



Administrația Rezervației Biosferei Delta Dunării

The situation of abandoned horses in Letea Forest area of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve

1. General considerations

In the **Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve** (DDBR) the grazing system for large domestic animals is mostly in a free regime on levees and areas above the water (floodable areas). From official data available in 2009 there were registered more than 300,000 domestic animals (sheep - 55.6%, poultry - 32.1%, cattle - 4.8%, horses - 3.5%, goats - 2.1%, pigs 1.9%). Officially, each territorial administrative unit within the perimeter of DDBR (7 communes and Sulina town) owns an area of communal pasture to ensure grazing of registered animals. Excepting poultry kept in households and partially sheep grazed mostly in agricultural polders under the administration of Tulcea County Council, other livestock are grazed, theoretically on local communal pastures with a total surface of about 25,000 hectares. In fact, livestock graze freely both on communal pastures and (mostly) outside of them, in natural areas of DDBR, on natural levees and lands newly emerged from the influence of spring floods. This situation occurs while communal pastures are not arranged nor managed by appropriate fencing to keep animals inside. In this way, is explainable that on DDBR perimeter, livestock, especially cattle and horses, and even sheep and pigs are scattered on nearly all natural grazing areas, many of them lost from their owners, wandering freely through natural areas and acquiring wild behaviour. **Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority** (DDBRA) received demands from local population for permits to recover these animals by shooting due to the difficulties of recovering them by other means.

In a similar situation is a large number of horses, represented in DDBR perimeter, both by officially registered herds of more than 10,000 heads, in 2009, and by a large number, difficult to quantify, of animals abandoned in the wild and grazing in all unfloodable areas with optimal natural resources. The existence of good grazing areas in the existing forestry fund of the Reserve, with a total surface of about 25,000 hectares, explains the presence of these animals near forests and even within them, with negative impact on forestry fund development (destruction of young shoots, etc.), and of course, this explains the relatively large number of domestic animals, cattle and horses found near Letea forest.

In the case of horses in Letea Forest area, were recovered only in small proportion by local population from Letea, C.A.Rosetti, Periprava and Sfiștofca, the remaining ones evolving in a semi-wild state and by reproduction over several generations, currently reached an estimated number of over 5,000 throughout the entire DDBR and between 1000-2000 in Letea Forest area (C.A. Rosetti commune). This phenomenon was amplified by the fact that during the '80s, *infectious anemia* was declared among horse which made many horse owners to abandon their animals in the wild.

The problem of horses abandoned in natural environment as well as cattle abandoned in terrestrial natural habitats of DDBR was an important issue for the **Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority** since its establishment, and in order to protect Letea and Caraorman forests, declared **strictly protected areas** for their value of heritage, with funding from the Ministry of Environment were constructed fences on 40 km around the two forests. Unfortunately, in recent years fences were destroyed on large portions thus protecting the two forests from horses and cattle become

an increasingly difficult problem. DDBRA repeatedly asked local councils of C.A. Rosetti and Crişan, as well as other local councils, to improve the management of domestic animals owned by local population through inventory, health status testing and appropriate management of communal pastures. This issue has been and still is in the attention of other institutions with responsibilities in this area: Tulcea County Council, Tulcea Prefecture, Tulcea Forestry Department, Tulcea Office for Zootechnical Improvement and Reproduction, Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority Tulcea.

In recent years several NGO's, WWF, „Save the Danube and Delta” Association, "Vier Pfoten" Foundation, Danube Delta National Institute for Research and Development Tulcea, were involved together with Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority in finding an acceptable solution for all parties in a controversial issue: **protection of the natural forest ecosystems of Letea (2825 ha)**, part of **UNESCO World Natural Heritage**, having the status of strictly protected area within the Reserve facing the **management /protection of abandoned horse populations** improperly called "wild horses" as a possible tourist attraction of the area.

In early 2009, at DDBRA headquarters several meetings were held with representatives from NGOs (WWF and SDD) regarding the monitoring of abandoned animals in DDBR perimeter, but these were not reflected in projects.

Moreover, in the same year, at Tulcea Prefecture level was formed a working group coordinating activities to mitigate the phenomena arising from uncontrolled reproduction of semi-wild animals in Danube Delta, aiming to reduce habitat destruction in all stages of their evolution, as a result of uncontrolled grazing of these animals and in the same time ensuring long term management of livestock in Danube Delta, with the participation of DDBRA, Tulcea County Council, Tulcea Prefecture, Tulcea Forestry Department, Tulcea Office for Zootechnical Improvement and Reproduction, Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority Tulcea.

Under this program has been completed a first phase, consisting of printing and distributing posters in the Reserve, with information about the obligations of animals owners, sanitary and veterinary rules regarding animal breeding and exploitation.

In the second phase, were organised actions of capture and contentment of animals in temporary shelters, and carried on operations of identification, inventory and health status testing.

These actions didn't bring the expected effect because Tulcea Forestry Department - the institution responsible with the funding of temporary shelters construction and wild horse capture could not meet its obligations due to financial reasons. However, by using two temporary shelters offered by DSVSA (in C.A. Rosetti and Chilia Veche), during 2009-2010 were collected, checked / tested on health status, microchipped and extracted from Sulina area about 450 horses.

Currently DDBRA envisages a partnership with the Foundation "Vier Pfoten" for the project "Wild Horses - Letea " aiming to solve the problem of semi-wild population of horses in Letea area. Actions were initiated in October 2010 and will be completed in October 2012, with the possibility to be extended if partners consider it necessary. In this project were identified and contacted as potential partners Tulcea Prefecture, Tulcea County Council, Danube Delta National Institute for Research and Development Tulcea, Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority Tulcea, Tulcea Office for Zootechnical Improvement and Reproduction, National Environment Guard, National Forest Administration- ROMSILVA, Tulcea Forestry Department, C.A. Rosetti Local Council.

This project aims to control animal reproduction, sanitary and veterinary safety by identification, vaccination and sterilization of stallions, resulting in fewer semi-wild horses in Letea area. In this project, "Vier Pfoten" Foundation commissioned a study to assess the impact of abandoned horses' presence on the strictly protected area Letea Forest and provided nutritional support for horses during winter to avoid high mortality in this season.

On February 16, 2011 at DDBRA headquarters took place a meeting with some of the partners involved in the project, to elaborate a plan of measures, as follows:

- Preparatory actions to identify horses by:
 - Establishing temporary shelters at local level, determining the size and location;
 - Identifying and contacting economic agents interested in acquisition of sick animals;
- Capturing and identifying animal, biological sampling, establishing legal status, subsequent actions by:
 - Capturing animals, especially those who are in the forestry fund and transport to temporary shelters;
 - Microchipping animals and creating the database;
 - Biological sampling to determine immune status and detection of possible diseases, castrating stallions with no genetic value;
 - Identifying horse owners and establishing their legal status;
 - Catagraphy of animals in Letea area;
 - Removal of infected animals from herds, selling and payment;
 - Flaying carcasses and establishing the location for animal cemetery.

As result of this project is expected to stabilize a nucleus of horses with high genetic value according to ecosystem's capacity of support (Letea levee) and its organization as a specific tourist attraction of the area.

In this context, Tulcea Office for Zootechnical Improvement and Reproduction and Tulcea Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority together with the Local Council of C.A. Rosetti commune started in early 2011 a recovery action for a number of horses, as part of the **national program initiated by the national authority in the field, ANSVSA, to eliminate animals sick of infectious anemia**. In this action were captured, during the month of May, 95 horses belonging to a number of 25 owners. Horses were gathered in two *temporary shelters* in Letea and Cardon villages, microchipped and blood samples were collected for analysis, to establish health status. As a result of testing, several cases of animals infected with *infectious anemia* were detected, the owners and authorities deciding to sell both these and the healthy ones from the temporary shelters. Unfortunately, in the action of capturing and then removing horses from the territory Danube Delta were recorded several episodes of aggression and inappropriate treatment of horses by their owners, actions brought to the attention of authorities by those present in the area, especially representatives of „Vier Pfoten” Foundation and then publicized by mass media representatives, present in the area during these operations.

As a result, ANSVSA ordered to stop any action to remove horses from the area until further notice.

It has to be noted that, following these actions, horses detected with *infectious anemia* will be compulsorily slaughtered, according to Order no. 52/2010 of ANSVSA and for the healthy ones the decision belongs to the owner, keeping them in their own household or selling them.

Analysing objectively the situation in this area and taking into account the fact that the existence since several decades of abandoned horses in Danube Delta led to the creation of a legend about the existence of a "wild horses" population in the Danube Delta, for which authorities should take appropriate protection measures, DDBRA considers that to address this issue, the actions identified in the meeting of February 16, 2011 and presented above, should be carried out. In addition to those set out in the above mentioned meeting, it is necessary that all local authorities in the perimeter of the Reserve having in ownership or management communal pastures to administrate these according to legal provisions, inclusively by enclosing them and by applying appropriate measures to improve their capacity of support for grazing.

On the other hand it should be underlined that in the present situation with the existence of numerous cases of infectious anemia, sick animals must be removed from the area to prevent spreading the disease to healthy animals and the path established by the laws in force should be followed.

If animals remain unclaimed by owners, should either be taken by local councils, according to legal provisions, inventoried and treated as in case of private owners, or will be managed by public authorities with responsibilities in the field, where local councils will decline their capacity of management.

In any case, DDBRA disagrees with any form of inappropriate treatment, aggression, injury, etc., of domestic or wild animals and will bring them to the attention of competent authorities and demand sanctions according to legal provisions in force.

Currently there are no horses held in temporary shelters and those kept in LETEA temporary shelter were left free on the communal pasture.

2. Proposals for the management of domestic animals abandoned in the public domain of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve

1. Actions/measures of the Ministry of Environment and Forests

- 1.1 Elaboration of an evaluation study regarding the adverse impact generated by the presence of domestic animal populations abandoned in the public domain of national interest within the perimeter of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve on the natural ecosystems of DDBR and proposing measures to reduce/eliminate this impact;**
 - Estimated total value: about 2.0 million lei
 - Execution time: 24 months

- 1.2 Promoting the investment objective regarding the enclosure of Letea and Caraorman forests, strictly protected areas within DDBR according to the feasibility study prepared by DDBRA in 2010;**
 - Total investment value: about 14.0 million lei: of which 8,0 million lei for Letea Forest and about 6.0 million lei for Caraorman Forest
 - Execution time: 24 months

- 1.3 Increase Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority's staff capacity for control and supervision by supplementing necessary budgetary funds to provide fuel for boats and terrestrial transport vehicles and by supplementing the existing staff with 4 rangers;**
 - Estimated value: about 200,0 mii lei of which: about 100,0 mii lei for functioning and about 100,0 mii lei for additional staff.

- 1.4 Development of collaboration with public institutions (Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority Tulcea, Tulcea Office for Zootechnical Improvement and Reproduction, Forestry Department Tulcea, National Guard for Environment, Local Councils from DDBR and interested NGOs) to implement management solutions for the situation identified in the evaluation study and projects that will be developed for this purpose;**

2. Actions/measures of other institutions/authorities

- 2.1 **Completing the actions of identification/registration/microchipping /health status testing of horses and other domestic animals abandoned in the Danube Delta, ongoing action of DSVSA Tulcea - OARZ Tulcea coordinated by ANSVA;**

- 2.2 **Entry into legality of local authorities regarding the management of communal pastures, including their enclosure, carrying out improvement works by populating with grazing domestic animals according to the supporting capacity of these communal pastures.**

GOVERNOR

Dr. Eng. Grigore Baboianu

Deputy Executive Director

Eng. Cornelia BENEA

Head of Natural Heritage Management Department

Eng. Ion MUNTEANU