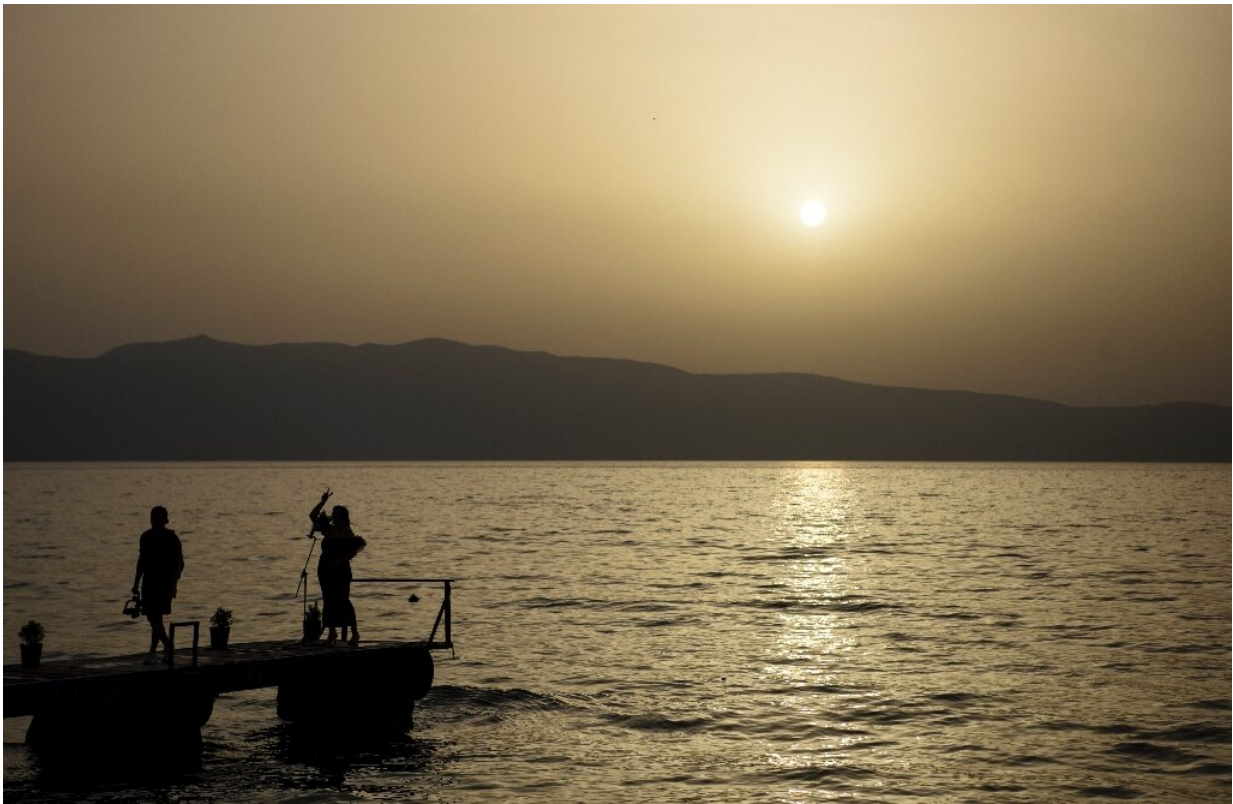


'Gone to hell': The battle to save Europe's oldest lake

July 1 2021, by Darko Duridanski and Joseph Boyle



Lake Ohrid formed more than 1.3 million years ago and is home to dozens of unique species.

Dimitar Pendoski marches to the end of a rickety walkway, skips around sunbathing youngsters and sweeps back a tarpaulin protecting his empty lakeside restaurant, recently closed by officials under pressure from

UNESCO.

North Macedonia's government is scrambling to enforce environmental protection rules and shut down places like Pendoski's self-built restaurant, to save Lake Ohrid from being placed on the UN culture agency's list of endangered world heritage sites.

"This way, everybody loses—the employees, the local economy, and of course the tourists because they have no place to go on the beach," Pendoski tells AFP, a point hotly contested by environmentalists.

Thanks to its unique animal and plant life, prehistoric ruins and Byzantine churches, Lake Ohrid and its surroundings have enjoyed four decades as a UNESCO world heritage site.

Only a few dozen places around the world have won the status for both their nature and their culture, a source of prestige for Lake Ohrid—and a major bonus in marketing the area to tourists.

But the UN body has said the Ohrid region will be put on the "in danger" list during a high-level meeting later in July because of concerns over uncontrolled urbanisation and pollution.

Unless North Macedonia can perform diplomatic miracles, the lake will be cited along with such marvels as Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Ohrid city mayor Konstantin Georgieski is at the centre of a tangle of local and national government bodies tasked with addressing the problems.

His mission is complicated by the international dimension—part of the lake is in Albania, and their officials are also taking part in discussions with UNESCO.

But Georgieski is not panicking.



A major tourism industry has sprung up around the lake, feeding the local economy—but also leading to environmental damage.

"It is not going to mean the end of the world," he says of the UNESCO's decision, pointing out that the heritage status does not bring any funding.

"After 30 years of negligence, it's normal that they (UNESCO) are losing patience."

'Cancer of the lake'

UNESCO first added the Macedonian side of the lake to its world heritage list in 1979, expanding the entry to include the Albanian side only in 2019.

During the time of Yugoslavia, Ohrid was a sleepy settlement known mostly for its hospitals and as a training post for sports teams.

After Macedonia's secession and Yugoslavia's chaotic disintegration in the 1990s, however, tourist developments began expanding along the lakeshore.

Esplanades, five-storey hotels, restaurants and bars have sprung up—and with them came apartment blocks amounting to a satellite of the old town.

Entrepreneurs exploited legal loopholes to build on protected land, often without even connecting to the sewerage system.

UNESCO estimates one third of buildings in the wider Ohrid region pump waste directly into the lake.

"Everything has gone to hell," says Nikola Paskali, an archaeologist who has spent two decades diving on the lake.



Dimitar Pendoski claims his restaurant was closed down despite having received all the necessary permits.

Sometimes he searches for Bronze Age relics but sometimes he hunts out junk—TVs, toilets and even a full-size bathtub are among the items he has pulled from the deep.

"Litter is the cancer of the lake," he says, accusing the government of doing little to protect biodiversity in a lake that formed more than 1.3 million years ago and is home to dozens of unique species.

UNESCO has highlighted problems from illegal buildings, logging and fish farms, to river diversions and haphazard road construction.

Much of this is underpinned by the region's desire to become a centre for tourism.

"If we started now, it would take years and years to repair the damage we have done," says Katarina Vasileska from grassroots environmental group Ohrid SOS.

'This is not Ibiza'

But cleaning up the lake comes with risks.

Mayor Georgieski recently ordered the destruction of several structures built over the lake that served as makeshift nightclubs and restaurants.

"It's difficult to destroy someone's property in a small town like ours," he says. "I'm a personal enemy of these people now."

But he reflects that business owners need to change their mindset, adding: "This is not Ibiza."



Ohrid's mayor Konstantin Georgieski has ordered the destruction of several lakeside nightclubs and restaurants, but it has won him enemies.

Georgieski envisages a town that welcomes sustainable levels of tourists attracted by culture and nature rather than partying.

But UNESCO said in its most recent report that restoration work had damaged the "authenticity" of some churches, and that the unique wood-beamed buildings of the old town were at risk from uncontrolled development.

Restaurateur Pendoski does not disagree with UNESCO or the mayor, but he claims he was closed down despite having received all the necessary permits.

"We all share the goal of having more guests while protecting the lake and nature, but there has to be some local economic development," he says.

Environmentalists argue, however, that pitting economic development against ecological concerns is a false debate.

"We have to keep the lake clean because otherwise we will lose everything, we will lose tourism," says diver Paskali.

Activist Vasileska also points out that receiving permits is not a green light for pollution.

"You may employ 30 people," she says, "but you pollute the lake for 50,000."

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