

## TENDENCIES IN WET ZONES VEGETATION EVOLUTION UNDER ANTHROPIC DISTURBANCES IN THE ROMANIAN BANAT

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### Abstract

*Wet zones have always been of great importance to humanity. The historical province of the Banat was known as a huge expanse of swamps in the past, but the current map of the region (its Romanian part) is fundamentally different, as a result of hydro-relief works. Our study is a synthesis about the evolution of the vegetation of some wet zones. Observations refer to a significant period of time. We processed and compared several hundred species and phytosociological relevés from many locations. Correlations were made between the nucleus of common species, the compared groups, the dendrogram with the grouping of the relevés, the diversity profile of the parameters. From the processing of the data, it appears that there are significant losses in the current structure and composition of the vegetation. These are caused by a series of factors such as: reduction of the areas occupied by wet habitats, hydro-relief works, climate changes, expansion of invasive species, fragmentation, other agricultural activities.*

**Key words:** Romanian Banat, wet zones, vegetation, anthropic disturbance.

### INTRODUCTION

Wetlands, defined by the Ramsar Convention as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres” or by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) as “areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil all year or for varying periods of time during the year, including during the growing season”, are very vulnerable, Gomoiu et al. (2009) considering them among the most endangered ecosystems on the globe. In the synthesis on the restoration of wetlands in Central Europe, Pfadenhauer & Grootjans (1999) consider essential the in-depth knowledge of ecological processes, Rittenhouse & Peterman (2018) and Stengård et al. (2020) explain the role of connectivity in the conservation of these dynamic ecosystems. The importance of wetlands, translated by the term ecosystem services, is well known, from supporting the needs of food and water, to mitigating climate change, controlling floods, soil erosion, the circuit of substances, up to multiple cultural services. The causes of

wetland degradation and loss are equally well known: agriculture, industries, transportation, excessive urbanization, global warming, pollution, expansion of invasive species etc.

In Europe, there is a wide range of wetlands, estimated at several thousand, as an expression of the climatic peculiarities of our continent. On account of some forecasts, Okruszko et al. (2011) draw attention to the possibility of losing an important number of the services brought by these areas (up to 46% in 2050) and consider that water management is crucial.

In Romania, there are 345 wetland sites covering 10.5% of the country's surface (Tanislav, 2014). In terms of the ecosystem services provided and the biodiversity they conserve, wetlands in Romania are very important, although throughout history they have been underestimated and considered wastelands (Ciobotaru et al., 2014; 2019). Speaking about the value of wetlands, Gomoiu et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of the genetic resources they hold, considering them huge reservoirs of biological diversity. Against the background of the same problems identified globally (Giosan et al., 2014; Davidson, 2018; Walpole & Davidson, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Finlayson, 2019; Cadier et al., 2020; Ballut-Dajud et al., 2022; Beranek et al., 2022 etc.),

the loss of wetland services is a major problem here as well.

The vast majority of wetlands in Romania (96%) are located in the plain area with a dry or semi-arid climate, distributed over a wide variety of soils (Ciobotaru et al., 2014). The Habitat Quality (HQ) index indicates their high susceptibility to pressure exposure state, outside the Danube Delta and Lower Danube Floodplain (Ciobotaru et al., 2019).

Over time, large-scale land reclamation and hydraulic improvement works were carried out in Banat (watercourses regularization and swamps drainage, the latter considered the source of multiple epidemics, from the 18th century), in order to use the land for agriculture and transport development. The current map of the region is fundamentally different from what was described by the Italian scientist Francesco Grisellini, on the occasion of his trip to the Banat of Timișoara, in 1774. Few natural wetlands were preserved, so that over time artificial ones were created (for tourism, fish farming, irrigation, flood mitigation, energy generation, as water reservoirs etc.). The only natural wetland that has survived is the Mlaștinile Satchinez area, nicknamed "the Banat delta", an area declared a nature reserve in 1942 with the involvement of the famous Romanian ornithologist, Dionisie Linția, and which is today a Natura 2000 site (ROSCI0115 Mlaștina Satchinez, ROSPA0078 Mlaștina Satchinez). Unfortunately, its state of preservation is not the best. Several other areas that protect habitats and important species should be mentioned, such as: Lunca Mureșului Natural Park (Ramsar site), Lunca Timișului (ROSCI0109, ROSPA0128), Lunca Mureșului Inferior (ROSCI0108, ROSPA0069), Lunca Bârzavei (ROSPA0127), Mlaștinile Murani (ROSPA 0079), Lacul Surduc (mixed nature reserve).

Gomoiu et al. (2009) show how the changes undergone over time by some wetlands in the Western Plain of Romania influence the flora and vegetation. Among the extinct species, these authors mention: *Hippuris vulgaris*, *Acorus calamus*, *Pedicularis palustris*, *Salix aurita* and among those in expansion, *Phalaris arundinacea*, *Glyceria maxima*, *Lythrum*

*salicaria*, *Lycopus europaeus*, *Oenanthe aquatica*, *Rorippa amphibia*, *Agrostis stolonifera*. Under the aspect of vegetation evolution, attention is paid to the impoverishment of some characteristic phytocenoses and the expansion of ruderalized ones in which the problem of invasive species appears, such as *Reynoutria japonica*. From the list of neophytes from Romanian wet zones, made by Anastasiu et al. (2008), the most invasive are considered: *Amorpha fruticosa*, *Azolla filiculoides*, *Elodea nuttallii*, *Helianthus tuberosus*, *Impatiens glandulifera*, *Paspalum paspalodes*, *Reynoutria japonica*, *Rudbeckia laciniata*, *Solidago canadensis*, *Solidago gigantea* subsp. *serotina*, *Xanthium strumarium* subsp. *strumarium* (*X. italicum*).

Pătruț & Coste (2006) mention that the hydro-ameliorative works carried out throughout history in the Banat Plain have determined the lowering of the water table level, so that the aquatic and palustrine biotopes have decreased their surfaces, the tendency of the evolution of the vegetation being predominantly hydrophilic and paludicolous, towards xerophilic and mesoxerophilic vegetation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Within our research we considered phytocenological surveys from some wet zones from Romanian Banat. The samples were made in an interval of over 60 years (1956 - present) by: Soran (1956), Boșcaiu (1966), Grigore (1971), Vicol (1974), Oprea et al. (1974), Arsene et al. (2005), Neacșu et al. (2008 - 2022). The relevés were carried out in the following wet zones: the Timiș floodplain, Liebling (Soran, 1956), the surroundings of Lugoj (Boșcaiu, 1966), the Timiș-Bega interfluvial area (Grigore, 1971), Oprea, I.V., Stratul, E., Iacob, M. (1974), the Lugoj piedmont (Vicol, 1974), Satchinez lowland (Arsene et al., 2005), Surduc, Pișchia, Liebling and Sânandrei lakes (Neacșu et al., 2008-2022). The processed variables for own data are: the number of relevés per association, the number of species per relevés, the number of species per association, general vegetation coverage, sample area size, vegetation height.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the synthetic table, we gathered 292 relevés. Of these samples, 124 belong to us and 168 are studied from the scientific literature (other authors). The table contains 386 species. The plant associations analyzed are: *Lemnetum minoris* (Oberd. 1957) Müller et Görs 1960, *Lemno-Spirodeletum* W. Koch 1954, *Eleocharidetum acicularis* W. Koch 1926 em. Oberd. 1957, *Myriophyllo-Potametum* Soó 1934, *Trapetum natantis* Müller et Görs 1960, *Polygono-Potametum natantis* Soó 1964, *Scirpo-Phragmitetum* W. Koch 1926, *Typhaetum angustifoliae* Pignatti 1953, *Typhaetum latifoliae* G. Lang 1973, *Glycerietum maximae* Hueck 1931, *Schoenoplectetum lacustris* Egger 1933, *Iretum pseudacori* Egger 1933, *Eleocharidetum palustris* Schennikow 1919, *Leersietum oryzoides* Krause 1955 em. Pass. 1957, *Phalaridetum arundinaceae* (Horvatič 1931) Libbert 1931, *Carietum ripariae* Knapp et Stoffer 1962, *Polygono hydropiperi-Bidentetum* Lohm. 1950, *Echinochlo-Polygonetum lapathifolii* (Ujvárosi 1940) Soó et Csűrös (1944) 1947, *Conietum maculati* I. Pop 1968, *Sambucetum ebuli* (Kaiser 1926) Felföldy 1942, *Salicetum albae* Issler 1924 s.l., *Rubi-Salicetum cinereae* Sonasak 1963, *Pruno spinosae-Crataegum* Heuck 1931.

Data series analysis using bar chart - box plot, led to the diagram in Figure 1. It presents the variation ranges of the data series for the AG (general vegetation coverage), IV (vegetation high), and SN (species number) parameters, the standard error, and the outlier values (in the case of the IV parameter, R110, come from a *Salicetum albae* phytocoenosis from Surduc). The multivariate analysis (PCA) led to the diagram presented in Figure 2 (correlation between groups diagram) and Figure 3 (Var-covar disregard diagram). It was found the formation of some groups of study points with common areas, but also with the polarization of some points in relation to the indices considered (AG, IV, SN). In the case of the diagram in Figure 2, axis 1 explains 77.979% of variance and axis 2 explains 16.211% of variance). In the case of the diagram in figure 3, PC1 explained 99.126% of variance and PC2 explained 0.7714% of variance.

On the diagram in Figure 2, it can be seen that on axis 1, which explains 77.979% of the variance, there are mainly marsh associations, slightly flooded up to associations with *Typha angustifolia* and *Typha latifolia*. Most of the other associations, including the aquatic ones, are grouped in the central area and a few are eccentric. Axis 2 has little explanatory value. On the diagram in Figure 3 it can be seen that axis 1, which explains 99.126% of the variance, is influenced by the presence of some abnormal relevés (R110 *Salicetum albae*, R93 *Polygono hydropiperi-Bidentetum*, R117 *Rubi-Salicetum cinereae*, R43 *Typhaetum angustifoliae*, R30 *Scirpo-Phragmitetum*). These relevés are from the Surduc and Pișchia area. Their positioning is mainly due to the large differences in the height of the vegetation (R110), compared to most relevés and the appearance of some species that are missing in the others.

The cluster analysis led to the dendrogram in Figure 4 under conditions of statistical safety (Coph.corr = 0.924). The dendrogram reconfirms the eccentric position of R110 and the separation into 7 clusters. Examining these clusters, it is observed that each brings together relevés with very diverse phytocenoses; we find phytocenoses from the same plant association distributed in different clusters. This can be explained by the fact that the list of species is consistent, that most relevés include few species, so that the accidental presence of a species greatly influences the cluster analysis.

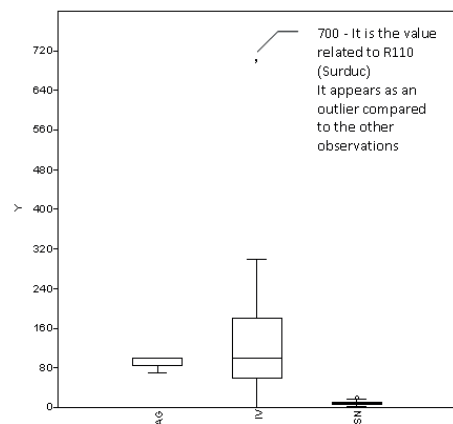


Figure 1. Boxplot diagram for the parameters AG (general vegetation coverage), IV (vegetation height) and SN (species number)

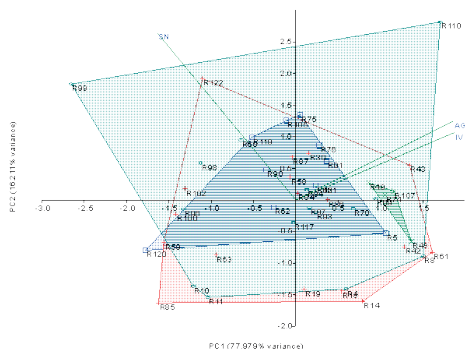


Figure 2. Principal Component Analysis - Correlation between groups

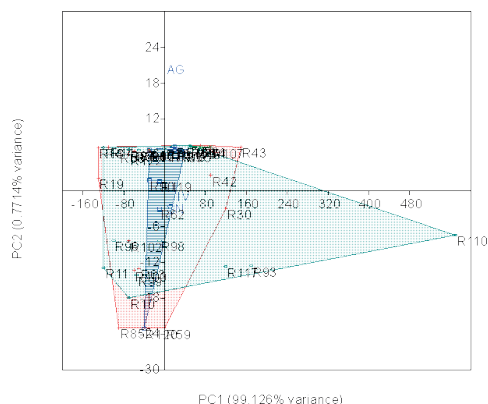


Figure 3. Principal Component Analysis Var-covar Disregard

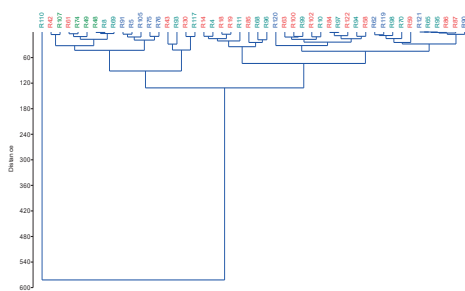


Figure 4. Dendrogram regarding the grouping of relevés (RN) in relation to the general vegetation coverage (AG), vegetation height (IV) and the number of species (SN)

## CONCLUSIONS

From the comparative analysis of the data, the following trends can be observed:

- the significant trend of decrease in specific diversity in the wet zones;
- the high presence of adventive species, in recent years studies: *Ambrosia artemisiifolia*, *Erigeron annuus*, *Phytolacca americana*, *Robinia pseudacacia*, *Xanthium italicum*, *Xanthium spinosum*, *Amaranthus retroflexus*, *Juncus tenuis*, *Eriochloa villosa*, *Lindernia dubia* (the last two reported in our phytocenoses at Pișchia and Surduc). Also, *Amorpha fruticosa* and *Echinocystis lobata* with sporadic presence in the past (Grigore, 1971, Vicol, 1974), are now among the worst invasive species in the Romanian wet zones;
- the sporadic presence or the disappearance of some important species (*Elatine alsinastrum* - Grigore, 1971: Uliuc, Urseni, Albina, Utvin / Near Threatened IUCN Red List, *Marsilea quadrifolia* - Grigore, 1971: Uliuc, Urseni, Albina, Utvin, Moșnița Veche, Ghiroda, Sînmihaiul Român / EU Habitats Directive, Bern Convention, *Salvinia natans* - Boșcaiu, 1966: Lugoș surroundings; Grigore, 1971: Albina, Uliuc, Urseni, Ghiroda, Sînmihaiul Român, Moșnița, Utvin, Peciu Nou, Otelec, Ionel, Livanda, Dinaș, frequent in the interfluvie, Timișoara; Vicol, 1974: Lugoș / Bern Convention);
- the decrease of the areas with aquatic and marsh vegetation (e.g. Neacșu et al. 2018);
- the tendency of ruderalization in wet zones.

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