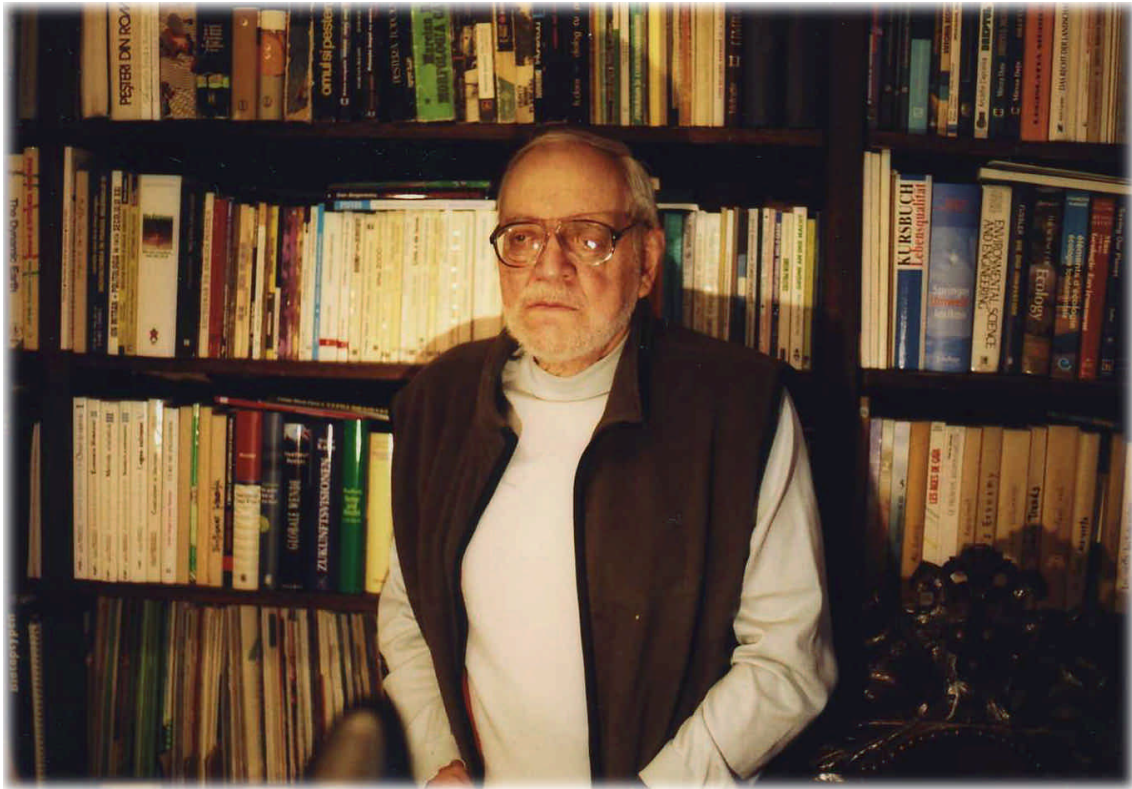


Making Ends Meet

Tulcea, Danube Delta, Romania



Marcian Bleahu

Professor Marcian Bleahu is the Leader of the Ecology Party of Romania. He is a Geographer and Geologist, and has been Director of the Geological Service of Romania. He is one of the founders of the Ecological University of Bucharest, and is a Professor there. The University has a branch in Tulcea, the city which is the jumping-off point for the Delta. He has also been a politician, and has been a Senator and Minister of the Environment since the fall of communism in 1989 – although he is not a member of the current government and has some criticisms of it.

Professor Bleahu loves the Danube Delta. He wants to `save' it. It is, for him, a wonderful place, a `textbook of biology, of geology, of nature'. He, and other Greens, had a lot of hope for the Delta after 1989, and a Biosphere Reserve was set up there almost straight away. But nowadays, he told us, there is too much unplanned development of tourism and business in the Delta, without enough thought for the future. It is, he told us, very vulnerable to over-exploitation. Caviar from sturgeon, caught off the coast of the Delta, are big business, and are being overexploited. In the mid 1950s 20,000 tonnes of sturgeon were caught, but now only 30 tonnes are caught. This is partly because of lack of planning nowadays, but it is also because of pollution due to attempts to exploit the Delta economically during the Communist period.

Professor Bleahu felt that there were three `aggressions' committed against the Danube Delta during the Communist period, between 1945 and 1989. These were:

- 1) Ceaucescu wanted to transform the Delta into a huge agricultural area. Embankments were built to create `polders' – artificially created areas of dry land.

Water was pumped out to create these – but the sea water then seeped in, and this meant that many of the polders are not good for growing crops. After the Romanian 'Revolution' of 1989, when Ceaucescu was overthrown, many of the polders were abandoned. Professor Bleahu believes that they now need to be reflooded, to return the areas to nature.

2) Fish ponds were also created under Ceaucescu, which also meant building embankments. This changed the flow of water, leading to stagnation. Chinese carp were brought in and because these are phytophages – eating surface plankton – this changed the surface flora and fauna.

3) Reed harvesting was carried out on a huge scale, and machines from Germany were brought in for this. These were, Professor Bleahu said, too heavy, and they destroyed the roots of the reeds. 60,000 hectares of reeds were completely destroyed. Nowadays, only a small quantity of reeds is cut commercially, in winter, above the surface of the ice. But huge areas of reed beds had already been damaged or destroyed.

Professor Bleahu told us that the people living in the Delta should be protected. He believes that they are able to maintain a balance between their needs and those of the other living things in the Delta, since they don't exploit its resources on a large scale and use simple, traditional methods. But he doesn't think that, at the moment, the Romanian state is supportive of the people of the Delta. He told us that there is a high level of depopulation – young people are leaving the Delta. He would like to reverse this by providing better facilities - better communications, good schools and shops.

Tourism in the Delta, for Professor Bleahu, should not be large-scale mass tourism based on large land hotels. It should be community-based, with tourists staying in homestay accommodation in villages. He suggested that tourists could stay on boats. He told us that he believes in 'developing tourism in villages, in old traditional houses, to offer visitors a piece of old authentic popular life, to know what family life in the Delta is really about'.