

Sailing to Barcelona – Saving the Planet?

A Balkan odyssey to WCC 2008

One of the highlights of the opening of the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona on Sunday 12th October was the spectacle of the Montenegrin ship Jadran – under full sail – proudly leading a parade of more than twenty vessels from Port Vell to the Conference venue. The parade was the conclusion of the ‘Sailing to Barcelona’ initiative, where sailing boats, research vessels and environmentally-friendly ships gathered to showcase their contributions to the protection of marine and coastal biodiversity (a key theme of the congress). Two days before, after 10 days at sea (with a brief stop-over in Cagliari) the Jadran had finally dropped anchor (actually, moor alongside the quay, but ‘dropping anchor’ is so much more romantic) in Barcelona.

Behind us were more than a thousand nautical miles of calm seas and wild storms, sunny days and still nights. This was a small step for the seasoned crew of the Jadran but a major leap for most of our small band of Balkan conservationists and fellow travellers sailing from Montenegro to the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona.



Our voyage had started 10 days before, on 24th September, when months of planning came to fruition as the regional contingent of ‘Sailing to Barcelona’ gathered in the ancient Montenegrin port of Kotor. The quay was packed with families, relatives and friends of the crew, there to wave goodbye together with the elite of the Montenegrin navy in their ceremonial white military suits. On deck, a launch ceremony was opened by the Mayor of Kotor, followed by speeches from the Montenegrin Minister of Defence (the Jadran is a Navy training ship) and from the Minister of Tourism and Environment, each giving their good wishes for the voyage. A military band played as the last ropes were cast, and the 75-year old sailing vessel Jadran – once the pride of the Yugoslav navy (the pre-War Kingdom and the post-war Socialist Republic), finally set off.

The enterprise had started small. A coffee bar conversation in Belgrade, between staff in the IUCN South-East Regional Office, and the Serbian Institute of Nature Conservation (with which it is happily co-located) had led, first, to the possibility, of 'borrowing' a boat belonging to one of the Institute's staff. But only 5 metres long and with an outboard motor of some antiquity, it was unlikely to last the distance. Besides, he would have to ask his mother, and who knows what she would say? Or perhaps they could hire a boat from Barcelona or a nearby port for the occasion. But this would be '*šminka*' – a petty and inadequate gesture for such an important occasion. After all, the World Conservation Congress is a major event. Founded in 1948 as the world's first global environmental organisation, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) remains unique as a democratic union of over 1,000 states, government agencies and NGOs in over 160 countries. Its World Conservation Congresses, held every four years, are the principal discussion and policy-making forum for world conservation action. This year, with marine and coastal conservation a special priority, there would be a series of events involving vessels that had sailed to the conference. It would be a great shame if the countries of SE Europe - especially those with an Adriatic coastline - were not part of this initiative, and it was clear that something special would be needed. But what could this special initiative be?



Eventually, inspiration struck. Wasn't there a boat, built as a training ship 75 years ago for the Yugoslav navy? And wasn't it now in harbour in Kotor undergoing a refit? Eventually after much scheming and several false starts, the Captain was approached directly. Yes, the Jadran was fit for service, and OK for such a long journey. After all, hadn't they made it to Portsmouth in 2005 for the Battle of Trafalgar celebrations? And yes, before this, in 1938, there was that epic voyage, all the way to Boston, New York. And, yes, the Ministry did approve providing it was clear to all that once afloat, the Captain would be in charge of logistics, and the ship would continue in its training role during the voyage.

So – here we were, at last! 90-odd souls on board, including our small contingent of conservationists *en route* to the WCC. Most of the ‘Dinaric Arc’ countries were represented - from Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia (‘represented’ by proxy by an English academic), plus an officer from the IUCN South East Europe Regional. Others, including representatives from Italy, and from UNESCO’s Regional Office in Venice, would join us in Sardinia.

The rest? Well, the Jadran has a permanent crew of 12, plus the captain and first mate. The remaining 20 seamen required to sail such a vessel had been drafted in from other ships (including submarines) to make the complement (some have never ‘sailed’ before), plus *učenici* (naval high school students) and *studenti* (from the military academy or the merchant navy faculty of the university). All were male (apart from the ship’s doctor, drafted in for the occasion) and most, with the male members of the WCC team, were accommodated in two 30-bed compartments in the ship’s hold. An odd hierarchy exists - *učenici* and *studenti* in the top bunks, where they have to contend with dripping pipes and bulkhead divisions; drafted seamen in the bottom, and the WCC contingent, significantly, in the middle bunks. The women in our team had the ‘first class’ (normally, the officers’) accommodation – cabins above waterline and permission to use the Captain’s WC and shower, with running hot water, rather than the ‘picturesque’ facilities afforded to the crew. This was the first time that women had taken part in a voyage on the Jadran - in fact, it was the first time that the vessel had carried civilians on a long-distance passage - and before we set off our Captain was clearly somewhat apprehensive. Detailed rules were issued, mostly observed in the most relaxed fashion, and soon a good *rapport* was



established all round. Like the crew and the trainees, we were here to work – in the case of the WCC contingent, to learn from each other, network, plan, publicise, see how we could take our activity to a new level, so seminars on board (in the ship’s hold, not the easiest place for presentations and discussion) have been a regular feature of the voyage.

Some interesting comparisons have emerged, between philosophical and institutional approaches to conservation. For example, on the institutional level, all the

former Yugoslav republics have semi-independent State Institutes for nature conservation charged with species protection, research and monitoring, and the designation of protected areas (though Croatia dates hers only to 2003, Serbia traces its Institute back to 1948 and, with IUCN is this year celebrating its 60th anniversary). However in Croatia, the Institute exists within the Ministry of Culture whereas in Serbia it is within the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning and in Montenegro's the Institute of Tourism and Environment. But in Bulgaria, the 'competent authority' is the Ministry of Environment, with research contracted to university departments and specialist research institutes – all within the Academy of Sciences. The consequence is a science-driven emphasis on 'basic' ecological research, with the danger of an 'implementation deficit' with conservation subservient to economic interests. In all cases Directors of national parks are appointed directly by the Minister, rather than by autonomous executive boards as in many European countries.



Seminars were only one task which meant that our voyage has not all been 'plain sailing'. Work took on a new meaning also on the afternoon of Sunday (day 5) of our voyage. Anchored in the bay of Cagliari, Sardinia and lined up with the crew and the trainees, the WCC contingent were told that we could move to dock in the harbour at 9am the following morning – ship's uniform compulsory for all – but that first the Jadran had to be cleaned (literally) from top to bottom. For most of the conservation team this was their first experience of scrubbing decks and added a new dimension to what had already been a new and instructive experience.

In Cagliari we were welcomed by senior Italian naval officers of equivalent rank to our own ship's Captain and Commander. We were also joined by Italian and German colleagues for the final leg of our journey to the WCC. This made us an even more international group and one appropriate to the history of the Jadran, which was celebrating its own 75th birthday. Built in Hamburg between 1931 and 1933, the costs of the Jadran had been raised by public subscription through the '*Jadranska straža*' an NGO formed in 1922 to promote Yugoslavia's presence in the

Adriatic, at that time dominated by Italy. During the Second World War, the Italian navy used the Jadran (renamed the Marco Polo) as a training ship and the end of the War saw the ship stripped and abandoned in Venice, serving as a bridge, until it was renovated and brought into service once again as the pride of Yugoslavia's navy. So today, in very different circumstances and three-quarters of a century after its construction, the presence of a truly international group, sailing to the World Conservation Congress was symbolic of the way that environmental concerns transcend national boundaries.

The break in Cagliari also provided the opportunity to recharge our batteries – physically as well as mentally. One group took a car to visit Ponte de Carbonara, a marine protected area in the south-east of the island (swimming compulsory); others sampled the town's rich archaeological, architectural, cultural and culinary history. We were seen off on Wednesday morning, by the same Italian naval officers who had welcomed us on our arrival – a ceremony delayed by only a few minutes by the late arrival of the *Carbonara* contingent from returning their hire car.



Seminars on the second leg of our journey continued and developed the debate initiated in the first half. Some presentations raised significant policy, even philosophical, issues. For example, what kind of protection is implied by the designation of *Natura 2000* sites (or in pre-accession states, the Emerald Network)? In Croatia, some 44% of the land surface is

considered worthy of *Natura 2000* status, yet formally designated protected areas account for only around 9% of the territory. Protected areas cover 7% of Montenegro yet 17% of the territory has been internationally designated (by UNESCO or under the RAMSAR wetlands convention). This leads to a contradiction. Kotor and Risan bay have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site for their extraordinary natural and cultural heritage, yet neither are designated as protected areas under national law. Clearly a significant strengthening of the protected area network is needed in both countries if the natural and cultural heritage recognised under European and international conventions are to be given adequate protection. The 'medals' of international recognition can sometimes

be used to threaten people, but they are no substitute for a proper national system of protected areas, which should always be greater than the 'key' areas represented by Natura 2000 or World Heritage Sites. Maybe the IUCN protected area guidelines need revisiting (and indeed, revised guidelines were launched at Barcelona). Inevitably (with Montenegrins a majority on the vessel and with Montenegro fresh in the minds of all the 'foreign' guests) much discussion concerned Montenegro's strategies for economic development, particularly those relating to tourism. Is Montenegro developing a genuinely different, 'green' approach to tourism, or is it locking itself in to a process of development which has already destroyed the attraction of much of the Adriatic coast elsewhere? This remained an open question for the group.

The promotional material produced by different national conservation agencies (including video and CDs) and the seminar presentations have been strikingly different in approach. Some emphasise the 'scientific' values of bio (and geo) diversity and nature protection, others the heritage, emotional and scenic value of protected areas. All agreed that the crucial element in successful conservation was the active participation of local residents, however good examples of where this had been achieved were hard to come by. Only Serbia appears to have an active structure specifically promoting earth heritage conservation, however the fact that this year's biennial ProGeo conference is meeting on the island of Rab (unfortunately coinciding with WCC) makes it clear that Croatia too is actively engaged in geological conservation.

Throughout our discussions, some common features emerged strongly. These include:

- Poor administrative/institutional capacity (especially on county / municipality levels) and absence of management plans for protected areas.
- Lack of biodiversity data for key species and poor monitoring of the outcomes of PA management
- Weak co-operation with other policy sectors (e.g. economic development) at all levels
- Lack of engagement of, and poor communication with local stakeholders ('participative planning' is a new concept for many countries) and consequent weak public and political support (especially on local level)
- Lack of resources and insufficient financing.

And so we arrived in Barcelona, full of memories of our voyage, but also primed with ideas and enthusiasm and keen to work and socialise with our fellow Congress participants (landlubbers and sailors alike). We have sailed – if not the traditional 'seven seas', then a good part of three smaller ones; the Adriatic, the northern end of the Ionian



and the Tyrrhenian. In the ten short days of our voyage, we have seen the most glorious sunsets (and for those who did not party too much the night before, some magnificent sunrises); we have been visited daily by dolphins (and once, on deck, by a flying fish); we have negotiated the rapids of Scylla and Charybdis; seen fire spurt and lava flows from the

summit of Stromboli. Some of us have climbed rigging, tied ropes, furled flags. Throughout, we have enjoyed the wonderful company of our hosts – crew and trainees – on board the most wonderful sailing ship afloat (and the subject of admiration from other ‘sailors to Barcelona’).

Significantly, just as the Jadran had the privilege to launch the Congress, it fell to the Jadran to end the first (Forum) part of it, at 9am on Friday October 10 with an unforgettable show as the Jadran left Port Vell to return to Montenegro. Now, with the Conference itself at an end, and inspired by both our voyage and our debates – at sea and on land - we are ready to participate in what is for all of us a far more challenging task than ‘sailing’. This is to help to ensure a sustainable future for our planet and its inhabitants – human and ‘natural’, so that hopefully the Jadran will be able to sail through clean seas promoting a message of conservation alongside its ‘official’ purpose for future generations.