. Meanwhile the UNPROFOR have been most cooperative, ensuring a presence through several check-points situated strategically throughout the Park. But what will be the future? It seems unlikely that the warring parties can live in harmony and so a political solution is essential.

Sadly, Plitvice is not a unique situation. Practically throughout the world, war has bled the financial resources which may have been available for conservation. Many parks do not have the funds to pay their staff or to provide basic equipment for management.

Some Future Hopes

The UN 'Blue Berets' have been, and continue to be, helpful. Do we not need a 'Green Beret' facility, funded by the Global Environmental Facility — a trust fund — as an essential first step towards ensuring that war-torn nations can find some financial support to stabilize their deteriorating situation in many parks and even World Heritage Sites?

For the present, in Plitvice National Park and WHS, we can only wish that warring parties could be as sensitive to the needs of local people as they have fortunately been to the natural values of this unique World Heritage Site. For even from the extreme holistic viewpoint, the friendly collaboration of local inhabitants is essential for lasting environmental security.



FIG. 1. In Plitvice National Park, September 1993. Photo: Harold K. Eidsvik.

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