

# Making Ends Meet

## Mila 23, Danube Delta, Romania



In the heart of the Delta near Mila 23

### Introduction

The Danube Delta is both remote and wild. Marcian Bleahu, leader of the Green Party in Romania, described it to us as 'a textbook of biology, of geology, of nature, a textbook open for each what are able to understand something from all this special life. It is a land in continuous transformation, a land growing from the water...'. The Delta is a huge area thinly populated by about 12,000 people whose ancestors came here as refugees from other parts of Europe, finding a hiding place here where they were safe and could scrape a living. There are Lipoveni from Russia, Cossacks from the Ukraine and shepherds from other parts of Romania. While the Lipoveni live in the wettest parts of the Delta and rely mostly on fish; the Cossacks and Romanians, who live where there is more dry land, keep animals too.

Under the Ceaucescu regime, until 1989, there were all sorts of experiments to try and make the Delta more economically productive. But immediately after the Revolution of 1989 the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve was set up, with the aim of reversing what Ceaucescu had done and 'saving' the unique ecology of the Delta. Now much of the Delta is strictly protected, and this has meant that the people of the Delta are restricted in how they can use its resources.

But one benefit of the Biosphere Reserve is that 'ecotourism' is growing in the Delta, with visitors increasingly coming - not just from Romania but from other countries too - to experience the rich animal and plant life. This provides the possibility for local people to make an income by taking in visitors, since there are very few hotels.

To find out how people make ends meet in the Delta, we visited Mila 23. It's a fairly typical Lipoveni community. Practically every man in the village is a fisherman, while the women care for

small strips of garden on what dry land is available amidst the winding waterways of the area, and process vegetables for use in the harsh winters. Fishing is the hub around which their lives revolve. Fish makes up most of what they eat - as the writer Anton Radu Roman told us, 'They have very very small quantity of vegetables, they have enough fish, that means you make a soup with one onion and fifteen kinds of species of fish. You put an onion and you put after ten, eleven, twelve, twenty kilos of fish, carp, pikes, etc. etc'. Traian Gherasim, a young fisherman in the village, considers that 'A man needs around one kilo fish per day, a strong man'. Although it can be dangerous, particularly in winter, the oldest inhabitant of the village, Fyodor Butelkin (see panorama), told us he that believes nature to be benevolent to the fisherman - that 'a fisherman is close to nature and nature won't hurt the fisherman except when the fisherman is drunk'.

Livelihoods in the Delta are complex. People in Mila 23 also hunt the birds, some of which compete with them for fish. But they are selective as to which ones they hunt. Volodia Butelkin, a fisherman from the village told us that 'he doesn't hunt pelicans and swans because these birds are very beautiful and he doesn't have the heart to do that. He says that the pelicans are the monument of nature....'

The people of Mila 23 are fiercely independent. Even under the socialist system their livelihoods were not collectivised, and they are not used to depending on outsiders, and don't like outsiders interfering in their livelihoods. As Anton Radu Roman - who was exiled to the Delta under Ceaucescu - told us, 'they are alone with nature ... nobody gives them nothing, nobody, since years and years and years...'. But Anton also emphasised that 'they love the foreign people, they love strangers, they are so alone there...' - though he told us that you have to know how to talk to them!

There is little cash in Mila 23. But this doesn't mean that the people consider themselves poor. For Pina Butelkin, 'Everyone can fish and have a garden. Here, the people have enough access to land and to fish. Only people who are drunk or lazy have to be poor'. For people here, poverty would be having to live without the natural resources to make a living by oneself - so it's easier to be poor in town than in the Delta.

Before 1989, some people from the village did take up jobs in the town of Tulcea, three hours away by motor boat. But now, the economic situation in the country is bad and there is very little work. Many people are returning to villages in the Delta like Mila 23, coming back to the traditional livelihood of their parents where they can depend on their own resources rather than relying on unpredictable and unreliable outside sources of income. Doina and Dan Burungiu have moved back from Tulcea and have taken up a mixture of fishing, vegetable and fruit growing and animal-keeping to make ends meet, in Stipoc near Mila 23, where Dan's parents came from - they were evicted under Ceaucescu to make way for a scheme to drain a huge area of land for an agricultural 'polder'. For Dan, 'the better style of life it's here, not in other places. He was in a lot of other places because he was a driver before but he decided to move here and has his family and his gospoderia (household) here, in this place.'

But there are problems in making ends meet in the Delta. First of all, the Biosphere Reserve regulations are imposed more strictly now than the regulations about the use of Delta resources under the socialist period. There is a strict three-month 'Prohibition period' when the fish are breeding. This is a serious problem for the people of a village like Mila 23. Traian.Gherasim told us that 'the ecologists must understand that the local inhabitants are depending on the fish and if they don't fish they don't have enough to eat'. Old Fyodor Butelkin objected to the fact that the 'ecologists' - which is what the locals call those who run the Reserve - have cut extra channels through the reeds in order to race out around in fast motor boats, 'checking' the plant and animal

life and, he believes, actually disturbing the ecological balance.

Another problem is land tenure. The people of the Delta fear that the Biosphere Reserve may mean that the authorities want to remove the people from the Delta, particularly from areas which are considered particularly in need of protection. So the fact that they haven't got legal title yet worries them. Doina and Dan don't have title for the land they are using, even though it was Dan's family's. The people of Mila 23 don't yet have title even to the land on which their houses are built, though they have been there for centuries. Volodia Butelkin and his wife Pina were so concerned that they took us to meet the mayor of the area in the village of Crisan nearby, asking us to try to find out when they would get title (the mayor promised that it would be 'soon').

Anton Radu Roman emphasised that the Delta is precious to him for its people as well as its nature. He told us: 'I don't accept a Delta without people, I don't imagine Romania without Danube Delta and I don't imagine Danube Delta without people from the Delta, without Lipoveni and Ukrainians from the Delta. It's impossible for me to imagine that.'

## Thinking points

- The people of the Delta have been living in the Delta and managing its resources for their own sustainable use for centuries. Should the regulations be different for local fishermen than for sports or commercial fishermen - and how could this be set up?
- What do you think about the attitudes of people in Mila 23 to poverty - that poverty is not having access to the natural resources to make a living by oneself, rather than not having access to employment?
- Think about the relationship between the people of Mila 23 and the outside world. They want to be self-reliant - but they're interested in the outside world. Do you think this is typical of people living in remote communities?
- Would you like to stay with a Lipoveni fishermen or a Cossack pastoralist if you visited the Delta, rather than in a hotel? Would you be interested only in the 'wild nature' of the Delta or would you like to get to know the people of the Delta as well?