

Fertő / Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape: Challenges for the Management of a Cross-border World Heritage Site

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Introduction

The fall of the Iron Curtain was not only a historical break, but also meant a fundamental change for regional development. It opened the possibility for cross-border cooperation on new concepts regarding the protection of the common natural and cultural heritage. At the same time, the regions along the former Iron Curtain faced particular economic pressure. This applied in particular to the cultural landscape around lake Neusiedlersee with its sensitive ecosystem, which is exceptionally vulnerable to rapid changes. The fall of the Iron Curtain enabled efforts to be concentrated on both sides of the border and to establish a cross-border national park between Austria and Hungary. Eight years later the Fertő/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape around the lake was also inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Maintenance and management of a World Heritage site imply specific obligations, which are even more challenging when consolidating efforts of all countries are concerned. Austria and Hungary have succeeded in developing coordinated management plans that include the mutual alignment of measures. The implementation of this joint approach is confronted with a wide variety of challenges, which have been tackled by different projects. One of those was the project TransEcoNet – Transnational Ecological Networks, which was implemented through the CENTRAL EUROPE Program co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Between 2007 and 2013, 16 project partners in six countries worked on the identification of cross-border ecological networks and corridors to provide a base for the development of measures for balanced progress. The aim was to provide support for the development of solutions for mutual endeavours to preserve and maintain valuable landscapes.

An essential part of the project was investigating the perception of the public regarding the transformation of the landscape after the fall of the Iron Curtain, using different case study areas. This article will focus on the result of the study for the project region Fertő/Neusiedlersee and the conclusions that follow for the management of the transnational World Heritage site (Fig. 1).

Perception of landscapes

The criterion for enlisting the cultural landscape around lake Neusiedlersee states:

“The Fertő/Neusiedlersee has been the meeting place of different cultures for eight millennia, and this is graphically demonstrated by its varied landscape, the result of an evolutionary and symbiotic process of human interaction with the physical environment.”¹

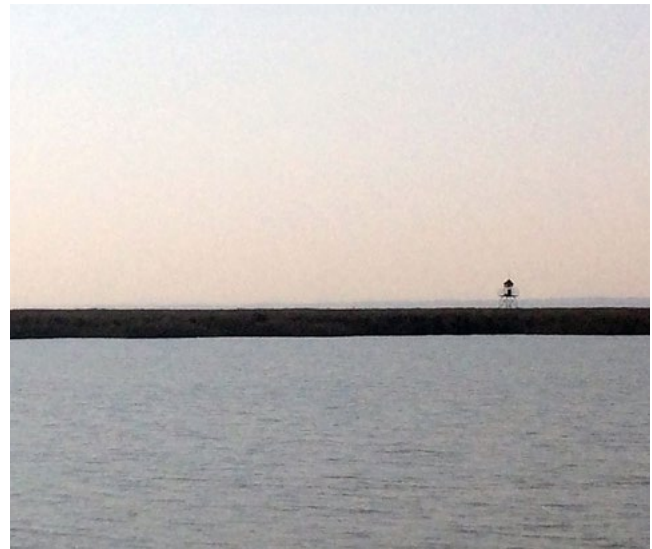


Fig. 1: One of the remaining border towers at Lake Fertő (© Ulrike Herbig 2016)

This description illustrates that the landscape is subject to a constant process of change, the dynamics of which have been influenced by political and socio-economic factors in the 20th century. With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Treaty of Trianon new state borders were defined which became even more significant after the Second World War with the erection of the Iron Curtain between Western and Eastern Europe. This border separated formerly interconnected areas which developed very differently under the diverse political regimes. This was reflected significantly in the dissimilar transformation of the landscape on each side of the border.

The fall of the Iron Curtain accelerated the development in the region, causing transformation processes that have resulted in an increasing loss of natural and cultural heritage as well as traditional character. In order to prevent a complete disappearance of the outstanding universal values of the region, it is necessary to find out more about the perceptions and opinions of locals and other stakeholders with regard to their landscape and the changes to it.

Within the frame of the project, TransEcoNet ecological networks were defined as the “infrastructure of nature”, providing habitat for all living creatures, including humans. Thus, it is obligatory to consider the cultural context for the development of sustainable preservation strategies, a circumstance that has been taken into account by examining the opinion of the population.



Fig. 2: In Austria, the garden around the house is already part of the landscape (© Ulrike Herbig 2018)



Fig. 3: Traditional buildings are a characteristic part of the cultural landscape (© Ulrike Herbig 2018)

Studying the perception of the landscape²

The study on the perception of the landscape and its transformation by residents and stakeholders in Austria and Hungary was carried out by scientists of the University of West Hungary, Institute of Forest Resource Management and Rural Development, and the University of Vienna, Department of Conservation Biology, Vegetation and Landscape Ecology. For the research approach, the following questions were defined: How do local people and experts perceive the landscape? What are the most important characteristics? How do they consider recent and long-term landscape transformations?

In semi-structured interviews, residents and stakeholders were questioned about the main characteristics of the current landscape, about effects that may be the result of changes, as well as regarding people's knowledge about ecological networks. A second block of questions concerned the information on how people perceive the land use and land cover transformations in the study area. Further on, the third part of the interviews dealt with questions about differences and similarities on both sides of the state border, and about the ideal landscape and probable future scenarios (Fig. 2).

In the description of the current landscapes, the Austrian respondents started with small units, like the plots of lands that are entirely under their control. For the definition of a personal landscape, boundaries were defined by visual extents or natural features, e.g. the lake or a mountain range. Some interviewees drew perimeters at the administrative borders of settlements. Experts made more specific definitions of the landscape in accordance with climate and hydrology.

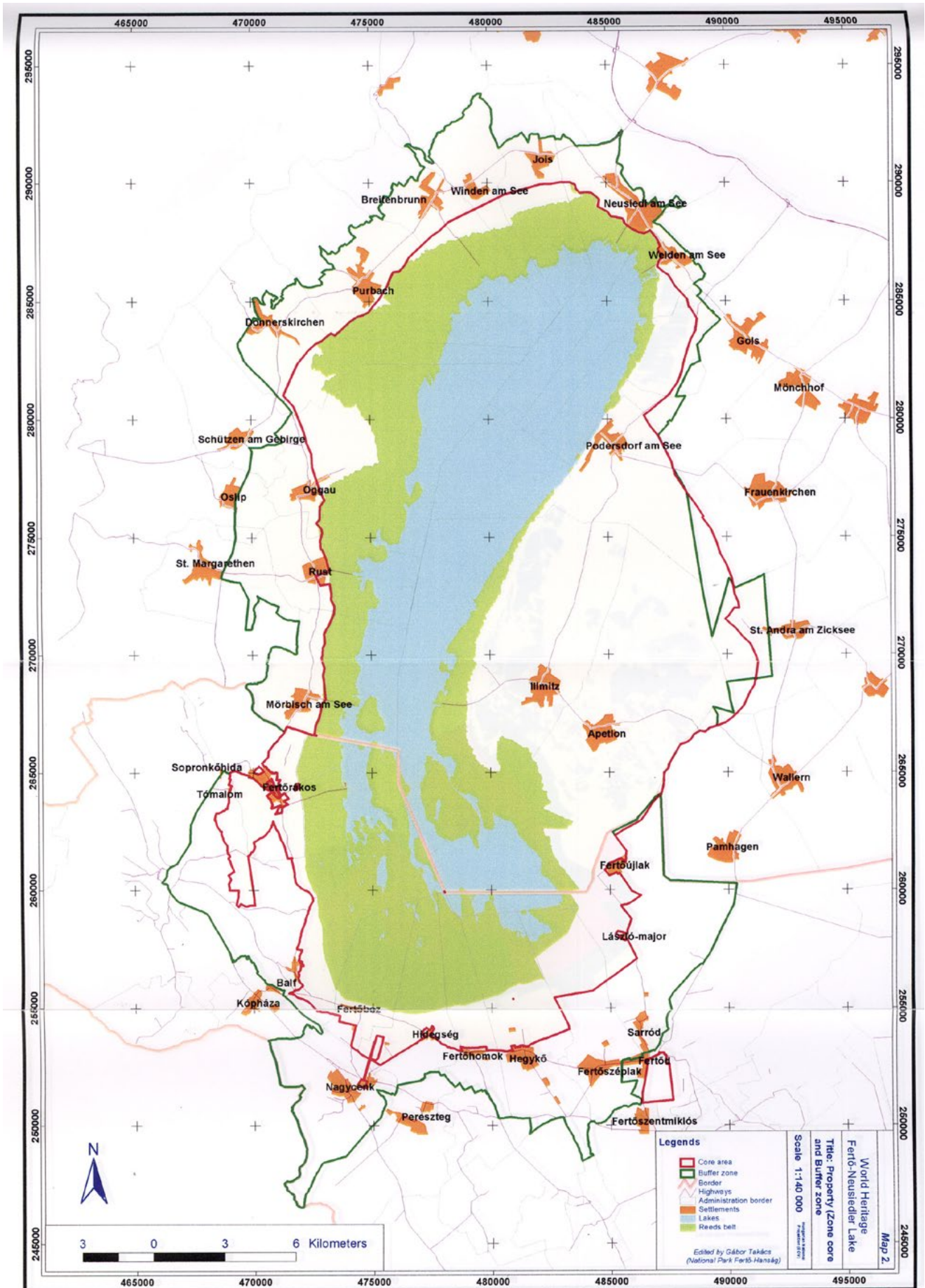
Two kinds of interaction define the personal understanding of landscapes in Austria. One is the interaction by activities; the other is the interaction by perception. The two are aggregated in the people's mindscape and are called 'homeland'. Thus 'my

landscape' is the place where a person feels at home (Fig. 3)!

On the Hungarian side mental maps have been used as the tool to investigate about the definitions of the landscapes. The answers showed that here people rather define the landscape in geographical units than in administrative regions. Lake Fertő was identified as an integral part of the personal landscape – an interesting fact, considering that the area of Lake Fertő was closed for a long time in the socialist era when the Iron Curtain existed. In addition to that interviewees made a clear distinction between the lake basin and the wetlands called Hanság east of the lake, although the Fertő-Hanság basin formed an interconnected marshland as a geographic unit. With water regulation, the characteristics of the area transformed significantly, which also changed the perception of the landscape.

For the second part of the study concerning the essential characteristics of the cultural landscape interviews done west and east of the lake were analysed separately. In the west part of the region, Austrian interview partners mentioned the small agricultural units or natural elements, e.g. wet and dry grasslands, as valuable features. Most Hungarian respondents focused on the cultural aspects, such as the historic buildings in Sopron, constructions for viticulture and villas located in the area. On both sides of the border, the significance of the scenic value was evident in the description of favourite places, mentioning spots with spectacular views or highlight panoramas from look-out towers (Fig. 4).

Also, the perception of the landscape east of the lake differs in the two countries. The main feature here for Austrian interview partners is the vast flat plain which is unique for otherwise mountainous Austria. Aside from the perception of infinity, people described special light conditions, as well as the dependence on water. On the Hungarian side, the Hanság was declared as the most characteristic feature, described as a vast wetland, especially by older interview partners. The landscape was also described



World Heritage map: Fertő/Neusiedler See (WHC)



Fig. 4: View of Oggau (© Sabine Lackner-Feiler 2018)

as an untouched, peaceful and calm countryside. In fact, today only a small part of the former landscape rich in water exists, and it is rather dominated by large arable fields which were not often mentioned.

These large homogeneous agricultural areas are also an important part of the perception of the Hungarian side by Austrian interviewees. In addition, the Hungarian side is also perceived as a wilderness that is only little cultivated and has preserved its naturalness. Even though this seems contradictory, both charac-

teristics (rather large agricultural entities as well as fallow lands) are represented in Hungary close to Lake Fertő. For Hungarian interview partners, the landscape around the lake on the Austrian side is characterised by small-scale agriculture, well-kept and with tidy fields, roads and villages. Everything, from vineyards, to pastures with grazing livestock, and the reed belt seems well-managed (Fig. 5).

Some respondents from both countries are convinced that the landscape “that once belonged together” will grow together



Fig. 5: “Organised” landscape of the Austrian part of the World Heritage Fertő-Neusiedlersee (© Ulrike Herbig 2013)



Fig. 6: Hanság marshland (© Ulrike Herbig 2009)

again, and the differences will gradually disappear. It is a general notion that the last remains of the borderline itself, once as closed as the “impermeable” Iron Curtain, are now almost vanished.

Although there are significant differences in the perception of the current state on both sides of the border, the memories of the landscape as it used to be are very similar. The majority of the persons questioned described their memories of a wilder, less cultivated landscape with smaller, more homogenous villages. Especially in the surroundings of the Hanság people remember the landscape of the past, when fishing and boating were common in large wetlands and roads were rare. Especially changes in water management are a matter that concerns residents and stakeholders on both sides of the border. This fact, as well as obviously perceivable urbanisation and growth in tourism were defined as developments influencing the transformation of the landscape (Fig. 6).

Conclusions

The results of the study show that although the perception of the cultural landscape differs in Austria and Hungary, the concerns about the future transformations are the same. Still, mutual efforts for the management of the transnational World Heritage site Fertő/Neusiedlersee are facing challenges based not only

on the different understanding of the landscape. Urban sprawl and economic pressure are now being tackled differently in the two countries. While on the Austrian side construction projects near the lakeshore have been discussed for a long time and often prevented by the population, the political situation in Hungary supports the development of tourism infrastructure. Traces of the Iron Curtain in the landscape may have disappeared, but the border remains. For the sake of preserving a border landscape of outstanding universal value it should be possible to ignore these boundaries in order to join forces for a sustainable development that allows different vivid perceptions for the next generations.

¹ UNESCO, World Heritage List, Fertő/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/772> [04.05.2018].

² Eva KONKOLY-GYURO, Sonja HÖLLERER, Valeria BACSARDI, Agnes TIRASZI, Recording Perceptions of Landscape Change in Central European Transboundary Areas in the 20th Century – the Oral History Approach, in: E. CSAPLOVICS, A. HAHN, C.

MARRS, S. SCHÖPS (EDS.), Transnational Ecological Networks in Central Europe – A Compilation of Results and Outputs from the EU Central Europe TransEcoNet Project, Technische Universität Dresden, Berlin 2017, pp. 194–208.