

**12th Living Lakes Conference, Trasimeno Lake, Italy
September 2008**

Welcome Marion Hammerl, President of GNF

No one questions the cultural values of lakes and wetlands, however if you look at the subject closely, it is surprising how strong the influence of lakes has been and is still today regarding our history, our culture and our spiritual life.

The values of cultural landscapes are well documented and even given a price. The cultural landscape of Lake Trasimeno has provided delicious local food and it the most attractive element for tourism including the lake itself. Orchard pasture lands are the symbol of Lake Constance and support a habitat with high biodiversity. The same applies to the dehesas in Spain. Without the extensively used oak tree pasture land we could not enjoy the excellent Jamón Iberico and there would be no habitat for more than 140 species of animals and plants. Today we will hear more about the influence of lakes and wetlands in shaping cultural landscape.

The historical values of lakes are well known:

On the edges of many lakes in Europe, simple domestic structures on stilts have been found. These houses built on wooden piles located in or next to the water have been the most important forms of settlement since the late stone age about 4,300 years ago.

At Lake Constance alone more than 100 locations with some 400 communities were established. The lake provided enough drinking water and fish for the inhabitants. Also the favourable micro climate supported good agricultural development.

Trasimeno Lake illustrates another kind of historical value: the battle of Lepanto which is captured forever in many paintings.

However, what about the importance of cultural, mystical and spiritual values of lakes?

Perhaps, the most famous contemporanean mystical creature is Nessy – the legendary monster of Loch Ness in Scotland. Hundreds of investigations and millions of visitors tried and continue to try to discover the truth about Nessy. Our tourism federation at Lake Constance would be very happy to have a Nessy – however we don't and so we need to collect other stories such as the one about the pike with the golden ring.

Lake Storsjö in Sweden seems to be more fortunate: With the aid of six cameras and two under water cameras Swedish researchers finally some months ago caught the images of a monster which is no pike and not a carp – but a family relation of Nessy! Now Swedens Tourism Board is very exited by the discovery. However, we hope that the very real monster called Tourism will be carefully developed at this lake without destroying Swedish Nessie's habitat. The long history of Lake Baikal is full of myths, legends and fairytales. They are the source of the rich folklore of the local people living around the lake and they are transferred by word of

mouth from one generation to the next. During the conference, Nina from our Living Lakes partner Gran will tell us about the importance of the myths and folklore for the preservation of Lake Baikal.

All Slavian regions recount tales of water ghosts living in lakes, fountains and rivers. At Lake Atitlán in Guatemala local people are still celebrating Maya – traditions related to the lake and water and mix it with Christian customs. Some of them are very practical such as offering a good spirit made of sugar cane to the holy Maximón to support their request for help to ensure a plentiful water supply.

When I researched, I was hoping to find a lake god or goddess – such as a beautiful woman which we might adopt as an evocative symbol for our Living Lakes Network.

I found Chalchiuhtlicue: Goddess of the Aztecs. The name means “Goddess with the skirt with precious stones” and she is the goddess of the lakes and all flowing waters. Together with Tlaloc, the god of rain, she was and remains the symbol for water in Mexico.

I was very much impressed to meet the huicholes, one of the remaining tribes at Lake Chapala. For them, Lake Chapala is a “holy lake” and they say that lakes are the mirrors of human beings!

During recent conferences we focussed mainly on environmental and social aspects.

During this conference we will exchange information and experiences regarding all aspects of the cultural and spiritual influence and importance of lakes and wetlands.

I hope the conference will give us some inspiration on how to include cultural values into our conservation strategies and motivate target groups which we did not reach up to now and try to find new sources of support related to cultural programmes.

Finally, this conference would not have been possible without the dedication of Living Lakes Italy and without the generous support of the regional authorities and economic partners. On behalf of Global Nature Fund and the Living Lakes Network, I would like to thank you all very much for your support. I am convinced that your time and money has been very soundly invested and that we will have a constructive and fruitful conference!

I leave you with this thought by Loren Eiseley:

If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water!