

NERETVA VALLEY: CHANGES THROUGH A FISHERMAN-FARMER'S MEMORY

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Abstract

Croatia is a country with great natural resources, including preserved land, clean and abundant water resources, three different climate types on a rather small surface. One of the most precious is the long, well-indented coast, in some parts enriched with arable hinterland. One of these hinterland areas is located in southern part of Dalmatia, commonly called Neretva. The Neretva valley is specific not only by its unique landscape, but also by long tradition of hard work of its inhabitants – fishermen-farmers. The term arises due to a dual way of their life and work in the past: in periods of the year when there was no need to work in agriculture, men used to go fishing, because it was the only way to survive in the Neretva valley at the time. Today, this term has no its original meaning. The improvement in technologies, and also in agricultural and fishery policies, have changed the character of agricultural and fishery activities, but also invited fears of its negative consequences on traditional values, environment and sustainable resource management.

Key words: Croatia, Neretva valley, agriculture, fishery, sustainable resource management

Introduction

Croatia is a country with great natural resources – preserved land, clean and abundant water resources, three different climate types on rather small surface. However, one of the most precious is the long, well-indented coast, in some parts enriched with arable hinterland. One of these hinterland areas is located in southern part of Dalmatia, commonly called Neretva.

The Neretva valley is the part of Dubrovnik-Neretva County, which suffered great natural and production losses during the recent war. But, the greatest danger for the future development of this county (and Neretva valley as well) is weak demographic structure of its rural areas with rather high share of elderly population, bad educational structure and high percentage of unemployed in active population. Agriculture and fishery have an important role in the revenue structure, but also in touristic supply and in landscape preservation (Kolega et al., 1996).

Organization of people's life, agricultural production cycles, but also the entire nature of the river Neretva valley were adjusted to the water regime. River basin, estuary and coastal area make an unique hydrological system, management of which is difficult due to a complex natural processes and socio-economic activities, as well as of the fact that the system belongs to two countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, Margeta and Fistanic, 2000).



Picture 1: Lower Neretva valley

Additionally, interventions in land regulation, meliorative actions, building of water-power and other plants within the Neretva river-basin, changed considerably the water regime, the system of agricultural production (Romić et al., 2003), but affect also the entire coastal ecosystem and human activities in the coastal areas providing food, water, energy and services (Margeta, 2000).

Methodological remarks

Besides the recent literature review, in this paper we try to tell the (hi)story of Neretva valley through the memories of one native man. For this purpose, a deep interview was conducted in June 2005 and recorded. During the interview, we tried – in an open conversation – to find out basic elements of interviewer's family history back to a last century, key elements of changes in their way of life and work in agriculture and fishery, division of work between those two activities and between farm members, working motivations in different periods. Finally, we tried to find out from our respondent how he estimates current prospects for the Neretva valley development, regarding government's, as well as local population's attitude toward this valuable area. The findings from the interview will serve as orientation in identifying critical social and economic moments in development and changes of this area during the past century, as well as in review of current problems of sustainable management of resource use in agriculture and fishery.

Neretva valley

The Neretva valley spans the lowlands of the river Neretva delta, together with the coast of the Neretva canal and the Karst waterless brink. In the past, the Neretva valley was an unhealthy, swampy area. In the second part of 18th century, the Venetian authorities had carried out the restricted melioration making grounds for cereal growing. Transformation of the low and flood delta has started at the end of 19th century, when the bed of the river Neretva was regulated from the sea to the city of Metkovic (near present border with Bosnia and Herzegovina), and the swamps drainage was starting with the purpose of gaining new arable areas. In that way, gradually was created specific type of cultivated landscape, in local community called by Turkish word for trench (*jendek* landscape). The majority of work on improvement of sanitary conditions of the delta was done after the World war II, when the current agricultural *cassettes* were created. Agricultural landscape was formed by the simple system of ditch digging, which helped the local people to extend the cultivating surfaces in the swamp area. The impressive work invested in creating the landscape and the beauty of the Neretva delta and the whole valley were described in a number of papers and books (Glamuzina, 1986; Smoljan, 1988; Faričić et al., 2005).



Picture 2: Trenches

Today, it is the most fertile area of the middle Dalmatia, as well as of the whole Croatian seaside (Mediterranean) region, oriented on commercial agricultural production (fruits, vegetables, flowers). River is extremely important for the inhabitants and economy of the area, but there are certain problems concerning the pollution, especially extensive use of pesticides used for crop protection, wastewater from the settlements and industry in this area (Grgić et al., 1999; Glamuzina et al., 2002).



Picture 3: Greenhouse

However, the Neretva valley is specific not only by its unique landscape, but also by long tradition of hard work of its inhabitants, calling themselves *fishermen-farmers*. The term arises due to a dual way of their life and work in the past: in periods of the year when there was no need to work in agriculture (and such periods were common in traditional farming in which for a long time existed only production of grape and maize), men used to go fishing, because it was the only way to survive in the Neretva valley at the time. In present days, of course, this term has no its original meaning.

The improvement in technologies has changed the character of agricultural activities, as well as of fishery. Today, local people are not worried how to feed their families, but how to increase their income. But, it seems that this rising economic ambition has caused a dangerous attitude towards natural resources, land and sea water and the whole environment.

The fisherman-farmer's story (the interview results)



Picture 4: Fisherman

Emergence of the Neretva valley

The Neretva valley was developed on shovels and other traditional tools, specific for this area. For example, the image of Primošten vineyards in the United Nation building, represents the case of exceptional human will-power and effort, but minor in comparison to will-power on which today's Neretva valley was developed.

"When you climb on our hill... and when you start to think how many *jendeks* were taken out to draw out this Neretva from the swamp... than Primosten vineyards are just the peak of a match in a match box."

Fishermen-farmers

This term originates from the Neretva valley. In periods when there were no activities in agriculture, men were going fishing, because it was the only way to feed their families. Neretva was swampy area with a little arable land, and the life was more difficult due to the moorish environment, which was the source of different diseases. The people survived due to their hard work "in the field", taking away soil from the water and fishery. Fishermen-farmers have invested a lot of inputs in developing agricultural activities and products, unlike the trawler men, who don't invest into natural resources (sea), but only use them.

"Before, each family had its own ravine in which eels were caught. More than fifty years ago, there were fifty families using their ravines and channels... cattle grazing and haymaking were strictly forbidden, and the Government at the time had guaranteed exclusive rights on natural resources use. Today, such kind of fishing and tools were disappeared."

Family history

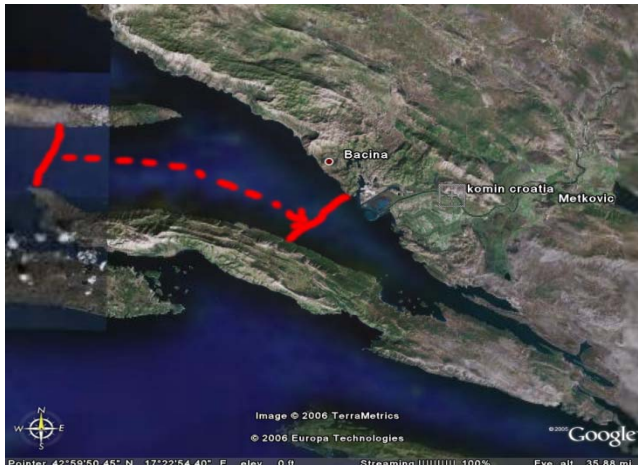
Knowledge and experience were forwarded through generations, so today's generations still know about the way of life of their ancestors. The grandfather of our interviewee was also the fisherman, and worked for the Austrian builders who built dikes, which was the first attempt of melioration in this area 80-100 years ago. Those Austrian companies had standards and licenses for catching fish, which was used only as food for workers.

"I remember the way of fishing of my grandpa... this tradition was continued by my father... than by my brother and me. The way of fishing is the same as of my ancestors... only the material for the fishing tools was changed. Natural materials, cotton and other, were replaced by artificial, synthetic."

Recent changes, problems and fears

In present days, people are confused: the situation that used to ensure their existence in the past and on which they counted for granted and the nature has never fail... disappears in front of their eyes. Basic principles of traditional – and sustainable – resource management are now disturbed. Additionally, government policies toward this area are contradictory: trying to protect Neretva valley as a park of nature, and at the same time adopting fishery laws and regulations that break the sustainability concept. Our respondent can't remember that any past government – and there were many of them – forbidden fishing in this area.

"Even during the wars in this area we could do fishing... and today... for the first time in the history, it happened that fishing is prohibited. I believe that problem is in recent law, because there was no adequate research that could justify this decision that we couldn't do fishing in our way. Our way is based on selective tools, unlike trawl boats and other dragging tools. The law does not protect the nature, but probably financial benefits... and our benefit shouldn't be only financial, it could be in preserving the tradition of such specific area. But, nobody asked us, people who live in this area, so now we live on the water, and can only look at the water."



Picture 5: Shortening of Neretva channel

Our interviewee believes that new legislation regarding fishing brings more damages than benefits to his people and Neretva valley. Also, the part of the area protected by the Law on protection of nature is not protected at all. Lot of pesticides and mineral fertilizers are spent on agricultural areas and rinsed into the protected area, floating way and oil terminal pass by through the protected area, in the port there is reloading of dangerous materials.

There are lots of sources of environmental devastation. He believes that consequences are already seen in shortage or even disappearance of some species, great losses and dissipation in fishery practice, developing animal diseases.

"There! In the valley some animals and species disappeared that were never angled, such as tortoises, snakes and fresh-water fish in *jendeks*. Eels also disappear, they have diseases for 20 years now, they are thin and probably die. About 20 years ago you couldn't see dead eel... it was eaten up by sea-gulls or crabs, but who knows how many eels die today when we found them dead? And there is more... for instance, there are no grey mullets for two years now... and if we see them, they have scars, and nobody cares... only matter is that we can't do fishing from one hill to the other!"

Conclusion remarks

The Neretva valley is specific ecological and socio-economic system that passed through the dramatic changes during the last century. The nature and the landscape were transformed from swamps as a resource of diseases to the intensive agricultural production areas as a primary resource of farmers' income.

Recent technological changes brought some negative consequences for the local people's way of life: former traditional and sustainable combination of agricultural and fishery activities are now replaced by new systems of intensive agricultural production (plantations, glasshouses, melioration), and fishery activities are limited by new legislation that eliminated traditional

fishery tools. That is why people are confused and often unsatisfied with government policies toward fishermen and farmers. They loose their tradition, customs, practices and habits; they also have fears of loosing their beautiful natural values in which their ancestors put their lives.

However, despites fears and doubts, there are hopes for the future of the Neretva valley. The beauty of the part of the area will be protected as the park of nature, helping also to protect and to improve sustainability of agricultural practice. Opinion of the interviewed fisherman-farmer reflects the opinion of the local people: careful government actions based on local people's experience will improve today's illogical political decisions regarding agricultural, fishery and environment management and bring back the principles of sustainability as a part of Neretva valley tradition.

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