

PRESS RELEASE

SECRETS OF THE ADRIATIC

1 x 52'

A documentary by Michael Schlamberger

STEREO, 16:9

For a long time, the Adriatic Sea was the only connection between Central Europe and the Orient. Hence, this small sea was regarded as a symbol for the whole world with all of its exoticism, and it was not without justification that Venice called itself the "Queen of the oceans". The shores of the Adriatic sea, a unique natural environment, is densely packed with cultural heritage. Nature and culture are linked inseparably. When 3,000 yellow-legged gulls circle around the oldest manned lighthouse of the Adriatic Sea on the island of Palagruza, when a flock of flamingos descends upon the salt works of Istria as if they were the famous soda lakes in Eastern Africa, or when Greek tortoises conquer the vines and olive groves, wild nature is usually only a stone's throw away from cultural treasures.

The scenes of this documentary are the most impressive shores and inland waters of several countries – the lagoons in the North-western Adriatic as well as the rugged rock faces of the Dalmatian coast in the East.

"Our intention was to show the unknown facets of the Adriatic. The Adriatic Sea is all too familiar to the Austrians because of its proximity, so we were out to discover new perspectives. During the two years of shooting, we encountered a mysterious island visited by man as early as 6,000 years ago, extensive sanctuaries for birds hidden behind the sand beaches of Lignano and Jesolo, and unexpected witnesses of a century-old struggle against the water...", explains director of photography Michael Schlamberger.

The lagoons of the Adriatic Sea are a unique habitat. The sea is shallow, the climate is sunny and mild. And yet the influence of the Alps is ever present. For rivers born in the dizzying heights of the Alps drag vast amounts of sand and mud charged with nutrients to the sea and make this region one of Europe's most important marshlands without which many bird species would be extinct. The lagoon is the point where river, land and sea blend into one. Borders blur and lines of separation are redefined every day.

For hundreds of years, the lagoons of the Northern Adriatic have been jealously guarded fishing grounds. Traditional fishing practices still survive in this area. Eel, thick-lipped grey mullet, gilt-head bream, sea bass, flounder and common sole populate the brackish water and regularly fill the fishermen's traps at the canal mouth.

However, the lagoons were more than just a source of food. They also protected the population against incursions from the hinterland, allowing the fishermen's settlements to grow into prosperous towns that would soon acquire world fame - above all Venice, La Serenissima.

Although it is built on water and regularly stricken by floods, water is by no means the only threat to the cultural heritage site.

Just behind the town, the rivers from the mountains drag vast amounts of debris to the Adriatic Sea. As they deposited their sediments, the Adriatic Sea became increasingly shallow and the estuary of the river Po moved further Northeast. To prevent the lagoon of Venice from silting up, an artificial channel was built 400 years ago to divert the river southwards. Otherwise Venice might well be stranded on dry land today.

The diversion of the river Po heralded an unprecedented fight to control the powers of nature. Until this day, living in the lagoon is a constant struggle against water to gain and defend precious land. Countless resources are invested to hold back the water. To drain the marshland, Leonardo da Vinci designed the first water locks. They diverted the river water and kept out the approaching seawater. After many years of operation, these locks were gradually replaced with steam-powered pumps just before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays, a highly sophisticated network of channels and dams, spillways and locks tries to keep the river Po in check. None of Europe's rivers resisted man's intervention more bravely than the river Po. In spite of the enormous efforts, the river remains a huge threat, capable of submerging the land at any time.

In spite of the risks inherent to the land, the high nutrient content of the river Po makes this region the most productive of the Adriatic Sea. The yield here is up to ten times higher than in other regions, and not only traditional fishing is practiced in the lagoon. Intensive aqua farming is a highly profitable business. Not surprisingly, the Mediterranean mussel and cockle farms in the delta are referred to as the true gold mines of the Po estuary.

The industrially exploited lagoons are in stark contrast to the Dalmatian coast with its steep forbidding cliffs. In many places, the vertical rock-face continues right to the bottom of the sea, offering shelter and food for an ecosystem of such diversity that it almost rivals the tropical rain forest.

One of Dalmatia's most spectacular spots is Kornati National Park with more than 90 large and smaller islands in an area of more than 54.500 acres. The underwater world of the Kornati islands offers plenty of material for marine biologists to study, for even the smallest nooks and crannies are densely populated with animals. During the day

the octopus, a twilight hunter, finds shelter in the crevices, and the bizarre scorpion fish rests leisurely in the shadow of the rocks. Almost every square inch is covered with yellow cluster anemones and colourful sponges. The Kornati islands are known for their strong currents, an effect that is further increased by tidal movements. For gorgonians, this is the ideal place to hang their fan-shaped plankton filters into the current.

“Shooting under water was a real challenge. In the Adriatic Sea, the most beautiful and interesting locations are hidden deep below the water surface. Because of the great depth, we needed a lot of artificial lighting equipment in addition to the cameras and the diving equipment, so every one of us ended up carrying a weight of more than 100kg. In strong currents, we had to cling to the rocks while we were shooting, otherwise we would have been swept away”, remembers Schlamberger. “Sometimes, two assistants had to lie on top of the cameraman and the lighting engineers to keep us in position and prevent us from coming back with blurred images....”

The airspace above the Dalmatian coast is the domain of the griffon vulture. But its future looks decidedly bleak. Hundreds of years ago, when man cleared the formerly extensive forests and turned them into cattle pastures, the vultures moved into this region. At the time, dying cattle provided a welcome meal for the vultures. But then poisoned bait was laid out to kill potential predators, and when industrial farming replaced traditional cattle farming, the griffon vulture was robbed of its food supply.

The Velebit mountains are among the few remaining strongholds of the griffon vulture. Located in the hinterland of Zadar, Paklenica National Park extends from the highest peak of the Velebit mountains to the coastal road, covering a surface of 37 square miles. The rugged limestone mountains featuring deep canyons with 1200

feet high vertical rockfaces offer threatened species such as the griffon vulture a direly needed refuge.

Where natural land competes with cultivated land, the dominance of the species often shifts dramatically, but not always for the worse. Thus, the Greek tortoise has moved into the many abandoned terraced olive groves and vineyards of Dalmatia. It loves dry soil and shrubby vegetation such as the Mediterranean macchie. It also loves lots of sun, cavities to rest in the shadow and stones to hide. For the tortoise, the terraced gardens are paradise on earth. Indeed, it has been proven that the population density of land tortoises in this versatile man-made environment even exceeds that of large natural surfaces.

Tortoises are harmless creatures – unlike some other reptiles in the plantations, such as the venomous nose-horned viper. The stony Mediterranean landscape is an ideal habitat for these snakes. Lazing in the sun, the viper's body heats up gradually until it is ready for the hunt. To get rid of them and the wide-spread brown rat in one fell swoop, the small Indian mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus auropunctatus*) was imported to Dalmatia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It owes its fame to the scene in Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" where the mongoose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi fights the cobra. Now, its job was to rid Dalmatia of the poisonous snakes.

But in the long run, the mongooses craved a more varied diet than snakes. Looking for alternatives, they finally found something to satisfy their demanding taste – waste dumps. At the waste disposal sites, the mongoose population multiplied explosively, and like so many supposed pest killers, they turned into a pest themselves. They eat whatever they are strong enough to kill and have big enough mouths to swallow, mercilessly finishing off some endemic species in the process. On top of it, the

mongoose as a daytime animal never challenged the rule of the nocturnal brown rat. In fact, due to the decimated snake population, the rat reproduced faster than ever.

Schlamberger has this story to tell about the shooting conditions: "To shoot these scenes, our camera team had to live for one and a half weeks in the sweltering heat of the record-breaking summer of 2003 when the extreme temperatures drove the otherwise active mongooses deep into the shadows of the rubbish tip. The foul stench and the millions of flies circling around our heads were an absolute nightmare. We had to totally cover up our faces. Even in the morning, the temperature climbed to a stifling 40 degrees in the shade, but of course we had to work in the sun. To add insult to injury, we could even see a lovely beach from where we were standing!"

For thousands of years, man's activity has influenced the Adriatic region and its nature. Archaeological finds on the Adriatic island of Palagruza demonstrate that early seafarers landed there and made tools around 4,000 BC. As trade along the coasts of the Adriatic Sea dates back to the early Stone Age, it is obvious that the Adriatic ports were centres of great importance. Examples include Korcula, a town with a history spanning several thousands of years and allegedly the birthplace of Marco Polo, or Dubrovnik, often referred to as the "pearl of the Adriatic", and finally Venice, the former superpower and "Queen of the oceans".