

Restoring and conserving 1001 village ponds in Slovenia

“I remember how much fun we had as kids swimming and playing in the pond here! It was also a great place to look at the many insects and birds or to catch frogs” a grandmother from the village tells. “During the day our cattle were drinking in the pond and there was a bench where the neighbors used to sit in the evenings. One would meet there your future spouses. In short the village pond was part of our life here since generations”.

The smile on grandmother's face disappears and she looks serious now: *“Then the economy changed: people went everyday to work in the cities. They had no cattle anymore. Water (for the households) was brought with new water pipelines. Slowly everywhere in this region the ponds were neglected, many even became garbage dumps. After a while it looked as if they all had disappeared and as if - because of modern life - we had forgotten all about them.”*

It was Tina, a young conservationist, who understood that she had to look for values that could trigger the restoration and conservation of these village ponds. She knew that rational arguments about the importance of village ponds for biodiversity would not work. Nor would it help to focus on the negative aspects of the destruction.

So she started meeting the community members and asked about their traditions, their old photos of village life, the traditional use of the ponds and stories from older generations. She discovered that there are many different types of ponds and that deep down each village was proud of their own pond tradition.

She made it clear that she believed in the positive contribution the restoration of the ponds could provide to modern village life: water supply for gardening, a place again for social meetings. She understood that she should make the villages aware again of the social, cultural and ecological values of the ponds. She understood that she should strengthen the values of love and respect that underpin the relation between the ponds and village life. And that she should appeal to people's motivation to do something positive for the village.

With some external support she managed to restore the ponds in the first village. The villagers organized a big event at the inauguration: they baked cakes, poured their wine, brought in their village music, kids released (don't know if this is the right term) a pair of frogs into the pond. A celebration that caught the attention of the media and other villages. A woman from another village immediately realized that ponds are part of tradition and cultural life of all villages in this part of Slovenia. She asked for advice how can we do the same? In the next years more restorations followed. It was almost as if villages competed with each other. It led to a national campaign supported by EU money called '1001 ponds'.

Now in this part of the country it is normal to restore ponds. Destroying ponds is not any more an option. It also made villagers aware of the fact that this is a very concrete way to contribute to something abstract as biodiversity conservation. Now ponds are again places where insects thrive healthily, children play, teenagers meet, parents get water for their gardens and elderly people sit there on quiet summer evenings and talk as in the old days!